

School-abuse study released

Agostino Bono/CNS

BISHOPS SAY MINISTERS MUST OBEY TEACHINGS

WASHINGTON (CNS) — While a wide public debate was under way on whether bishops should deny Communion to Catholic politicians who consistently oppose church teaching on abortion, several bishops have taken steps recently to assure that their lay ecclesial ministers or those who speak at church events are in full accord with church teachings.

Bishop Robert F. Vasa of Baker, Ore., has issued a two-page "Affirmation of Personal Faith" with instructions that anyone applying for any role in lay ecclesial ministry in the diocese must read and affirm.

Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo of Richmond, Va., appointed a diocesan theologian to assist him on doctrinal and moral issues and "to review any person that is under consideration to lecture, present a workshop, give a retreat or otherwise speak ... on Catholic property."

'DESIGNER BABIES' DECISION CRITICIZED

MANCHESTER, England (CNS) — A British archbishop said the government's decision to allow the creation of so-called designer babies is "deeply flawed" and must be reversed.

Britain's Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority announced July 21 that it would allow the screening of human embryos so parents can choose which embryos will be implanted and allowed to be born in order to help a seriously ill sibling.

Archbishop Peter Smith of Cardiff, Wales, said the decision "abandons the foundational moral principle that human lives should never be used as a mere means to an end."

POPE NAMES BISHOP TO INVESTIGATE SEMINARY

SANKT POLTEN, Austria (CNS) — Austrian Bishop Klaus Kung of Feldkirch was appointed by Pope John Paul II July 20 to carry out a special investigation of the Sankt Polten Diocese and the diocesan seminary where thousands of pornographic photographs had been found on computers.

The seminary rector and vice rector resigned after photos were published showing staff members and seminarians kissing and fondling each other.

WASHINGTON — Because of the prevalence of child sex abuse, public schools must develop prevention programs that include educating employees, volunteers, parents and students on how to spot and report problems, said an educator who prepared a federally mandated study on the issue for Congress.

Sex abuse of students by teachers and other adults in the public-school system "is a problem that needs to be taken care of," said Charol Shakeshaft, professor of educational policies at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., and managing director of Interactive Inc. in Huntington, N.Y.

She was interviewed by telephone July 6 by Catholic News Service.

Her study, "Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature," estimated that almost 10 percent of public-school students, about 4.5 million children, have been abused by public-school employees or adult volunteers. It was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and presented to Congress at the end of June.

When informed of child sex-abuse prevention programs that involve educating children, parents and employees in Catholic dioceses, Shakeshaft praised these as a "good idea" and a "good step" toward curbing child sex abuse.

The figure of 4.5 million children was based on a 2000 national survey of 2,064 students done by the American Association of University Women. It showed that 9.6 percent of public-school students from kindergarten through 11th grade reported unwanted sexual harassment or abuse by public-school employees.

Shakeshaft told CNS that her mandate was limited to identifying the public information available on the topic, and she hopes her report will lead to a national survey devoted exclusively to gathering data on child sex abuse in public schools.

Shakeshaft proposed a national summit on the issue. She also favored less stringent federal laws to make it easier to sue schools for failure to prevent abuse and to sue the adults responsible, she said.

Currently it is easier to sue for employment discrimination based on gender under federal law than to sue for child sex abuse, she said.

Federal laws are an important way to change how local school districts act, she said.

"If a district believes that it may have to pay damages and employees may have to pay because of child sex abuse, it will put sexual misconduct higher on the priority list," she said.

PROTECTING STUDENTS

Educator sexual misconduct is a continuing problem. About 4.5 million children reported being sexually harassed or abused by public school employees.

Steps institutions can take to protect children

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEVEL POLICIES

Develop written policies defining sexual misconduct and inappropriate educator-student relationships.

HIRING PRACTICES

Use a written application form to facilitate reference and background checks.

REQUIRED REPORTING

Report all allegations to both police and child protection agencies.

THOROUGH INVESTIGATIVE PRACTICES

Train regular investigators who can respond quickly to reports.

EDUCATE EMPLOYEES

Train educators and school staff to recognize behaviors that are not acceptable.

EDUCATE STUDENTS

Teach students to understand the boundaries that educators should enforce.

Source: Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature, by Charol Shakeshaft, Hofstra University.

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