

Chastity, Not Abuse, Is Harrisburg Focus

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SAFE ENVIRONMENT PART 5

HARRISBURG, Pa. — The Diocese of Harrisburg, Pa., was already working on a chastity program when it found out that dioceses need “safe environment” programs to prevent sexual abuse.

The Harrisburg Diocese’s Formation in Christian Chastity Committee reviewed several programs that could fulfill a demand in the U.S. Bishops 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. But under the supervision of the diocesan secretary for education, Father Edward Quinlan, the committee found its vision of a good chastity and human sexuality program was different from the programs reviewed.

Committee members noticed a tie-in between safe environment and chastity and developed their own safe-environment component, which could be woven into their existing chastity curriculum. Their program has become a model of how, with hard work and skilled team members, a diocese can discover the ways Catholic doctrine in itself protects children.

“Our thinking and work was guided by the Church’s wisdom as expressed in *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, promulgated by the Holy See, Dec. 8, 1995,” said Jim Gontis, director of the Office for Religious Education for

the Diocese of Harrisburg. “Fundamental to the principles set out in TMHS is that parents are the primary educators of their children.”

The committee presented its first draft of the program to the diocese in October 2004. Parishes and schools tried it that fall, and Bishop Kevin Rhoades formally approved the program in August 2005.

The Dioceses of Arlington and Burlington have chosen to use the program. Twenty other dioceses have requested a copy of the “Formation in Christian Chastity” program for review.

The age-appropriate program is divided into three levels, Grades 1-4, Grades 5-8 and High School. For all levels, formational letters are sent to the parents.

“We were trying to develop a program that would draw the parents in,” said Theresa Farnan, a member of the Committee on Formation in Christian Chastity. “We saw there was a big gap, a whole generation of parents who didn’t go through formation in the Catholic schools or CCD. ... So for us, a strong point of the program is that by means of the letters, we are able to bring formation to the child and parent at the same time. It brings the parent into a cooperative relationship, not a marginal one.”

The lessons for children in grades 1-4 are taught exclusively by the parents, who receive instructional material grounded in Catholic doctrine. One of the papers sent to parents of first grade students teaches about the Holy Trinity. The committee had found many safe-environment resources referred to “self-esteem” and “self-identity” of the child as an important element.

“But there was never any mention of the fact that it is only in God and in our relationship with him that we find our true identity,” said Gontis. “So this paper about the Holy Trinity — the one we send to the parents — was written to catechize children and adults on him in whom we find our true identity as sons and daughters of the Father.”

The parents of children in grades 5-8 receive letters explaining what their children will learn in the classroom. There is a different theme for each year. The fifth grade theme is, “God made us to know the truth.” The sixth grade theme is “God made us to love and to be loved.”

Presented at the beginning of each lesson is the profile of a saint known for heroically living out the virtue of chastity, such as St. Maria Goretti, St. Gianna Beretta Molla, St. Maximilian Kolbe and St. Joseph. A prayer based on the saint’s profile is then said, followed by quotations from Scripture, quotations from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, discussion questions, suggested activities and a homework assignment.

“We don’t make a big deal about it,” said Kristine Hammar, director of religious education at St. Katharine Drexel Parish in Mechanicsburg, Pa. “We pair it with something we’re already teaching the kids. So they don’t know they’re doing anything different or special. It’s just the lesson for the day. It’s much more natural than a program that separates boys from girls. We just pick a certain date to focus on Christian chastity and it ties in with everything else.”

This program differs dramatically from most sexual abuse programs in several ways. According to a paper by social worker Mary Beth

Style, “Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs: Are They of the Father’s House?”

most programs geared toward children from pre-school through third grade isolate parents from the instruction and have the following common themes:

- What is good touch and what is bad touch
- Knowing about secrets and strangers
- How to report abuse
- Understanding your feelings, and
- Everyone is a potential abuser, including parents and other family members.

These types of programs do not lead to a decrease in abuse and might even promote abuse, said Rebecca Bolen, whose paper, “Child Sexual Abuse: Prevention or Promotion,” was published in *Social Work* in April 2003. They presuppose that children are able to protect themselves.

They are also contrary to Catholic doctrine provided in the *Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, which describes the latency period in children (age 5 until puberty) as a time when children, by their nature, do not think of sexuality. *Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* states, “This period of tranquility and serenity must never be disturbed by unnecessary information about sex. During those years, before any physical sexual development is evident, it is normal for the child’s interest to turn to other aspects of life.”

So, by shunning pre-existing safe-environment programs, and choosing to create their own, the Diocese of Harrisburg is working to keep its children safe and doctrinally sound.

Not everyone thinks Harrisburg’s program is optimal, though.

Pamela Church, creator of “Good Touch/Bad Touch,” said, “I find that [Harrisburg Chastity Program] incredibly naïve. What child isn’t chaste? As a young Catholic child I was taught chastity as a way of being. I think a predator could have fooled me and tricked me, like he does any child, because I was a child. Being chaste wouldn’t spare me.”

But Father William Waltersheid, pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Carlisle, in the Harrisburg Diocese, responded, “Our chastity program in the diocese is about inculcating the virtue of chastity into children not in a naive way but in a way that is informed and that will help children to value chastity and that is the first defense against any kind of untoward sexual behavior. The program would have to be reinforced in the home. We hope also that families will embrace the whole concept of the chastity program and that other kinds of good safe behavior will be taught by the parents concomitantly with the chastity programs.”

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At a Glance

WHAT’S IT ABOUT — The Register is examining 20 U.S. dioceses with the largest elementary-school populations.

To improve the quality of religious education, the U.S. Bishops’ Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism began reviewing textbooks in 1996.

AT ISSUE — Most textbooks were found to be seriously deficient in 10 fundamental areas:

the Trinity; the divinity of Christ; the magisterium; Christian view of man; an emphasis on God’s action, not man’s; grace; the sacraments; sin; Christian morality, and eschatology.

WHAT WE’VE LEARNED — Cleveland and Pittsburgh use textbooks in conformity with the Catechism. Cincinnati does not. Newark, Milwaukee, Buffalo, St. Louis, Baltimore and Miami are partly in conformity, but outdated texts often remain in the hands of students.

A list of approved textbooks is available on the bishops’ website (www.usccb.org.)