

CONTINUED...

Misconduct

Continued from page 1

or creates an intimidating, hostile or ofensive work environment.

In church settings, Father Ring said, casual relationships can easily escalate into situations involving sexual misconduct unless clear boundaries are established. He explained that church employees regularly encounter "dual relationships," where they strive to perform spiritual ministry while also maintaining their professionalism.

"These relationships are complicated. They're fraught with ambiguity," Father Ring said.

Two clinical social workers agreed that because of its intimate nature, church ministry can be a natural setting for sexual misconduct.

"People are vulnerable when they go for counseling," Martha Mryglod said. "When they go, they feel safe as a baby."

"It's really a fine line that human service professionals walk," Robin Chamberlain added. She and Mryglod serve as community coordinators for the Rochester office of St. Anne Institute. This non-profit agency, based in Albany and founded by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, provides rehabilitation services for emotionally troubled children. Many of the agency's clients are victims of sexual abuse.

The diocesan workshops also stressed the proper actions to be taken, based on a diocesan policy instituted in 1993, when cases of sexual misconduct arise.

The policy originally focused on incidents of sexual abuse of minors by priests and deacons. In 1996, this policy was expanded to include sexual misconduct against individuals of any age by any diocesan employee. Under the guidelines for reporting incidents of sexual misconduct involving diocesan employees:

- School employees who become aware of any incidents of abuse between another employee and a student should contact Sister Virginia Steinwachs, SSJ, diocesan assistant superintendent for Catholic school personnel.

- Parish employees who believe they have observed sexual misconduct between two employees, or an employee and parishioner, are advised to contact Father Ring or Pedeville.

- Parishioners or parish employees who believe they are a victim of sexual *abuse* by a parish employee should contact the police and/or Pedeville or Father Ring.

- Parishioners or parish employees who feel they are a victim of sexual *exploitation* or *harassment* by a parish employee should contact Pedeville or Father Ring.

The diocesan policy promises a full investigation into each complaint. Initially, Father Ring and Pedeville interview all the people involved. Employees are removed from their positions if necessary, and professional counseling is made available to those who require it. Diocesan officials will also direct complainants to the proper authorities if the complainants may be victims of sexual crimes and wish to press charges.

Proven cases of sexual abuse result in automatic removal from ministry, Pedeville stated. Since the diocesan policy was instituted four years ago, she noted, four clergy members (priests and deacons) have been removed for having committed sexual abuse. All four are currently inactive.

Proven cases of exploitation and harassment, on the other hand, are assessed circumstantially. Although Pedeville stated that "in some instances, employment has been terminated for lay employees," she added that other employees have returned to their jobs based on recommendations from therapists and input from an advisory board. The board consists of diocesan officials and professionals who specialize in sexual misconduct cases.

Father Ring noted that the diocese plans in the near future to distribute pam-

phlets to parishes reviewing the sexual misconduct policy. The pamphlets will be available in church foyers, he said.

Further education for parish communities should be passed on by employees who attended the sexual misconduct workshops, Father Ring added.

"It is our hope, as parish staff become more aware of these issues and committed to prevention, that they will help raise the awareness of parishioners through adult education and volunteer training," Father Ring stated.

Parishioners in the Naples/Prattsburg Catholic Community are already familiar with discussion of alleged sexual misconduct. In the fall of 1993, Father Eugene Emo resigned as pastor of St. Januarius in Naples following allegations of financial improprieties by persons other than himself within the parish. He also had been accused of inappropriate behavior in situations that included interaction with young men.

Although the diocese found no evidence of sexual misconduct, Father Philip Billotte remarked that the controversy sparked considerable distress in the parish community.

"People did not know where to go or what to do for a long time," Father Billotte said. He was appointed administrator of St. Januarius in January 1994 and

became its pastor when the parish clustered with St. Patrick's in Prattsburg six months later.

Father Emo is serving a six-month prison term in Steuben County Jail after being convicted of first-degree sexual abuse of a mentally handicapped male in connection with incidents that took place after he left St. Januarius. Father Emo pleaded guilty Feb. 11 and was sentenced May 5.

Because the subject of sexual misconduct has hit so close to home, Father Billotte is pleased that the diocese is taking steps to heighten awareness and increase prevention.

"We can't push it under the rug; it's something that's critical. It's a serious enough matter, and the consequences are serious enough, that it should be mandated," Father Billotte said.

Until recently, Father Billotte stated, priests were frequently able to avoid such scrutiny.

"It was almost a blind faith that the priest didn't do anything like that," he remarked. "We were put on a pedestal."

"For years it was a subject that was never talked about," Pedeville agreed.

Mryglod noted that she has counseled several victims of sexual misconduct in Catholic church settings. She remarked that priests — and even nuns — used their "enormous power" over victims in order

to maintain secrecy.

"Who was going to tell? You just obeyed. If somebody said to do it, you did it," Mryglod remarked. "It was incredible."

However, Father Ring said he believes that public perception now unfairly links priesthood and sexual misconduct, particularly abuse of minors.

"At times in recent history, some media coverage has tended to support myths about sexual abuse rather than clarify them. In the workshops, we've tried to make clear that abuse, harassment and exploitation happens in all walks of life and all segments of society," Father Ring said.

Father Ring said he has observed a sharp rise in the number of reported cases of sexual misconduct since the diocesan policy took effect. Yet he also cautioned that this does not necessarily reflect a growing number of incidents.

"In some of the cases, there were false accusations made," he said.

Father Billotte asserted that *awareness* of sexual misconduct in the church — but not necessarily *frequency* — has increased.

"I don't think there's more (misconduct). We're just dealing with it now," Father Billotte said. "It hurts in some ways. But let's get on with it, in society and in church, and use what we have learned so we can serve God better."

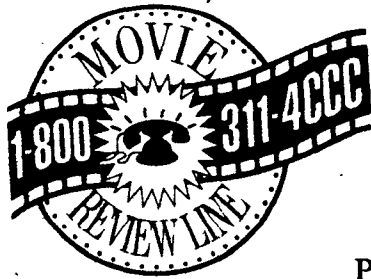
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