

## **In the Heartland**

### **Addressing directly issues of sexual abuse**

Until very recently, the media had once again focused on the abuse of children by priests – due undoubtedly to revelations of abuse by priests in Europe. I know such news is disturbing to our clergy, diocesan and parish staff members and Catholics and non-Catholics alike, as it is to me, and I want to address it here as well as in the secular press.

First, the publicity gives us who are leaders of the Church another opportunity to ask pardon for the horrific actions of members of the Catholic clergy who exploited their positions of trust to abuse children. Nothing can be said to justify such actions, or of any attempts to cover them up. Priests have traditionally held places of privilege and honor among Catholics and to betray that trust is indefensible.

That place of privilege is undoubtedly related to the media's, and the public's, continued interest in the problem, too. Many other professionals, and non-professionals, have abused children, but much is expected of priests, who dedicate their lives to God. So, I want to be clear that such actions are unacceptable and as bishop, I apologize for the egregious harm they have caused.

I make my own the language of the “Charter for the Protection of Minors from Sexual Abuse,” adopted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002 and revised in 2005.

“The sexual abuse of children and young people by some deacons, priests and bishops, and the ways in which these crimes and sins were addressed, have caused enormous pain, anger, and confusion,” says the document’s preamble. “As bishops, we have acknowledged our mistakes and our roles in that suffering, and we apologize and take responsibility again for too often failing victims and the Catholic people in the past. From the depths of our hearts, we bishops express great sorrow and profound regret for what the Catholic people have endured.”

Much more than an apology is needed, however, so I also want you to know that with all of my fellow bishops, I am committed to do all in my power to prevent such conduct by the clergy or any church employee. The Diocese of Des Moines subscribes to the charter, which provides uniform guidelines on reporting sexual abuse, accountability, reports to a national board and mandatory education programs in parishes and schools.

In our diocese and around the country, civil authorities are notified of any allegations of sexual abuse of a minor. And, pending an investigation, any cleric guilty of such an act is permanently removed from ministry. The diocese has a victim assistance advocate, who can be reached at (515) 286-2024, and an allegation review committee, which does what the name implies. For details on diocesan policies regarding abuse of children, go to [www.dmdiocese.org](http://www.dmdiocese.org) and click on Youth and Child Protection.

As many of you know, one of the principal elements of our effort to protect children is the VIRTUS program. The word *virtus* derives from Latin, and means valor, moral strength, excellence, and worth. The VIRTUS programs empower organizations and people to better control risk and improve the lives of all those who interact with the Church, and all who are “regular” diocesan volunteers and employees, or who have more than three hours of contact with children per month, are required to participate.

Among its many components, the education component makes every adult employee and volunteer aware of the issues surrounding child sexual abuse, including the many ways that sexual abuse harms its victims, their families, the parish, and the community. The awareness session also helps adults learn to recognize the warning signs of abuse and shows them the appropriate way to respond to suspicious behavior. Finally, the awareness session empowers each person with five steps to help prevent child sexual abuse. The program also requires background checks and since its start, 8,458 such checks have been performed on regular employees and volunteers in the Diocese of Des Moines. A total of 8,168 have taken the VIRTUS training.

In discussing these preventative programs and their importance in the Diocese with the Diocesan Presbyteral council recently, I was grateful for the priest members’ commitment to full and continuing implementation of the program’s requirements. It is not a matter of merely conforming to regulations, but a desire on the part of our pastors and other church leaders to address these questions directly and with resolve.

Further accountability of the diocese’s fulfillment to these programs is the audit of them by an outside national agency. A documentary audit is conducted two successive years. In September, which is the third year in the three year cycle, an on-site audit will be conducted in the diocese to test conformity to the charter.

One other feature of the bishops’ efforts to address and understand this problem is an extensive study that has been commissioned to the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York on the “Causes and Context” of this problem which was most virulent in the 1970s and 1980s. While the church accepts responsibility for the issue among its members, sadly, the matter is much broader and is a societal problem. It is the hope of the bishops that our experience in addressing the problem will be of benefit to society at large and that insights gained by the John Jay study will be illuminating to all.

The bottom line in all of this is that the Catholic Church cares about children – all children – and wants to protect them. Jesus had a special place in his heart for them, and the church can be no less loving. That’s why abuse of children by priests, the overwhelming majority of whom are dedicated, caring people, is a great embarrassment and causes pain for victims, their families and all the church’s members.

The best we can do for victims now is to do all we can to make sure it doesn’t happen again.