

Study: Trust in clergy on decline

WASHINGTON (CNS) — When a priest is accused of sexually abusing a child, the child is everyone's first concern, and rightfully so. But the ramifications extend far beyond.

New research published in August showed that trust in priests and support for vocations drops significantly among Catholics in a diocese where a priest has been accused of child abuse, and even more significantly in a parish where such an accusation has been made.

A new controversy in Chicago in early September highlighted the legal problems that clergy child abuse cases pose — not just for the church, but for civil authorities as well.

Elsewhere, a prominent northern Virginia priest recently killed himself just two days after a man accused him of having committed child sex abuse a quarter-century earlier.

The new research, based on a national survey of more than 1,000 lay Catholics, was published in the monthly magazine *Today's Parish* by Father Stephen J. Rossetti, a priest-psychologist from the Diocese of Syracuse, who specializes in treatment of child abusers and their victims.

Among respondents who knew of a priest accused of child abuse, Father Rossetti reported, "every item on the survey that measured attitudes toward the priesthood demonstrated a significant decline."

He said the measures of trust or respect for priests dropped most markedly among those who knew of a priest accused of child molestation in their own parish. Only 34 percent of the respondents in that group, for example, agreed with the statement, "Overall, I am satisfied with the priests that we have in the church today."

Those who did not know of any ac-

cused priest in their diocese or parish showed the most trust and respect. Of that group, 69 percent said they were satisfied overall with today's priests.

Those who knew of an accused priest in their diocese but not in their parish fell in the middle on every single measure Father Rossetti used. On the question about overall satisfaction with priests today, 50 percent said they were satisfied.

"The clarity, consistency and strength of these results should sound an alarm throughout the church," he wrote. "The extent of the erosion in confidence, trust, support and satisfaction with the priesthood documented by this study should be cause for considerable concern."

The Chicago archdiocese is currently fighting state subpoenas of some records it considers confidential in regard to 20 priests facing accusations child sex abuse.

The conflict has led to a new debate in Illinois over whether clergy should be added to the state's list of those who must be reported to civil authorities if there is any reason to believe they have engaged in child sex abuse.

The Aug. 11 suicide death of Monsignor William T. Reinecke, chancellor of the Diocese of Arlington, Va., and pastor of St. James Church in Falls Church, indicated how deeply an allegation of child sex abuse may affect the accused person, even if the alleged event is decades removed.

News media subsequently reported that Joe McDonald, now 39 and executive director of the Mental Health Association of Northern Virginia, said he spoke privately with Monsignor Reinecke two days before his death, accusing the priest of having abused him when he was a 13-year-old altar

boy. McDonald said he asked Monsignor Reinecke to resign from the priesthood.

Relatives and friends said Monsignor Reinecke had been in a severe depression for weeks. After his encounter with McDonald, he purchased a shotgun, wrote some final messages, and went to Holy Cross Abbey, a rural Trappist monastery in Berryville, Va., where he went out into a field and killed himself with the shotgun.

In a message Sept. 3, Arlington Bishop John R. Keating asked Catholics not to let the child abuse allegations "blur our vision about the priesthood." A diocesan spokesman said that in 27 years as a priest Monsignor Reinecke had never been counseled for or suspected of any impropriety.

In a recent interview Father Rossetti said one reason for the increase in reports of clergy child abuse is a greater awareness of child abuse in society, leading to more willingness to listen to accusations and not ignore them.

"In the past, children would make hints of sexual abuse, but nobody wanted to listen so we all ignored the hints for help," he said.

He said the day is gone when a priest who sexually abuses a child can be "whisked away from the parish" and the allegations against him "ignored or dismissed."

He rejected the idea that media



AP/Wide World Photos
Father Richard R. Lavigne pleads guilty to two counts of indecently assaulting two boys as he's sentenced at Newburyport Superior Court in Massachusetts June 25. The priest must serve 10 years probation and was ordered to a psychiatric hospital specializing in helping the clergy.

coverage of clergy child abuse is harmful.

"Overall, I would say that media coverage of sexual abuse is a good thing as long as the coverage is not done in a sensationalistic way," he said. "Through the media attention, we're becoming more sensitive to a very difficult issue, and that is good."

"In addition to priests, however, the issue of child sexual abuse should be dealt with in a wider society," he said.

Priests asked to help pay expenses for Irish bishop

DUBLIN, Ireland (CNS) — Irish priests have been asked to contribute up to \$200 each toward the "legal and other expenses" of an Irish bishop who fathered a child with an American woman.

Bishop Eamonn Casey, 65, resigned last May as head of the Galway Diocese after admitting he and divorcee Annie Murphy, a Connecticut resident, had a teenage son from their romance back in the 1970s. Bishop Casey traveled to the United States immediately after resigning and has been in seclusion ever since.

The plea for financial contributions was contained in a letter sent by former classmates of the bishop at Ireland's principal seminary at Maynooth near Dublin, the *Irish Press* said.

One priest, who was not identified, told the newspaper he thought the request was highly unusual. He was quoted as saying he decided to ignore

the appeal but he said he knew other priests had made contributions.

"The letter talks about priests showing solidarity with Bishop Casey but if it was just an ordinary priest there would be no collection. The matter is raising a few eyebrows," the priest said.

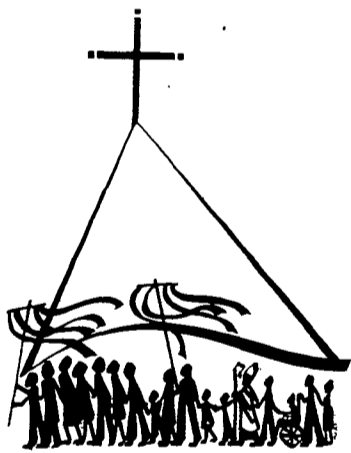
The bishop resigned May 6, just before reports of his liaison with Murphy began surfacing in Irish press.

He at first said he was resigning for "personal reasons" and intended to spend the rest of his working life in the missions.

Later, he admitted he was the father of 17-year-old Peter Murphy.

It also was revealed that the bishop had used nearly \$50,000 of diocesan money as part of \$100,000 he paid to Murphy in child support and legal fees.

He said that the diocesan money was replaced by friends.



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