

Statement March 12, 2003
Belenchia and Morrison Lawsuits

Beginning in 1985, the Diocese of Jackson implemented a written policy and procedure regarding reporting and handling of sexual misconduct claims for lay and church personnel. Since January 1, 1994, the Diocese of Jackson has had its current policy in place that requires investigating current and past allegations of sexual misconduct by priests and religious. Sexual misconduct by church personnel violates human dignity and the mission of the Church. The Diocese of Jackson is committed to ensuring that children being served by the Church are not at risk of sexual abuse by Church personnel. The spiritual well-being of all victims, their families, and others in the community is of particular concern to the Church. In accordance with diocesan policy, all victims of abuse are offered counseling and pastoral care.

The claims of the Morrisons and Mr. Mark Belenchia stem from actions occurring at the very earliest 29 years ago. In 1999, when Mr. Belenchia confronted the diocese about his alleged abuse, the diocese reached out with pastoral care. In addition, Mr. Belenchia received psychological treatment and submitted bills for medicine, evaluation and treatment which were paid by the diocese. On January 5, 2000, Mr. and Mrs. Belenchia signed a valid enforceable contract with the diocese. The document was entitled "Settlement Agreement and Release of all Claims." **The release was reviewed, approved and signed by their counsel.** Pursuant to the terms of the release, Mr. Belenchia and his wife were awarded over \$44,000 in damages. In their lawsuit, despite the signed release and their agreement to settle all claims against the diocese, they now seek millions of dollars from a Hinds County Circuit court jury.

In their lawsuit, the Morrisons seek discovery of a broad range of church documents and information regarding the inner workings of the Roman Catholic Church and the Diocese of Jackson. The Diocese has filed a motion with the Court **seeking to protect the confidentiality of the identities of children who were victims of sexual abuse, and of priests who in some cases were accused without substantiation.** The Diocese's motion asks the Court to recognize that the establishment of religion clause of the First Amendment protects the priest - penitent privilege and the privacy of individuals who seek that privacy. If those identities are revealed, the harm to the victims who seek privacy would be immense and irreversible. The Diocese is willing to reveal those identities, provided the victims involved first give their consent.