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## **Come, Lord Jesus: Safe environment programs protect our children**

**By Archbishop Harry J. Flynn**

An important part of the outcome from the adoption in 2002 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops of the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” is the mandated “safe environment program” that is being implemented in dioceses and eparchies across the country.

Without question, like the charter itself, these “safe environment” programs are in large part a response to the recent clergy sexual abuse scandal in the church. However, making no attempt to minimize the gravity and tragedy of that scandal, the truth is that sexual abuse and pedophilia present serious vulnerabilities in so many areas affecting our young ones — in schools, playgrounds, youth athletic activities and, yes, neighborhoods and interaction with relatives.

It is to significantly reduce the dangers to these primary environments for children and young adults that the U.S. bishops, working through the National Office for the Protection of Children, is requiring that this “safe environment” program be conducted.

Each and every one of our priests and religious, employees, teachers, principals and administrators at all levels, support staff, etc., throughout the archdiocese has already completed this program. A major benefit of the training-and-education program is that it also teaches us all the danger signs to be aware of from those who prey on our young.

Now we are preparing to begin the final step of this program — teaching our children how to recognize any threats to their personal safety while preserving their blessed innocence.

Last week, our school administrators and religious education directors attended a meeting where they were introduced to the curriculum that has been selected for this program. This spring, we will pilot each of the programs in some of our schools and religious education programs. During the 2006-2007 school year, we will be implementing the lessons in all of our schools and religious education programs.

I want to emphasize that parents will have every opportunity to be involved and to review the materials before their children experience the lessons. This is true for both the pilot programs and for the full implementation.

Each and every program has a parent component and recognizes the parents' role as their child's primary educator. Parents' efforts in educating their children will be further supported and supplemented by classroom work.

The plan is a simple one. For the recommended programs, our Catholic school children will have four lessons throughout the course of the year and the religious education children will have two lessons. The curriculum will build year to year and is age appropriate.

We are also offering an alternative program for those parishes that so choose. That family-based plan was presented to the educational leaders at last week's meeting.

If your pastor and your parish educational leadership, after carefully studying the materials for these four recommended programs (available for review later this spring), still wish to use another program, the pastor can request that permission from me. Any such curriculum programs must, however, be compliant with the terms of the charter.

We also will be working in partnership with your parish's education staff to keep cost at a minimum. The archdiocese is assuming the main expenditure for these programs. It is important to state that none of these expenses will reduce our financial support for charity, social justice or evangelical programs.

I am aware of the concern and confusion about this "safe environment" program already circulating among some parents and others. This has come about because of misinformation and untruths about the program and that is unfortunate. I ask you to please wait until you hear from your pastors and educational leadership before jumping to conclusions.

It is perfectly understandable that parents show great concern and even reservations about any programs of this type that can affect the innocence and secure world of their children. That is why there are the adult awareness sessions in addition to the children's safety lessons.

A resource booklet has been delivered to each household in the archdiocese that has children. Parents are invited to share appropriate information with their children at their own discretion. Parents are also invited to attend an adult awareness session. These are the exact same kinds of Virtus sessions that all of the above have attended and that all volunteers who work with children and youth are to attend.

To achieve your assurance and comfort (and our own) with this program, we, as an archdiocese, have chosen not to be in compliance with the audit that reviews our adherence to the charter this year.

We are doing this to make certain that we have not bypassed parents before implementing these programs. We also want to make certain that parents receive the adult booklet for their own reading and conversation with their children.

Be assured that information and materials related specifically to your children's curriculum will be sent to you and to all parents before your children are involved. We will also keep you informed as we proceed with this important program.

I thank you in advance for your cooperation and understanding with this important part of our committed program to protect and preserve the wonder and innocence of our beloved children and young adults.

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