

# National, local church addresses sexual abuse

This week and last the *Catholic Courier* has featured Wilton Gregory, bishop of the Diocese of Belleville, Illinois, and president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Last week, our cover story highlighted Wilton's presidency and celebrated the fact that he is the first African-American to hold that post.

On page 5 of this issue, you will find a Catholic News Service story on a recent statement from Bishop Gregory on the sexual abuse of minors by priests — a subject that is as painful and disturbing as last week's was joyful and encouraging. We also print the full text of the bishop's letter, which was occasioned by a spate of national publicity on the issue.

I encourage you to read both the letter and the related story because they set forth in clear language some of the factors we all need to keep in mind about this deeply painful reality. Such activity on the part of any priest is totally unacceptable; there is never any excuse or justification for it. The sexual abuse of children is an act of violence against them and a serious violation of the trust we all place in those who minister in the name of the church.

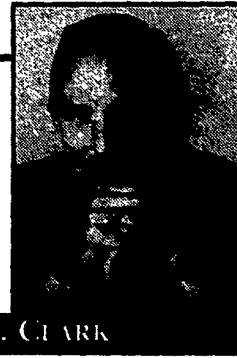
In addition, Bishop Gregory alludes to the fact that in recent years the church — as is true of society in general — has learned much about the nature of this offense, its profound and lasting influence on victims, the recovery of victims, and the prospects of recovery and rehabilitation for perpetrators of these offenses.

To Bishop Gregory's comments I want to add a few of my own. I do so with the hope that, as you read them, you will remember having read similar words about this issue in past editions of the *Catholic Courier*.

1) I know from personal experience that the vast majority of priests in our diocese are men of the highest integrity. They love and respect the people among whom they serve. Our children bring them a particular delight. Our young people are persons

## along the way

By BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK



whom our priests wish to nourish, lovingly care for, support and encourage in any way that they can.

I hope that you have some sense that destructive and abusive behavior by any priest causes great pain and sadness in the hearts of the priests who serve you. When such behavior hurts children, the pain and sadness are particularly intense.

The impact of such behavior also raises some very understandable concerns and questions in the minds of many of our priests. Do the people still trust me to honor and respect their children? Can I be as spontaneous, "as much myself" as I always have been with the young people who have always brought such joy to my heart? What are the people thinking as they read these stories? If there are people out there who are reluctant to speak to me about this matter, how can I encourage them to do so? And how do I meet my own need to share my thinking and deep feelings about what has been going on?

2) I want to remind you that for several years we have had in place a specific and clear diocesan policy that guides us whenever we have any reason at all to be concerned about this issue. We developed this policy and administer it with the assistance and guidance of a panel of lay professionals.

In addition to rendering that service, this panel also helps us to keep current about new research and insights into the sexual abuse of minors — its causes, effects,

treatment, rehabilitation, etc. Our first concern in this is always the well-being of the victim and the protection of our community. We know that abusers do serious damage to their victims; we are becoming more aware that they also do harm to the wider community and to the church.

3) Echoing Bishop Gregory's words, I express my apologies and those of my brother priests to any and all of you who have ever been sexually abused by a priest.

To those words I add the invitation, if you have any concerns about this issue, to call Mrs. Barbara Pedeville at 585/328-3228, ext. 215, or 800/388-7177, ext. 215; or Father Robert Ring at 315/536-7459. I can assure you that you will be respectfully heard and that we will respond to your question or concern in a responsible and professional manner.

Thank you for your kind attention to these words. In summary, I want to reiterate a few important ideas in the light of recent publicity about the sexual abuse of minors by priests:

- Such behavior is totally unacceptable and never justified.

- We have a solid policy in place to deal with this matter, and we will act on that policy whenever the evidence warrants it.

- We invite you, should you have any concerns, to contact us. We will respond to you in a respectful, sensitive and professional manner.

I hope you will agree that it is very important to the health of our diocesan community that we do not allow the grave offenses of a few to diminish the bonds of trust, affection and respect that unite the vast majority of our priests with their people and our people with their priests.

Part of my prayer this Lent is that the Lord — precisely in our struggle with this painful reality — will heal the wounded and broken-hearted and lead us to deeper life and mutual respect.

Peace to all.

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