

GUIDELINES FOR PASTORAL CARE OF MINORS

As clergy, religious and laity, we are called to serve all God's people, having particular responsibility for those who are young. The Gospel invites us to bless and welcome God's children (Mk. 10:13-16). At the same time, the care that must be shown to children is emphasized by the Gospel's warning not to lead them astray (Mt. 18:6, Mk. 9:42, Lk. 17:2). Jesus' ministry to the young and the ongoing pastoral care of the Church to form youth in the faith is part of the rich tradition of our Catholic faith. This pastoral care of the young extends from the life of Jesus, through the witness of great saints (e.g. St. John Bosco, St. Angela Merici and others) to our present day. The proper exercise of this pastoral work today is of special concern for the Church's priests, deacons, and other pastoral service providers. In our time, prudent and comprehensive guidelines are necessary to continue the pastoral care of Jesus for young people.

Ethics and Responsibilities

Those who minister to youth are obliged to see to it that young Catholics are educated and formed in Gospel values (Canons 528, 548). This responsibility, as any pastoral responsibility, is to be carried out in accord with sound doctrine, moral integrity, and zeal for the persons being served (Canon 521).

Effective pastoral care of minors (defined as those under the age of eighteen) depends upon the competence, quality and commitment of those who work with them. These guidelines set forth expectations placed on the clergy, religious and laity involved in this important service.

Commitment to Young People

As bearers of God's Word, we believe that our young people should make their journey through this world learning from the past, living in the present, and yet with a strong focus on the world to come. As bearers of the Word, we have a special responsibility to encourage young people to achieve their maximum potential. We work to stimulate the spirit of inquiry into religious truths, the acquisition and integration of the truths of our faith, and the thoughtful living out of Christian values. In fulfilling our obligations to young Catholics, we are called to:

1. enable young people to grow in a sense of self worth and accountability by encouraging their involvement in religious activities;
2. help young people to grow in their understanding of their Catholic faith and their witnessing to it in their lives;
3. set a good example of Christian living for young people to imitate;
4. help young people see the relevance of a Christian value system in their daily lives and be aware of the need for their own counter-cultural witness before their peers;

5. help them understand the relationship between human culture and knowledge of the Good News of salvation and apply this understanding in the specific settings of their homes, schools and places of work;
6. provide appropriate service projects for young people to instill a sense of responsibility for the community.
7. show Christian concern for the joys and problems of young people;
8. speak with charity and justice about young people even when called to discuss sensitive matters;
9. respect confidential information concerning young people, as appropriate;
10. provide, when it is necessary, a secure and trustworthy atmosphere for those young people who must discuss serious personal problems or even matters of abuse; guarantee that appropriate steps are taken to respond to any such matters in accord with the dignity of the persons involved, counseling practice, sound common sense, and the dictates of both Canon and civil law.

Commitment to Parents

Parents have the most serious duty and primary right to do all in their power to see to the physical, social, cultural, moral and religious upbringing of their children (Canon 1136). As set forth in the Pastoral Message of the U.S. Bishops, "Follow the Way of Love," parents have the primary responsibility to foster intimacy, evangelize the child by good example, teach the child to pray and to serve others. The Pastoral Message further proclaims that parents are to be supported and assisted by the Church in their responsibilities toward their children.

Programs for minors must be prudently supervised by adults. Adults in sufficient number (always more than one), should be present at every parish or diocesan event for young people. Events should be scheduled at appropriate times and be held at appropriate places. Parents should be made aware of the time, place and content of all activities for young people.

Persons working with minors should be of good moral character. Pastors and all who share with them responsibility for the choice of persons to work with minors have a serious obligation to take all reasonable and appropriate steps to assure that those doing such work are of good moral character and free of any history or inclinations which would disqualify them from such service. Training in keeping with the duties they will assume must be provided for clergy, religious and laity working with minors.

The Church assists parents in fulfilling their obligations for the Christian formation and education of their child. Therefore, we will:

1. respect parents' fundamental right to know, to understand, to share in any decisions that affect their child by (a) assuring parents of the commitment and qualifications of all persons dealing with their child in parish/diocesan activities or events, (b) keeping parents apprised of the time, place and content of all youth activities, (c) involving

parents, whenever possible, in activities in which their child participates, and (d) being sensitive to the needs and concerns of parents in formulating and carrying out youth programs;

2. respect any confidential information which parents share with us;
3. without breaking confidence of the young person, keep parents apprised of their child's situation and participation in activities; [*Code of Pastoral Conduct (CPC)*, III,2]
4. maintain proper relationships with minors and never usurp the rights or responsibilities of parents relative to their child.

Commitment to the Community

Various facets of our connections with young people impact the entire parish, diocese and world. The Church plays a vital role in preparing young Catholics to become preservers of our hallowed tradition, and future civic and church leaders. In dealing with young people, therefore, we are called to:

1. promote the peace of Christ in the world by (a) modeling peaceful solutions to individual conflicts, (b) encouraging a spirit of respect and cooperation in our young people, and (c) providing programs which enable young people to interact with society for a better world.
2. cooperate in the continual building of parish and diocesan life by (a) emphasizing the responsibility of the entire parish to assist parents in the Christian formation of their child, and (b) communicating information about events and resources available for young people and for parents.
3. contribute to the development of leadership skills in young people by (a) offering appropriate programs at a parish or diocesan level and (b) integrating our young Catholics appropriately into the life of the Church and the society in which they live.

Responsibilities Toward Young People

Priests especially have a direct influence over the faith and well-being of the people they serve. They strive to build up a community of faith in which all are welcome to worship God, find comfort, and place their talents at the service of God's people. The pastoral care of young people is an essential element in building up that community of faith. We realize that the dignity of young persons is primarily preserved and enhanced through the nurturing of the parents, and secondarily through other persons, including priests. Any ministerial involvement of priests must respect and maintain the dignity of the young person. In fulfilling their responsibilities, priests are called to:

1. maintain professional standards by (a) presenting the authentic teaching of the Church in all activities, (b) preserving the reputations of all members of the parish or institution, (c) safeguarding the exchange of all confidential information, (d) refusing to use their positions of trust for personal goals or satisfaction, (e) conducting

themselves in a professional and virtuous manner at all times, and (f) maintaining a proper relationship with young people and meeting with them only in appropriate places, ex. not in private quarters of the rectory. [*CPC*, III, 1.8]

2. model a life consonant with Gospel values and Church teaching;
3. educate themselves about the needs, concerns and particular circumstances of young people so that they can serve them better.

Much of what is stated here regarding the responsibilities of priests applies also to deacons and all those who work with young Catholics on the part of the Church. They too have a direct influence over the faith and well being of those they serve and have responsibilities which must be met as they exercise their service of our youth. All of those who share in such pastoral care are called to conduct their work responsibly by maintaining professional standards as reflected in this section, modeling a life consonant with Gospel values and Church teaching, and educating themselves in the pursuit of service of young people, to the extent that the nature of their own apostolic activity demands. For information on mandated reporting, see paragraph #3 in the next section.

Particular Guidelines for Priests Relating to Ministry to Minors

Because of the trust and confidence parents place in priests in dealing with their children, we wish to address matters of particular importance and concern.

1. **Sacrament of Penance:**
Confidentiality with minors is a complex matter. Of course, dealings with minors in the context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are absolutely confidential and cannot be divulged under any circumstances (cf. Canons 983 and 984). Additionally, the matter of a spiritual direction session or information given to a priest in his professional character as spiritual advisor cannot be disclosed, even under legal compulsion; i.e. they are legally privileged communications (cf. Civil Practice Law and Rules, section 4505). In building new or in renovating current reconciliation space, the design should be such that, without violating confidentiality or proper counseling procedures, at least the priest may be visible from the outside.
2. **Counseling:**
Young people will approach a priest for counseling from time to time. Priests should recognize their limitations, and be willing to make referrals to appropriate professionals when prudent. [*CPC*, III, 1.1] In counseling situations, priests should meet with minors only in appropriate settings. Prudent practice dictates that priests must be highly sensitive when dealing with confidential information. [*CPC*, III,2] Priests must be responsive to the expectations of confidentiality of those approaching them for counseling. Where confidentiality is demanded, it should be respected. When a priest feels that confidential information should be disclosed to a minor's parents, he should first obtain the permission of the minor to disclose the information. [*CPC*, III, 2.5] In extreme cases, the priest may disclose a minor's confidence to parents without the minor's consent. In such cases, however, the priest should inform the minor of his decision to disclose the information and his reasons

for doing so. Such cases include, but are not limited to situations where someone is harming or has harmed the minor, the minor is or has been subjected to danger, or where the minor poses a threat to himself/herself or a danger to others.

3. **Mandated Reporting:**

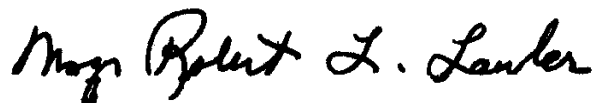
While priests and certain other diocesan employees who deal with children are not required to report suspected child abuse *according to the provisions of New York State law*, the priest or Church employee may have an obligation in conscience to report. Such reporting should take place according to the provisions of State law. Legal counsel has also advised that it appears that priests and Church employees who choose to report in this manner are immune from civil or criminal liability for such reporting. In the spirit of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, *all those involved in ministry with children will use every opportunity and means to provide the protection of children.*

Further reporting guidelines exist according to New York State law for school personnel, social workers, health care workers, and others. Those who are mandated reporters know of this responsibility from their professional training. *The diocese stipulates and requires that all employees are to observe any and all reporting laws which govern their actions.* In addition, diocesan personnel, without violating the boundaries of professional confidentiality, will cooperate with civil authorities.

Conclusion

The Lord Jesus gave testimony so often to his love for children. A similar love for young Catholics should mark the lives of all who care for them in the name of the Lord and His Church. The quality and character of the relationship of the Church's representative to any minor should also be in imitation of the life of the Lord: selfless, pure, earnest and consistent. Ultimately, the witness given to young Catholics by those who minister for the Church has a substantial impact on the faith lives of these unique people, so much beloved by the Lord. Growth in faith as well as in personal wholeness and integrity is effected deeply by the encounter of a minor with a representative of the Church. The grave responsibility we have to our youth demands that they receive only the best and most proper pastoral care from adults who seek to guide and serve them, remaining with them as pilgrims on the journey toward the fullness of life in Jesus the Lord.

Approved & Revised October 20, 2003



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