

Harrisburg chastity program viewed as theologically sound

By Barb Ernster



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[Editor's note: In recent weeks, much controversy has developed concerning the safe environment programs to be used in the schools and catechetical programs. An exceptional program has surfaced, and many Catholics are very grateful to Archbishop Harry Flynn for his permission to parishes and schools in his Archdiocese to use this high-quality program. The following is a review of it.]

Formation in Christian Chastity (FCC), a K-8 chastity program developed by the diocese of Harrisburg, PA, has gained widespread attention since the U.S. Bishop's Charter for the Protection of Children mandated safe environment programs for all Catholic children. Even before the mandate, the Harrisburg diocese had formed a committee to develop a chastity program based on the principles set forth in *The Truth & Meaning of Human Sexuality*, issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family in 1995.

"I was not comfortable with a lot of the programs dealing with human sexuality, so we set in motion a process to see what we should do," said Rev. Edward Quinlan, Diocesan Secretary for Education. "We saw a particular philosophy in *Truth & Meaning* that I was comfortable with as a pastor and educator. We were in the process of developing a program when the requirement for the safe environment program came up, and we just proceeded along the same course."

Under his direction, the committee, made up of lay people with expertise in medicine, education, parenting and theology, created a chastity curriculum that looked to the parents as primary educators, but saw a special role for school and catechetical programs to help build a requisite spiritual life and vision of life as our Lord and the Church has communicated, said Fr. Quinlan. The committee utilized some child safety resources from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, added Catholic elements to them, and developed three classroom lessons to comply with the safe environment component. Additional child safety information is given to

parents to share with their children at home as they deem appropriate.

The program has been in place for several years now, and Jim Gontis, Director of the Office of Religious Education in Harrisburg, said he has heard only positive comments from parents. Moreover, at least 20 other dioceses and numerous individual parishes and schools have inquired about using the FCC program in their area to fulfill the safe environment mandate. Due to the widespread interest, the Harrisburg diocese put the FCC program and the safe environment component on its website for anyone to download and use free of charge, said Gontis.

Elizabeth Dorsey, who has a preschooler, second and fourth grader at Lebanon Catholic School in Lebanon, Penn., said all her concerns about a school-based program were relieved after a parent meeting was held and materials examined.

"I got exactly what I had hoped for," she said. "They did a nice job explaining what they would and would not do in school, but also provided the parents with materials to make it easier for them to explain some of the facts at home. Even the classroom lesson plans on safety respect the innocence of children and defer to the parents how much and when to introduce the broader information at home," said Dorsey.

Gontis said the curriculum presents a different theme for each grade, and includes lessons on God's love, the virtues, particularly chastity, a profile of a saint who has lived out the virtue of chastity heroically, discussion questions for the classroom and parents, and suggested activities and homework assignments. It also incorporates Scripture references and material from the

Catechism of the Catholic Church. The diocese of LaCrosse, Wisc., developed the program further, adding a 9-12th grade component, which Gontis said has been partially incorporated in Harrisburg.

Dr. Todd Flanders, headmaster at Providence Academy in Plymouth, Minn., said the K-12 school will begin using the Harrisburg program in the 2006-2007 school year. After reviewing the program with some of his staff and members of the clergy, he found the program to be developmentally and theologically sensitive and thoroughly within the context of Christian teaching.

"This program springs from the heart of the Church, rather than having some catechetical phrases slapped onto a secular program. Even the lesson plans from the Center for Missing & Exploited Children are presented from the heart of the Church," said Dr. Flanders. "We have received permission to use this at Providence Academy and I'm very grateful for that. I see this offer by Archbishop Harry Flynn of an alternative for parishes and schools to be a very generous act and I'm hopeful that many will explore this or similar options. I really am confident that a lot of kids and parents are going to be well-served by this."

Dr. Patrick DiVietri, PhD, an adjunct professor at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Emmetsburg, MD, and the North American Pontifical College in Rome, as well as several graduate and undergraduate colleges in Alexandria, VA, said research shows that some child safety programs can actually be harmful to children and do little to reduce or prevent child abuse. Furthermore, much of the data on sexual abuse of children does not distinguish it from other forms of abuse, and makes no distinction concerning religious practice, marital status, use of day care, schools and baby sitters, he said. The Catholic population is a unique pool and contains by its very nature and principle, the highest percentage of the components of child safety, i.e. intact marriages, families closely resembling intact marriages, biological parents, frequency of church

attendance and religious practice, placement of children in schools with strong values, and a lower percentage of cohabitating parents in the household.

As executive director of the Family Life Institute in Manassah, VA, Dr. DiVietri has also worked directly with the Pontifical Council for the Family in Rome to write practical parish programs based on the ideas in Truth & Meaning of Human Sexuality. After reviewing Harrisburg's FCC program, Dr. DiVietri said it is a confirmation of the theological and moral principles that should normally be presented in CCD programs and its objectives are sound. The program, he added, is a "no-brainer" if you've got a choice between it and the secular programs.

"You have to analyze which program would be the least harmful to the innocence of the child, and the Harrisburg program protects that innocence. It is actually a checklist of religious formation. It presents lesson plans in a way that is respectful, and upholds the primary principle of whose business it is to talk to the children, and it's really the parents," said DiVietri. "It also presents a clear picture of the good that the parents and the children must know and that's where the virtues come in. It articulates the religious and moral values that are necessary for the wellbeing of the child to keep the child safe."

To download this program, which can be used free of charge, please check our website at www.hbgdiocese.org/education_index.htm, then click on religious education and scroll down to additional information - resources. The first one listed is "formation in Christian chastity."

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