

August 19, 2001

Response of St. Anthony Shrine to Cases of Sexual Abuse of Children

by Fr. John R. Ullrich, OFM

Dear Members of the St. Anthony Shrine Family,

Very regretfully, in the very recent past as well as over the past several years, we have heard a great deal about the issue of child abuse, especially the sexual abuse of children. Even more unfortunately, much of the news has focused on priests in the Church who have engaged in this criminal activity. Indeed, these have been dark days for the Church as we seek to find ways to understand and deal with the issue appropriately.

As you may already know, State Senator James P. Jajuga (Methuen) is currently sponsoring a bill in the State Senate that would require clergy to report suspected child abuse to the state. This bill would add clergy to the list of "mandated reporters" who have a legal obligation to report suspicions of child abuse to the Department of Social Services. Currently, teachers, doctors, day care workers and counselors are required to do so.

As proposed, the bill makes an exception for so-called "privileged communication," that is, allowing priests who learn of abuse in the confessional to keep the information confidential, thus respecting the seal of Confession and the sanctity of the Sacrament.

Recently, the Massachusetts Catholic Conference has endorsed this bill and has indicated that it will work to ensure the bill's passage. We Franciscans fully support the position of the Massachusetts Catholic Conference. In addition, we Franciscans will fully respect and actively comply with the new bill, in the likelihood that it is passed.

Certainly, the victims of child abuse and respect for their persons, their rights, their health and their dignity are very important considerations in the exercise of our pastoral ministry here at St. Anthony Shrine. Ours is a ministry of compassion, healing and hope.

Finally, both as people and as ministers in the Church, we are not willing to nor will we attempt to brush serious issues like child abuse under the rug. We will not engage in a conspiracy of silence. It has become clear over the past few years that perpetrators of child abuse rarely, if ever, recover from this illness, even with extensive rehabilitation programs. Thus, I doubt that few, if any, of us here are expert enough in this matter to consider that our pastoral assistance alone will truly be able to help someone. Hence, the purpose of the new bill, and, I presume, the endorsement of the MCC, and our own willingness to exercise our ministry accordingly.

Thank you for listening. And thank you for being an important part of the St. Anthony Shrine Family.

Yours truly,

Rev. John R. Ullrich, OFM
The Franciscans
St. Anthony Shrine
100 Arch St., Boston, MA 02110