

Project MORE Helps Adult Prostitutes Find Better Lives

By Teresa A. Parsons

"The epitome of violence against women in society" is how Sister Eileen Conheady views prostitution, and she should know. As director of Project MORE — More Options Really Exist — she singlehandedly runs the only outreach program to assist area women over 17 who want to stop supporting themselves by prostitution.

How does a 54-year-old Sister of St. Joseph and former history teacher relate to prostitutes? "They think I'm pretty naive, but I'd rather not be too much better informed on some of the things they go through," she said. "I try to do something when I say I will and expect them to do the same ... but the most important thing I can offer them is hope." As for how other people react to her ministry, she said most just seem grateful that there is someone making the effort.

Project MORE began in 1983 when Sister Eileen, working in community outreach near St. Bridget's Church, identified a consistent need for support of adult women trying to leave prostitution behind.

"They are so fragile and so abused by everyone — the men who 'own' them, police, their clients, society — and especially themselves," she said. In a tone of mild amazement, Sister Eileen added that they accept abuse as a matter of course. "They don't seem to reject the fact that people hit them or degrade them," she said. "Maybe because many have had this from childhood in abusive home situations."

Project MORE was funded by Sister Eileen's congregation during her first year. Since then, a group called Ventures in Human Services, which includes representatives from the Diocese of Rochester, the Sisters of St. Joseph and Sisters of Mercy, and the Catholic Family Center, has backed Project MORE with development funds.

"Although she finds that the overwhelming motivation to take up prostitution is money, Sister Eileen is frustrated by the attitude she encounters when a prostitute gets beaten or arrested — the belief that 'she asked for this and she deserves what she gets.'" Sister also points out the irony in most prostitution sweeps by police — that the number of women picked up far outweighs men. In April of this year, local police arrested 53 people in a four-day anti-prostitution campaign, netting 43 prostitutes and only 10 "clients."

"These men have families and homes — things to lose. There's a sense that the women are the offenders, not the men," Sister observed.

To a girl in her early or mid-teens coming from a poor and troubled family, the promise of a certain lifestyle — big cars and nice clothes, a sense of belonging and being cared for by someone (usually a pimp), and a supply of good drugs — is appealing. Often they are recruited by other women as well as by pimps.

But the reality is a far cry from the glamorous way prostitution is often portrayed, not only by those trying to promote the lifestyle, but also on television and in movies. Contrary to what's commonly perceived, Sister Eileen says that she's never met anyone in "the life" who got rich at it. Instead, she describes the lifestyle of the women she works with as rootless. They have few possessions and live a hand-to-mouth existence, often moving from city to city in the upstate area to avoid periodic crackdowns by police. Even the brightly colored clothes, Sister Eileen says, are for the most part a myth. "I usually see them in jeans. During the summer they have less on, but it's usually fairly plain," she said.

The children of prostitutes seldom live with their mothers, something which she

hears is consistently painful for them. Instead the children live with other family members, with friends or in foster homes. Their children form part of the dream Sister Eileen's clients usually bring to her — of having a home, marriage to someone who loves them, a family life. But the women don't know how to achieve that dream.

Referrals to Project MORE come from many sources — social service agencies, the courts, chaplains of various institutions and by word of mouth. Clients begin to show up at a certain age, usually about 25, saying they feel used up or worn out and want to get out of "the business," Sister Eileen said.

Prostitutes face tough obstacles on their way to a change in lifestyle. For most jobs they must adjust to daylight hours, but more difficult is a change in attitude. From viewing money as something always spontaneously available on the street, Sister Eileen's clients need to learn budgeting to pay the rent. Shopping and cooking are also challenges since, for the most part, they subsist on fast food. Leisure activities are another habit most have not acquired.

"They really miss their teenage years to about 25 so they don't develop interests like tennis," she said. Instead drugs and alcohol are the primary uses of their spare time. Most of her clients need more education to qualify for good jobs, yet it's frequently difficult to convince them of the importance of going back to school.

An average program with a woman lasts about three months, although Sister Eileen approaches each case individually. To begin, she meets with a client once a week, to set goals — education, employment, housing — and continues in person or by phone, encouraging her and advocating for her with other agencies. Drug treatment programs, medical care and insurance are needs she usually encounters, but most the most

common and most difficult service to provide is housing.

"That's such a problem," Sister Eileen said. "Often by the time I've hooked them up with other agencies they're gone." The temptation of the old surroundings and lack of a supportive atmosphere, or sometimes the threats of a pimp or just second thoughts, may mean a woman drops out of sight. One of the hardest aspects of Sister's job — even when it means a client has made a successful transition — is not being sure what happens in the long run.

So far Sister Eileen has met with some 50 women more than three times each and estimates that roughly 40 percent of her clients continue to support themselves with prostitution, a statistic she measures by rearrests.

But even those who fall back into the old lifestyle, she believes, are never the same again. Once they have seen a glimmer of hope for a better life in the fact that this one person cared to help, they won't give up.

Sister Eileen's hopes for Project MORE's future include expanding to meet the critical need for emergency housing with a women's shelter and a drop-in center. At some point, she would also like to have help in actual counseling as well, but for now the counseling role is not one she feels she can share with volunteers.

Contributions from individuals and parishes are welcome, and go directly to the needs of her clients — usually for a security deposit on an apartment, to help provide medical care or insurance, or for other basic needs like food or clothing. "I wish you could see how much your help means," she has said to contributors. "It's a privilege to be called to this."

If you would like to help, call Sister Eileen Conheady at (716)546-6206.

Religious Groups Praise, Criticize 'Moment of Silence' Ruling

By Liz S. Armstrong

Washington (NC) — The Supreme Court's June 4 decision striking down an Alabama public school "moment of silence" law mentioning prayer drew praise from some religion-oriented groups and rebukes from others.

The disputed law, declared unconstitutional by the court's 6-3 decision, called for a "moment of silence" to allow "meditation or voluntary prayer" by public school students.

The high court indicated that it has no problems with state laws merely specifying a moment of silence in public school classrooms without implying that prayer is the preferred activity during the silence. It noted that Alabama already allowed meditation under a 1978 "moment of silence" law that has been accepted by opponents of school prayer.

The Alabama law, passed in 1981 and challenged by Ishmael Jaffree on behalf of his three children in Mobile, Ala., stated that a teacher may call for silence lasting one minute or less "for meditation or voluntary prayer."

The court continued that "the legislative intent to return prayer to the public schools is, of course, quite different from merely protecting every student's right to engage in voluntary prayer during an appropriate moment of silence during the school day. The 1978 statute already protected that right, containing nothing that prevented any student from engaging in voluntary prayer during a silent minute of meditation."

Furthermore, the majority opinion stated, "the addition of the phrase 'or voluntary

prayer' indicates that the state intended to characterize prayer as a favored practice. Such an endorsement is not consistent with the established principle that the government must pursue a course of complete neutrality toward religion."

The high court said that "the First Amendment requires that a statute must be invalidated if it is entirely motivated by a purpose to advance religion."

The majority opinion pointed out that the state senator who sponsored the law in the Alabama Legislature had stated in the legislative record and in court that the measure was an "effort to return voluntary prayer" to public school classrooms and had "no other purpose in mind."

Michael Schwartz, public affairs director for the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, criticized the high court's decision and said the Catholic League opposes a mandatory public school prayer law but not a "moment of silence" law mentioning prayer. By drawing a distinction between a "moment of silence" law and a "moment of silence" law that specifically mentions prayer, the court provides "a classic case of a distinction without a difference," Schwartz said.

"The law did nothing more than provide a forum for students to think about whatever they wished, be it prayer or motorcycle races," he said June 5. Once again, Schwartz added, "the court has embraced fear of religion, hostility to religion. I'd have to consider this a step backward."

The Center for Judicial Studies, a non-profit think tank which opposes "judicial

activism," praised the court's ruling. The center, whose members include such legal scholars as Notre Dame law professor Charles Rice, was involved in the case from the beginning, according to James McClellan, its director.

"It's a victory actually, although no one understands why," said McClellan, who testified as an expert witness in the lower court. Although the decision is "an assertion of raw judicial power" it also shows the court's apparent willingness to accept other "moment of silence" laws, McClellan said.

"The religious community should rejoice," he added. "We've won an important victory. We'll go on from here."

The U.S. Catholic Conference, public action agency of the U.S. bishops, had no comment.

In the past, the bishops have supported voluntary public school prayer but emphasized that any rights of public school prayer should include opportunities for optional on-the-premises religious instruction.

Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia, asked about the high court ruling, reiterated views in a November 1984 statement in which he said that "government should neither impose nor compose prayer" and should "neither inhibit nor prohibit voluntary prayer."

Although the Justice Department, under the Reagan administration, had urged the court to retain the Alabama law, the White House had little comment. Larry Speakes, deputy press secretary, said the White House staff had not had time to review the court's ruling and in any event, "we generally don't

comment on Supreme Court decisions unless they're outrageous."

President Reagan appointed Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who is often considered conservative but voted with the majority to declare the Alabama law unconstitutional.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell, Baptist minister and founder of Moral Majority, assailed the court's decision.

"Surely the United States of America, which presents itself as a nation under God, can only be viewed as hypocritical when it refuses to tell its children that they may pray to that God," Mr. Falwell said June 4. "There's no doubt in my mind that this ruling will fuel the movement for a constitutional amendment to return voluntary prayer to our public schools."

"We must hold hearings as soon as we can...on the silent prayer amendment," said Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah. "The real issue isn't the form of prayer. It's ending the governmental ban on school prayer...which is offensive to most people."

Americans United for Separation of Church and State said the Supreme Court's ruling on the Alabama law was "very welcome."

"This was a pretty strong reaffirmation" of the court's earlier decisions forbidding government sponsorship of religious activities, said Joseph L. Conn, spokesman for Americans United, June 5. Conn said that in recent decisions, including those involving city nativity scenes and religious chaplains at state legislatures, the court had "tended to lower the wall of separation" between church and state problems. This is a good break" from that trend, he said.

Pope Blames Poor Catechetical Formation for Religious Doubts

By Sister Mary Ann Walsh

Vatican City (NC) — Pope John Paul II blamed "deficient catechetical formation" for "crises of faith" in a May 30 address to the Italian bishops' conference.

In the same talk, the pope highlighted the importance of "good catechetical texts" and qualified religion teachers. "Deficient catechetical formation is at the roots of not a few crises of faith," the pope said in an evening address to the 25th General Assembly of the Italian bishops.

The pope supported the Italian bishops' concern that catechists appointed to teach in state schools be certified and well-prepared.

Catechists should be taught adequate teaching methods and should have "a solid doctrinal foundation" in order to show "the interdependence between fundamental human values and the Christian truth which gives them their rationale and deepest roots," Pope John Paul said.

The pope urged the bishops "to confront the problem of preparation and updating of religion professors."

He also said he joined the bishops in reminding families and students to take advantage of religious education in public schools — where it is offered as an optional course.

"Religious formation is an integral part of human formation," the pope said, "and Catholic education is a right and a need for the baptized."

The pope also asked for prayers that the forthcoming extraordinary Synod of Bishops will bring "a better understanding of the genuine message" of the Second Vatican Council and acceptance of council teachings by "all sections of the people of God."

The synod has been scheduled for Nov. 25-Dec. 8 to study the implementation of the council's teachings.

The same day the pope met with artists visiting the Vatican for the May 30 opening of an exhibit of illustrations of Dante's "Divine Comedy." The pope praised the poem and cited the medieval author's use of symbol and allegory to explain religious

concepts.

"The substance is theologically true," the pope said, adding that the lengthy poem was inspired by Scripture and reflected the teachings of the church leaders and

theologians of the day.

In the 14th-century work, the poet Dante travels through hell and purgatory and learns that an individual earns reward or punishment according to how he exercises free will.

Campus Ministers Named

Fathers Michael J. Mahler and Sister Sheila Briody have been appointed assistant directors in the diocesan Department of Campus Ministry. They will join Father William Lum, department director, who serves as Catholic chaplain at the University of Rochester.

Father Mahler will continue his campus ministry at Cornell University while serving the department as assistant director for budget and finance. Sister Sheila, campus minister at SUNY Brockport, will be department director for personnel.

Campus Ministry's fourteen ministers serve seven campuses full time and work with campus ministers at St. John Fisher and Nazareth Colleges.

Geneva Parish Closes Sesqui

St. Francis de Sales parish in Geneva, founded in 1835, concluded "Community Celebrating Commitment," its sesquicentennial anniversary, with a Mass on Sunday June 2. Bishop Matthew H. Clark participated as principal concelebrant and homilist.

Music was provided by a combined choir from both St. Francis and neighboring St. Stephen's parishes, as well as St. Francis' folk group and a children's choir. A Knights of Columbus color guard escorted Bishop Clark in procession from the rectory to begin the ceremony. A reception followed in the school hall.