



## Bishops Work To Assure Safe Haven for Children

By Lynn Williams

In what has been called a mammoth undertaking, the U.S Catholic bishops are working to eradicate child sexual abuse, seven years after releasing the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The *Charter*, adopted by the bishops in June 2002, is a landmark statement that outlines mandates to respond to accusations involving children and clergy.



Bishop Blase Cupich, Diocese of Rapid City, SD

“There has been a seismic shift in our whole approach” since 2002, said Bishop Blase Cupich, Chairman for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People (CPCYP). Bishop Cupich, who heads the Diocese of Rapid City, SD, said “We made a promise that we would aggressively make sure that the abuse that has occurred will never happen again.”

The *Charter* put in place a uniform national policy on clergy sex abuse that includes a diocesan audit process, seminary screenings, and cooperation with local law-enforcement authorities. Results of these audits are published by the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, and made available to the public-at-large.

Now, Catholic dioceses in America operate under a strict written code of conduct and employs a victim’s assistance coordinator whose role is to advocate for a victim within the church system. Each diocese conducts outreach to victims and agencies that serve them, regularly publishing policies and procedures for victims to come forward and offering help and acceptance.



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
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“We practice zero tolerance,” Bishop Cupich said. Current regulations call for removing offending priests from ministry.

Additional steps have been taken to create a safe environment in every Catholic institution. According to Bishop Cupich, 1.9 million clergy, educators and volunteers in parishes have been trained to create a safe environment for children. Five and a half million children have been trained to recognize inappropriate behavior so they can help protect themselves from sexual abuse. In addition, background checks for criminal records have been conducted on an estimated 1.7 million employees of Catholic parishes and schools.

Current safe-environment training involves instruction in wholesome boundary limitations and also helps volunteers, teachers and clergy to recognize the signs that child abuse may be taking place.

In Catholic teaching, parents and adults are the primary educators and protectors of children. Safe-environment training is taught within a theological framework, as well as a social one. Victims and children receive help for more than their physical needs as they recover from sexual abuse.

“It saps the souls and the spirits of people who are abused. We have to bring healing to that level,” Bishop Cupich said. Understanding the body as a temple, and made in the image of God gives victims a context for restoration and reconciliation, he said. “As believers, we understand the value and dignity of the human body.”

Young people receive assurance that sexual abuse by an adult is not their fault and should not be kept secret in today’s system of aid to victims. Truth is vitally needed to bring healing and justice, said Bishop Cupich. “It has to be, or otherwise we will treat this as just a legal issue.”

The USCCB offers its approach to dealing with child sexual abuse as a model on which other organizations can build.

“We are setting a standard,” said Bishop Cupich. “There is a worldwide epidemic of child sexual abuse. The more our whole society sheds light on this problem, the more we can ensure there is a safe environment for children everywhere.”

