

# CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester Thursday, May 30, 1991 75¢ 16 pages

## Child abuse grows out of parents' woes

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

When she was 15, "Helen" intentionally stuck her hand through a window pane.

"I (was) hoping I'd bleed to death," she said.

By the age of 25, "Margaret" was the divorced mother of five children. Now 35, Margaret lamented, "I still feel like I do not belong. I feel alone."

Both women — whose names have been changed for this article — were abused as children.

Both bear lingering scars of the physical, emotional and mental abuse they suffered. Years later, these scars still affect the way they deal with the world and the people around them.

Experts say that no one knows precisely how many people in the United States bear the scars of child abuse due to lack of reliable records.

In recent years, however, more accurate records have been kept. Monroe County's Department of Social Services, for example, received 4,618 reports of suspected child abuse and maltreatment in 1990 — down slightly from 4,654 reports in 1989.

In New York state, 130,384 reports of abuse and maltreatment were recorded in 1990.

And according to the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, the total number of abuse or neglect cases nationwide in 1990 was around 2.5 million.

Observers of these statistics fear the circle of pain will ever widen — encompassing not only the children abused today, but their offspring of tomorrow as well.

"The main thing is that people who abuse children were almost always abused when they were children," said Craig Snyder, a marriage and family therapist at the Onondaga Pastoral Counseling Center in Syracuse.

Although abused children can grow up relatively healthy, Snyder said, in many cases, the abuse "is a pattern that's repeated from generation to generation."

"If children are abused, they grow up with no self-esteem, they grow up with anger, and they grow up to be angry people," observed Veronica Piano, co-founder of the Dreikurs Family Education Association of Rochester, Inc.

As adults, such abuse victims "take it out on the world — they want to get revenge," added Piano, whose organization teaches parenting skills.

In addition to experiencing self-loathing or feelings of inadequacy, abused children often come to believe they are the cause of their families' problems.

These feelings manifest themselves through such symptoms as withdrawal, bed wetting, constant stomach aches and headaches, as well as aggressive or violent behavior.

As they grow older, victims of abuse can be subject to depression; low self-esteem; such self-destructive behaviors as overeating or substance abuse; and an inability to form healthy relationships.

The most common interpretation of the term "child abuse" is that a child has been sexually molested, physically harmed or even killed.

But experts note that abuse comprises a broad range of behaviors.

Due to poverty, unemployment or ignorance, some parents fail to provide their children with adequate food, shelter and health care.

Other abused children are subject to overly rigid home environments and excessive discipline, as well as constant belittling, yelling and insulting.

"I don't often separate emotional and physical abuse," noted

Continued on page 14

## Church can foster healing

Syracuse marriage and family therapist Craig Snyder discussed treatment of child-abuse victims during a daylong workshop in Elmira April 16. Entitled "Partners in Healing," the program was sponsored by the Chemung County Interfaith Task Force on Families.

The workshop, which drew approximately 50 participants from the Elmira area, encouraged churches to work with local agencies and health-care providers to deal with child abuse.

Churches, Snyder said, can take a leading role in preventing child abuse and promoting better parenting.

"All parents want to be good parents, they want to do the best they can," Snyder said. "Churches can address that desire."

In addition to suggesting that parish priests address the subject of child abuse in their homilies, Snyder noted that churches can create support groups and sponsor parenting programs that teach parents "acceptable ways to treat children."

Churches can also take advantage of such groups as Dreikurs. In addition to offering talks, six-week parenting skills

study groups and conferences, the organization operates a telephone help line for parents.

Once abuse or the risk of abuse takes place, Kinship Homes and Rochester's Catholic Family Center offer intensive prevention programs for families. Many of the people served by these programs are referred by the county social service departments.

Kinship's program — known as the Supportive Home and Parent Enrichment program or SHAPE — helps families find agencies for necessary services and counseling. The program also teaches about infant care, nutrition and health care.

The program's goal, noted Kinship's director Joseph Weider, is to keep families together whenever possible.

If parish members become aware of people committing abuse, they can help those people receive counseling through a variety of agencies and groups, including such agencies as DePaul Mental Health Services. In addition to its Survivors of Sexual Abuse group, DePaul also offers a Child and Family Team.

— Lee Strong