

Child Protection our Year-Round Focus

The Catholic Review

For the past month, our Archdiocese has joined other institutions and organizations committed to the safety and well-being of children in recognizing April as Child Abuse Prevention Month. While our child protection efforts are our focus throughout the year, it does present an opportunity to reflect on what our Church—primarily through the diligence of those working and volunteering in our parishes and schools—is doing every day to protect the children entrusted to our care from the scourge of sexual abuse.

Since the scope of the sexual abuse crisis became clear in the early part of the past decade, the Catholic Church has arguably done more to protect children than any other organization in the United States. There are 68 million Catholics in the United States and there were six credible allegations of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church last year. Six too many and our efforts must continue, but our efforts to make our Church safer are working. Consider:

Safe environment training is taking place in all 194 dioceses of the country, with more than 2 million adults having been trained to recognize the behavior of offenders and what to do about it.

Background checks are conducted on Church personnel who have contact with children. Over 2 million volunteers and employees; 52,000 clerics; 6,205 candidates for ordination have had their backgrounds evaluated.

There is a zero tolerance policy on abusers. Any priest or deacon deemed to have sexually abused a minor is permanently removed from ministry regardless of how long ago the abuse occurred.

Dioceses require extensive background screening as well as psychological testing for those wishing to enter the seminary.

Here in our own Archdiocese, these policies have long been our practice and as a result, the most recent independent audit of our compliance with the U.S. Bishops' *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* found our Archdiocese to be 100 percent compliant. The audit, conducted by a team of former law enforcement officials, took place last fall in 26 of our parishes and schools. I am most grateful to all who have worked so hard to ensure the safety of every child in our care.

This is only possible due to the hard work of many employees and volunteers, led by pastors, pastoral life directors and principals. From July 2008-June 2009, our Archdiocese:

Trained 49,077 children in our schools and religious education programs.

Trained and screened 19,068 new volunteers.

We are also reaching out to victims of sexual abuse. We have continued the practice of offering counseling to those who come forward claiming sexual abuse at the hands of anyone representing the Church. I have personally met with any victim requesting to meet with me. These meetings are important to me as they provide me an opportunity to hear from those harmed and to offer my apologies as well as the support of the Church.

These are some of the concrete steps we are taking to protect children and to continue earning the trust that was breached when the sexual abuse scandal, a scandal that rocked the foundation of our Church when it came most strongly into the public's consciousness in 2002.

It is now having the same effect in Europe, where victims are beginning to come forward and where the European media reports almost daily these tragic stories, mostly detailing abuse from past decades. As with the American media in 2002, their attention will play a crucial role in the purification of the Church in Europe and will lead to the same kinds of measures in accountability and transparency that enabled the Church here in the United States to emerge, though damaged, unified in our commitment to protecting children, to communicating openly and to never again returning to that dark and evil place in our history.

Over the past several weeks, news outlets have disseminated poorly researched, one-sided stories to suggest failings by Pope Benedict XVI, who previously served as the Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), the Vatican office which has, since 2001, overseen the handling of sexual abuse claims against priests. I'll leave it to the Vatican's press office and to those more familiar with the facts than I to rebut these claims as they appear. Instead, I will share what I know of the Pope's efforts to prevent the spread of abuse in our Church and of his commitment to address with victims the unspeakable harm perpetrated on them.

In 2001, the Vatican put in place new measures that enabled the Cardinal Ratzinger-led CDF to deal more swiftly and decisively with priest abusers.

Under Cardinal Ratzinger's leadership, the CDF enacted changes that allowed the world's bishops to remove credibly accused priests swiftly.

Cardinal Ratzinger played a key role in gaining acceptance by the Holy See of the U.S. Bishop's newly-created child protection norms in 2002 .

Since his election as Pope, the Holy Father has demanded our Church confront abuse for the benefit of victims, society as a whole, and our Church.

His outreach to victims—whether during his April visit to the United States, his letter of apology to the Church in Ireland, or his meetings with victims last week in Malta, have been sincere, contrite and received positively by those most directly impacted.

In his 2005 inaugural homily, Pope Benedict said, “Pray for me, that I may not flee for fear of the wolves. Let us pray for one another, that the Lord will carry us and that we will learn to carry one another.”

Let us pray, indeed, as we stand with our Holy Father in prayer for the victims of sexual abuse and for the entire Catholic Church.