

Boston Archbishop...

Mandates Controversial "Safety" Program

By PAUL LIKODIS

BOSTON — In an August 25 letter to pastors, parish administrators, and religious education teachers, Boston's Archbishop Sean O'Malley, OFM Cap., said the archdiocese remains committed to using a modified "Talking About Touching" (TAT) program in all parishes and schools to guarantee that all young Catholics learn in a "safe environment."

Since the archdiocese announced it would be using the controversial TAT program, which was created by the Committee for Children around Easter 2003, parents have protested the use of the program, charging it violates their rights and their children's innocence. (See *The Wanderer*, May 8, 2003, p. 1.)

At the height of the controversy last summer, scheduled public meetings for parishioners were canceled, and parents were told the program — which includes training sessions for parents and all teachers in archdiocesan schools — is compulsory, and children would not be given the right to "opt-out."

In his letter, Archbishop O'Malley said he "listened carefully to the concerns that some parishioners have raised about this program." Some of the program's strongest critics, such as layman David Vise, however, assert that the archdiocesan bureaucracy did not take parents' objections seriously.

Archbishop O'Malley stated in his letter: "Our goal is to develop a program that is both consistent with Catholic teaching and formative of Catholic values. Our offices of Child Advocacy and Religious Education have been in contact with catechetical publishers who are interested in incorporating child safety elements into their catechetical programs and in developing and integrating a more faith-based safety education program into their curricula. While we are developing a Catholic program, a modified version of the 'Talking About Touching' curriculum will be used at the present time as the standard personal safety/abuse prevention education curriculum for children and parents in the Archdiocese of Boston.

"As we move forward, we will continue to assess the effectiveness of the program and modify and adapt the current curriculum as necessary. The archdiocese is also working to meet other educational challenges, including the development of protection and prevention education suitable to Catholic children and young people in the upper elementary grades and in the high schools."

The average cost of the TAT program's published materials is around \$5,600 annually for each parish; but the cost of implementing is vastly greater, since it involves a tremendous amount of time for paid staff and volunteers and oversight. Much greater than that, however, say critics, is the cost in alienating parents, grandparents, parishioners, which itself is still minor compared to the possible

damage to the spiritual and psychological health of the children who are the Catholic Church of the future.

In his letter, the archbishop writes that he expects "full implementation of the child protection programs for adults and children in our schools, parishes, and institutions. These programs come out of our responsibility to do our best to protect children. The training for parents and parish adult teachers [is] about how to recognize and protect against child abuse in its various forms, how to report if abuse is suspected or witnessed, and how to create safe environments in our parishes, schools, and communities.

"The programs for children are not courses in sexuality education but, rather, are about teaching and empowering children to resist the advances of predators and the lures of manipulative, controlling people who would harm or otherwise exploit children for their own sexual gratification."

Critics of the archbishop's mandate for child empowerment programs say the archdiocese's program is "backward" because it will inevitably create a divide between parent and child, make children suspicious of all adults, and burden the child with the obligation and function of attempting to sort out with his own limited knowledge and lack of experience which adults are suspicious and which are to be reported to law enforcement and other authorities.

"Why do we assume that public authorities, who are imposing abortion, pornography, acceptance of homosexuality and other perversions, are destroying the concept of marriage as between a man and woman, the rightful authority of parents over their children, are worthy of trust?" asked one parent.

"This is the exaltation of the secular state, which increasingly shows its intent to gag and control the Catholic Church."

Detailed Critique

In a letter to his pastor, Boston-area Catholic David Vise responded to Archbishop O'Malley's letter.

He said he was "mystified" by the archbishop's claim that "I expect that all parishes and Catholic schools will work with the Office of Child Advocacy on the full implementation of this personal safety educational program and the Child Abuse Prevention (CAP) Teams. I appreciate the many pastors, religious education leaders, and principals who have provided strong leadership through the early implementation of our safe environment program."

"How is it possible," Vise asked, "to be appreciative of the 'many pastors who have provided strong leadership through the early implementation' if now by their own admission they will be using a 'modified version of the "Talking About Touching" curriculum'?"

"Is he congratulating the implementation of immoral materials [which were the ones] provided through the early implementation phase? For if the materials were not immoral, then why would they be forced to utilize a 'modified version'?" A second

concern is that the archbishop expects that we work with the 'Office of Child Advocacy on the full implementation of this personal safety educational program'; this expectation may entail an undesirable and immoral compromise with which our parish should have nothing to do."

In his critique, in a question and answer format (see text following article), Vise wrote in part:

"**Q.** Are, then, diocesan officials correct when they make statements like, 'The programs for children are not courses in sexuality education but, rather, are about teaching and empowering children to resist the advances of predators and the lures of manipulative, controlling people who would harm or otherwise exploit children for their own sexual gratification'?"

"**A.** No.

"**Q.** Why not?"

"**A.** There are several dangers in the statement above that need to be wrestled with. The first one is the illusion of empowering a child. A child (say one from 6 to 11) is not more empowered to resist the advances of a predator than a mouse has a chance to dissuade a hawk from having it as his next meal. Under this illusion, all that is accomplished is to taint the innocence of the child in order to achieve a false security. This approach would condition the children for the abuser's advances, predisposing them to sexual discussions and fantasies that otherwise would not be present in his or her imagination. In fact, this instruction would constitute the sin of scandal.

"Diocesan officials are then overreaching in these efforts since their mandate does not include the soiling of the children's innocence but to 'teach them to observe all that I [Christ] have commanded you.' One is hard pressed to even imagine Christ giving the Apostles sexual instructions such as a modified TAT would, much less this poison being dispensed to children.

"In fact, Christ did say (Matt. 18:6): 'Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.' Misguided diocesan officials will do best to heed the warning of Christ and remember that the crisis in the Church was that of homosexual abuse by priests and this miserable episode should not serve as an excuse for sexual indoctrination under the guise of safety."