

Priests reach out to the hurting

By BARB ARLAND-FYE

Representatives of the Davenport Diocese's priests, following deep reflection, are issuing a public apology to all who have been harmed because of sexual abuse by priests.

In addition, the Presbyteral (Priest) Council will devote the Spring Priest Convocation to presentations by abuse victims and professional health care personnel in a prayerful setting.

Two motions, approved last week at the Presbyteral Council meeting, reflect the profound sorrow of the priests and a sincere desire to nurture healing in the diocese.

The first motion states:

"As a priest council we are aware of the hideous nature of sexual abuse by priests whenever or wherever it occurs. Such acts are a gigantic betrayal of trust and cause unimaginable pain (physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual) to those victimized.

Therefore, let it be known that we, representatives of the priests of the Davenport Diocese, apologize to, empathize with, and continue to pray for all who have been so badly harmed by those in whom they should have had every reason to trust."

In its second motion, the Presbyteral Council further promised:

In order that "our apology to, empathy with and prayers for the victims be sincere and better informed, be it moved that the Presbyteral Council change the proposed agenda for this

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Chairman of the Presbyteral Council**

spring's Priest Convocation to presentations from abuse victims and professional health care personnel in a prayerful setting, in order that priests of the diocese may have a more deepened awareness of sexual abuse, its causes and resultant harm to the victims."

The Presbyteral Council is striving to take a proactive approach to a crisis in the U.S. Catholic Church that has captured national attention for the past two years.

Within the Davenport Diocese, 11 lawsuits have been filed concerning allegations of priest sex abuse occurring 20 to 50 years ago.

"We want to make a very positive statement about our concerns for the people who were abused and we want to know, 'Where do we begin to bring healing to the people?'" said Father Robert McAleer, chairman of the Presbyteral Council and pastor of St. John Vianney parish, Bettendorf. "We're all part of the body of Christ — if one of us hurts, we all hurt," he added.

"There's a sense that we need to look at what's happening around us and try to respond to what the Gospel message is calling us to do at this time," said Father Anthony Herold, vice

chairman of the Presbyteral Council and pastor of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace parish, Clinton.

The message needs to come from the diocese's priests; theirs are the faces that people in the pews connect with the institution called church, the priests say.

"It has to be at the grassroots level. That's where people live and celebrate their faith," said Father Edward Fitzpatrick, director of the Newman Catholic Student Center in Iowa City.

"As a church, we have to admit to sin, ask for forgiveness and begin the healing process that can lead to reconciliation," he said.

Father John Hynes, a retired priest of the Davenport Diocese, said the priests' public apology is meant to confront a heinous crime that has life-altering consequences for its victims.

"We're all overwhelmed by the realization of the pain (that victims have suffered). We don't even begin to understand the pain that is bottled up within," Fr. Hynes said.

"We want to understand, to reach out in some appropriate way to the people who are suffering yet."

In order to minister appropriately, the priests need additional

education to understand a subject that is unfamiliar to many of them.

They will need what Father Brian Miclot calls continuing education to learn about the psychological, sociological, legal and spiritual aspects of clergy sexual abuse.

From there, the priests need ask themselves, "What do we do with the harms that have been done? What do we do with both the victims and the victimizers in Christianity?" said Fr. Miclot, a professor at St. Ambrose University, Davenport.

"We certainly need to learn more about the issue so we can be more effective in our call to be healers in our church," Fr. Herold said.

"The more we learn about this, the better we can deal with it, and reach out to people," Fr. Hynes said.

The priests also want victims to have an opportunity to tell their stories, and to vent.

They want someone who is hurting to understand that "Our door is open if you want to talk," Fr. Herold said.

Choosing the Spring Priest Convocation as the time and place to begin the education and healing process underscores the importance of the subject.

The convocation and Chrism Mass are scheduled Monday and Tuesday, the week before Holy Week. All priests in active ministry are required to attend; the retired priests are invited to participate.

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Priests to reflect on abuse issue during convocation

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"The convocation is a time for the diocese's priests to reflect on the personal stories of their ministry," Fr. McAleer said.

After the convocation, the priests participate in the Chrism Mass, during which Bishop William Franklin blesses the sacramental oils for the year. The priests also renew their commitment to their ordination vows during

the Chrism Mass.

For many of them, shock mingles with sadness over what has happened in the church. Now is the time to do something about it, they believe.

"We want to be at the forefront and say, 'We know this is important for us as a church,'" Fr. Fitzpatrick said. "It's important who takes the first step. It's important for us to take the first step."

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