

ARCHBISHOP'S COLUMN

Sexual misconduct policy reviewed

BY (MOST REV.) J. FRANCIS STAFFORD

As your archbishop, no burden has been heavier to bear than the various news reports identifying how serious sexual misconduct has become in American society, particularly when it is priests who have violated their priestly identity by sexually abusing others, including children.

Although the archdiocese has had in place for several years procedures to handle accusations of sexual misconduct involving a priest or any other Church employee, we regularly need to review these guidelines to ensure they are complete. This is never an easy topic to discuss because the great majority of laypersons, Religious and priests who serve the Church in northern Colorado are outstanding people. Their lives witness persuasively to the Gospel.

But as the summer holidays wind down and a new "work year" begins, I believe this is a good time to explain the archdiocesan policy on sexual misconduct and how the archdiocese proceeds when allegations of misconduct involving Church workers arise.

Since arriving in Denver in 1986, I have worked with both priests and laypeople to provide prompt care for anyone claiming abuse at the hands of a Church employee, whether priest, layperson or Religious. Our current misconduct policy was first published on Sept. 8, 1981, but the policy itself had been in effect long before that.

No one who works for the Archdiocese of Denver underestimates or ignores the gravity of the sexual misconduct issues. Everyone employed by the archdiocese is made to clearly understand the principle behind our sexual misconduct policy: zero tolerance. We enforce that policy consistently.

We act in the belief that a true solution to situations involving sexual abuse can proceed only from finding healing for victims of abuse, providing appropriate assistance to those who commit abuse and ensuring that priests in ministry or any other Church workers will not be a danger to minors or adults.

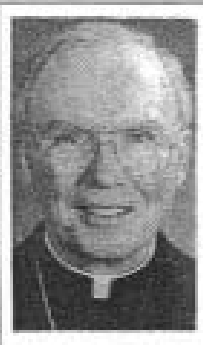
While we respect confidentiality when people seek it and remain sensitive to the rights of everyone involved, we do not hide or evade addressing any allegations. We investigate immediately. We respond with offers of counseling and assistance to those who have been affected. We never deal with a problem of sexual abuse by simply moving the alleged offender to another ministerial assignment.

All investigations are conducted by the archdiocesan response team. The team leader, one of our two vicars general, Father R. Walker Nickless, is also archdiocesan secretary for priests and seminarians.

The team also includes Dr. Charles Shelton, a Jesuit priest. Dr. Shelton, an experienced clinical psychologist licensed to practice in Colorado, is an associate professor of psychology at Regis University and the nationally respected author of "Adolescent Spirituality," "Morality and the Adolescent," "Morality of the Heart" and the forthcoming "Pastoral Counseling with Adolescents and Young Adults."

Completing the team is Dr. Mary Lou Munroe, division director of family services for Catholic Charities and Community Services, and co-author of "Counseling the Parishioner."

Every complaint of sexual abuse by a priest or other Church worker is grave. Every inappropriate sexual contact results in suffering for the victim and, therefore, demands the full engagement of the Church.



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The vast majority of our priests, Religious and other Church workers live out their vocational commitments diligently and faithfully. Yet, while only a small minority of Church workers have ever been involved in sexual abuse, even one case is one too many.

In closing, I would like to make two points.

First, I encourage anyone who feels that he or she has been abused by a priest, Religious or other Church worker of this archdiocese to write or telephone Father Walker Nickless at the Pastoral Center. He is committed to responding immediately to any such contact. I also want to assure the faithful

of this archdiocese that I have worked, and will continue to work, relentlessly to prevent any sexual abuse of any type; and, when a complaint arises, to respond faithfully and appropriately to the alleged victim and the alleged offender.

I want to assure the people of this archdiocese that I am committed to making the Church a place of comfort and security for all the faithful.

Second, and equally important, I ask the people of the archdiocese to affirm and support the many, many fine Church workers who give so much to their lives to the Gospel. Our priests especially need your prayers at this time.

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