

# **Communications Policy for the Diocese of Worcester**

## **On Sexual Abuse by Clergy**

Consistent with the goals of the national charter and our local policy, the Diocese of Worcester seeks to be as open as possible in all its communications with the public, including on the issue of sexual misconduct. That can best be described as a willingness to share information unless there is a serious reason to maintain confidentiality. Let us consider the rule, then its exceptions.

As a rule, it is the desire of the Diocese of Worcester to share information, as available, with the public through a variety of means:

- Directly with parishes by personal visits, letters and bulletin inserts
- Secular newspapers
- Catholic newspapers
- Regional broadcast TV
- Locally produced Catholic cable programming
- Radio interview shows
- Video productions on the issue itself for use in parishes

Media relations include news releases, follow-up interviews on camera (radio, etc.) by the spokesperson, in-depth interviews with experts, and one-on-one interviews with the ordinary.

There are always exceptions to a rule. Specifically, we will not release information to the media about past cases where an alleged victim wants no public attention drawn to the case, though we will cooperate fully if that victim changes their mind. We will not release details which were shared with law enforcement authorities who are operating under Grand Jury subpoena or in situations where our announcements would be seen as impeding an investigation.

### ***Impact on a specific community***

When the news directly affects a community (e.g. parish or school), it is preferable to first announce the news to the affected community, then to make a public announcement. This is consistent with our general policy on any news which affects a particular group.

This is often not possible, and the resulting hurt when these communities learn the news in the paper or on TV has been noted often.

***Personnel Records***

The diocese does not share personnel records with media or other parties outside of the judicial process involved in a criminal or civil action. This is again consistent with the handling of all personnel matters in probably any organization. The files remain confidential unless there is a specific charge of a crime. At that point, material is handled following normal judicial process.

***The spokesperson***

Generally, the Director of Communications is the spokesperson for the diocese on this issue, as with most issues, and may be assisted by representatives from the Office for Healing and Prevention for specifics. The ordinary cannot be available for comment on a regular basis, but has been and will continue to be available for broader or more major announcements, such as policy releases and reaction to the National Conference. It is also advisable that the ordinary be available for individual interviews between major announcements to focus on the general effectiveness of our diocesan programs, as has been the case over 2002 and 2003.

***Clergy Sexual Abuse in relation to other issues in the media***

The Diocese has been proactive in all media relations since the mid-nineties in its rate of releases and depth of information to all media. As such, it has had good relations with most media. We applied this approach to the best of our ability on the issue of sexual abuse, in particular in the release of our new policy prior to the Charter in June 2002, and in the previous version release in 1996. In both cases, nearly 70,000 copies were distributed in print through parishes, the Catholic paper and, in 2002, on the internet through our diocesan website. Additionally we promote safe environment training, mandated reporter training, etc.

***Long term***

Locally the issue has been in the media since 1993. Criminal and civil cases have been tried since then. Once it is in litigation, it is the policy of the diocese to not comment further on the specific case. Other than to acknowledge our response at the time the allegation was made, or confirm factual information regarding assignments, etc. the diocese must continue to walk a fine line between openness and potentially denying someone a fair trial by allowing it to be heard in a court of public opinion first and foremost.

***Law Enforcement and communications***

In all instances, we are reporting everything brought to our attention to the law enforcement agencies in Worcester County, and make note in releases (as they do in theirs) that investigations are occurring with the full cooperation of the diocese. We must be cautious, however, to not release information prematurely, as this would be viewed as impeding an investigation in progress. As such, it is our policy to not release an allegation prior to the completion of an investigation by authorities, and only if they find credence to the charges. This is in keeping with the Norms, para 1 & 2, that the reputation of a person not be tainted if there has not been sufficient basis for credibility of the allegations.

***Concern for Victims***

It must be understood that, were it not for the victims coming forward, we would not be able to take such a proactive stance today to try to correct past errors in judgement as a Church, and someday become champions for future victims of others in society. People need to hear of the pain and suffering that has been endured and we must enable those with credible allegations to be heard.

When conflicts have occurred between victims groups, such as SNAP and the diocese, they should be worked out quickly, as was the case in June 2002. When groups seek to protest (as has been the case outside the cathedral) or to hold press conferences outside our locations (such as the chancery) they have been and will be accommodated to the extent that they are not interrupting religious services or normal business. It remains

the goal of the Diocese of Worcester to show concern for past victims and a dedication to avoiding the occurrence of future victims - by anyone, not just clergy.

However, the axiom that people call you with good news and call the media with bad news certainly holds true with this issue. Locally, victims who have tried to communicate how the diocese is helping them have been humiliated on websites and chatrooms.

Since we cannot talk about individual cases to show how we support victims, we will continue to emphasize it through the work of the Office for Healing and Prevention, both through media stories and through parish visitations.

In addition to "focus stories" in the media, The Catholic Free Press and Diocesan TV Ministry programs are two ways we get the word out about the work of OHPV. This will continue in the future. Simple ads have limited value until credibility is established for the office's services. After a period of time of in-depth shows and articles, we will move more to ads about the availability of the services.

Similarly, OHPV has made parish visits and provided family training programs by deanery. This can migrate to "bulletin announcements" once awareness and credibility is established at the parish level.

In this respect, communications is not the sole purview of the Communications Office. By their positions, the Bishops, Chancellor, OHPV staff and others represent the diocese whenever they speak about this issue.