

WORLD & NATION

USCC officials criticize 'biased' HBO special

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The chief spokesman for the U.S. bishops said that an HBO cable special on sex abuse by priests is "an attack on the Catholic Church."

Msgr. Francis J. Maniscalco, director of communications for the U.S. Catholic Conference, made the charge in an April 29 memo to diocesan communications directors.

The program, "Priestly Sins: Sex and the Church," "does a disservice to the Catholic Church," Msgr. Maniscalco said. "It is a distorted account of real problems which the church has acknowledged and has tried to grapple with to the best of its ability."

The program alleges that church officials "engaged in a massive cover-up" of clergy sex abuse, according to Msgr. Maniscalco, an allegation he denied.

"Rather, it is the media that covers up by concentrating so exclusively on the problem as it exists in the Catholic

Church and so often ignoring how the church is seeking to remedy it," he said.

"Priestly Sins," according to Msgr. Maniscalco, attacks the practice of clerical celibacy in a way "that would be hard to imagine with regard to the religious practices of other faiths."

He said, "A questionable attempt is made to blame on celibacy aberrant forms of behavior which are engaged in by people of all religious backgrounds and none and by people who are married and single. Equally questionable is the leap in judgment made from the actions of individual priests to judgments about the priesthood and the church as a whole."

Msgr. Maniscalco said that an interview with Bishop John F. Kinney of St. Cloud, Minn., chairman of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Sexual Abuse, "was obtained by assurances of a far more objective kind of documentary than what 'Priestly Sins' has turned out to be. This discrepancy seriously calls into question the integrity of both HBO and the producer (Nicholas Kent)."

Kent's other credits, according to

HBO, include what the cable company called the "provocative" series "Naked Hollywood" and "Naked News."

In an April 22 memo to all U.S. bishops, Msgr. Dennis M. Schnurr, general secretary of the U.S. bishops' conferences, said that a letter sent to Msgr. Maniscalco requesting an interview with Bishop Kinney for the documentary "describes a very different program" than what eventually developed.

Msgr. Maniscalco said it was "intensely disturbing to find on HBO's program schedule 'Priestly Sins' described between programs titled 'Sex Bytes' and 'Radio Sex TV.'"

"Clearly HBO is looking for this to be a titillating program, a goal that should unite all those concerned with the problem of sexual abuse in criticism of this program as an exploitative act."

In an earlier review of "Priestly Sins," Henry Herx, director of the USCC Office for Film and Broadcasting, said Bishop Kinney was given "scant opportunity" to present the church's perspective.

The bishop's "sound bites," Herx

added, "are lost in the context of a program that uses some specific cases of clergy sexual abuse to charge that celibacy is responsible and that the bishops are trying to hide such abuses."

Herx added, "These are serious matters which deserve much more responsible treatment than being turned into one more conspiracy-theory tract."

Msgr. Schnurr said in his memo, "We hope that the bias of the show is sufficiently self-evident that HBO will offer us some opportunity for redress."

The program premiered May 6, with repeat showings scheduled for May 9, 14, 17, 20, 25 and 28.

Msgr. Maniscalco wrote to HBO president Jeff Bewkes about his objections to "Priestly Sins" in an April 24 letter.

Bewkes gave Msgr. Maniscalco a telephoned reply, but when the priest was asked by Catholic News Service if he thinks there will be any changes from the version TV critics reviewed and what HBO viewers would see, Msgr. Maniscalco said, "No, I don't."

R. I. house votes 85-10 to ban assisted suicide

WASHINGTON — Appeals from the bishop of Providence and his leading pro-life lobbyist helped a proposal to ban assisted suicide win by an 85-10 margin in the state's House of Representatives May 1.

But supporters of the bill fear that a procedural move might keep it from coming to a vote in the Rhode Island senate.

"The people of Rhode Island feel very strongly about banning assisted suicide," said Maria G. Parker, Respect Life coordinator for the Providence Diocese, in an interview with Catholic News Service in Washington, where she was attending a meeting.

Sister Ortiz ends vigil; vows continued efforts

WASHINGTON — Ursuline Sister Dianna Ortiz ended her vigil and fast in front of the White House May 6, saying that while information released so far is inadequate, there seemed to be momentum toward resolving questions about her 1989 abduction, rape and torture.

At a press conference, Sister Ortiz, 37, also announced plans to sue the federal government for further documents and provided sketches of her assailants and of an American who she believes was their superior.

The press conference capped an eight-day campaign of civil disobedience in front of the White House in which more than 100 people including a bishop, nuns and priests were arrested. Members of Congress also spoke up on her behalf, and a protest was staged in El Salvador.



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