

Peace be with you!

It is with great joy that I welcome each of you, and extend my personal gratitude for the work that you do. Like any aspect of ministry, I know that it is filled with many joys, as well as many challenges. The work that you do is too often involved with the frailty of the human condition, and the real presence of sin in our world. As I was preparing these reflections, I thought about the many ways that you, in your ministry in the Church, keep alive your faith as you face many challenges in your roles as Safe Environment Coordinators. You deal with the reality of human frailty, with sin, and with many stories of hope and reconciliation.

I would like to share with you some reflections that I hope will be helpful to you. I will begin with a brief overview of the tragedy of child sexual abuse, its scope in our society, and the role of child prevention education programs. Next, I will propose three concrete ways that you, as Safe Environment Coordinators can continue to be effective in your ministry. I will conclude by connecting these concrete aspects of your ministry with our Easter season and our mandate to Move Beyond Compliance Toward Conversion, the theme of this year's conference.

First, a brief overview of the tragedy of child sexual abuse and its scope. A 1994 study by Elliott and Briere found that one in every four girls and one in every five boys are sexually abused by the age of 18. While different studies may reveal slightly different numbers, because of the way in which the data is collected, they all conclude that at least 20% of our children are victims of some form of sexual abuse by the age of 18.

We all know these numbers, and some of us deal with them every day. They can become that to us: numbers. Let us stop and think about this for a moment. 20% of our children; one in every five children. What would our society do if 20% of our children were stricken with a terrible disease that carried life long, potentially traumatic, and devastating results? Would we be content to sit back and do nothing? No! Would we turn away from addressing the disease because it is ugly, and makes us uncomfortable? Absolutely not!

Every politician would be under pressure to provide the funding necessary to address such an unacceptable level of destruction. Every medical research institution would be under intense public pressure and scrutiny to devote its resources and expertise to address the problem. The front pages of our newspapers, our magazines, and our television news would provide close coverage of any progress against the disease, and lament the setbacks. And, without a doubt, we would make every effort to assure that our children were informed and educated about ways to protect themselves from the disease, and what to do if they were exposed to it.

Like some of you, I know from personal meetings with victims that the effects of child sexual abuse can be devastating and life changing. I find it absolutely astounding that the public hue and cry, and political pressure, that would erupt in the event of a devastating disease affecting 20% of our children, is largely absent in the face of the tragedy of child sexual abuse. There is indeed much to be done.

And where is this abuse taking place? It is taking place in families, in child-serving organizations, and throughout society. And it has been happening for a very long time. Many of you are familiar with the work of Dr. Monica Applewhite. Her article in "America" magazine on September 25, 2006, is entitled "Putting Abuse in Context." She begins her article by describing the reports that surfaced within the Boy Scouts of America concerning a male nurse who inappropriately touched scouts in 1922, leading to more careful screening of adult leaders in that organization. She references the challenges faced by Big Brothers of America in 1974 as they discovered that they had become a haven for adults seeking sexual contact with children. She

discusses the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. And she mentions the epidemic of sexual abuse by teachers in school systems throughout the country.

An Associated Press story from earlier this year reported that 2500 teachers in a five year period were punished for sexual assault of students. A recent story on CNN was entitled “Cells, texting give predators secret path to kids.” A recent newspaper story in Reno, Nevada, reported that more than 400 children were found working as prostitutes in Las Vegas during a single month last year.

The evil of child sexual abuse is present on our streets, in the Catholic Church, in our schools, in other child-serving organizations, in families, and on the internet. It knows no racial, socio-economic, or religious boundaries. It is a major societal dilemma, and a major societal tragedy.

As Catholics, we are always in search of the “Good News.” And there is some very good news in the fight against child sexual abuse. In his recent article in the journal “Pediatrics”, Dr. David Finkelhor, who will be presenting later this week, quoted two studies indicating a decline in sexual abuse between 1993 and 2004. Another piece of Good News from Dr. Finkelhor’s article is the finding from a 1995 study that indicated that children receiving prevention education were more likely to

disclose victimization;

feel that they had been able to protect themselves; and

not blame themselves for the abuse.

The results of another study, published by Gibson and Leitenbert in 2000, suggests that “adult women who had not participated in a school prevention program during childhood were about twice as likely to have experienced child sexual abuse as those who had participated in a program.”

We know that child sexual abuse can have traumatic and lasting effects on its victims. We know that approximately 20% of our children experience some form of child sexual abuse before the age of 18. We know that child sexual abuse is a problem that is pervasive throughout our society. We know that the frequency of child sexual abuse is declining, and we know that child prevention education has some positive effects on victims and potential victims.

So the question is, what are we to do about this tragedy? How can you, as Safe Environment Coordinators, have some impact given the enormity of the problem? What are ways that your ministry can be even more effective, so that together we might play some role in reducing the incidence of child sexual abuse from 20% to 0%? Let me suggest three concrete ways for you to strengthen your ministry as pioneers, prophets, and people of prayer—easily remembered as the 3 “P’s”.

Let’s start with the notion of pioneers. Pioneers were people of resolve, foresight, and passion. They set their minds and hearts on a goal, and endured incredible hardships in order to achieve that goal. When we think of the journeys they made with no electricity, running water, roads, hotels, or modern amenities, it is truly awe-inspiring. That is not to say that they did not sometimes get discouraged, because they did. But they kept going by keeping their vision on the goal. They fixed their vision and directed all of their energy toward the future and toward what they hoped and believed would be a better place to live.

As Safe Environment Coordinators, you deal with different hardships, but you are also pioneers. Your positions are relatively new ones, and there are no roadmaps to guide your journey. You learn from and lean on one another. You face adversity, whether from parish personnel that object to training, volunteers who are upset because they believe their integrity is being questioned when a background check is required, or parents who are concerned that the

prevention education may be harmful to their children. You will be able to work through this adversity if you, like the pioneers, keep your vision set on the goal of reducing the 20% incidence of child sexual abuse to 0%. In the midst of the day to day challenges and struggles of your work, this goal will provide you with the continued resolve and strength to continue the journey.

A second way to strengthen your ministry is to learn some lessons from the prophets. Our Archdiocesan vision statement is entitled “A Future Full of Hope,” taken from Jeremiah 29:11. The full text reads:

“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! plans to give you a future full of hope.”

Jeremiah, like all the great prophets, had a two-fold role. First, he challenged his own community, the people of Israel, by revealing Yahweh’s message to them. He continually challenged them to believe that Yahweh was present with them, even in exile. Secondly, Jeremiah challenged the political leaders of his time. He lived in one of the most troubled times in the history of the ancient Near East. His message was both within his community, and to the political leaders in the secular society.

As Safe Environment coordinators, you are prophets in our modern times. Your ministry, at its best, demonstrates Yahweh’s love for those who are vulnerable. At its best, your ministry also challenges our political leaders and secular organizations to take action against the evil of child sexual abuse. We are raising awareness about the issue of child sexual abuse for our clergy, lay employees, volunteers, parents, and students in our Catholic schools and religious education programs. Beyond that, we are hopefully working hard to effect changes to assure that ALL children (not just children in our Catholic schools or religious education programs) receive sexual abuse prevention education. We must challenge the political leaders and secular society to join the battle against child sexual abuse through education and other prevention strategies. We must challenge all those we encounter to speak out about the evil of child sexual abuse, to be vigilant to its signs, and to end the silence! Like the early prophets, our voices may be met with disbelief or even ridicule. And like the early prophets, we can make a real difference both within the Church and in the broader society.

Modeling your ministry after pioneers and prophets will strengthen and support your daily work, and will yield results that may unfold very slowly, only over time. You will have the patience, perseverance and persistence to continue these efforts only if your ministry is rooted in prayer. The passage I read earlier from Jeremiah is part of a letter to the exiles in Babylon. It proclaimed the awesome news that Yahweh was present to the Israelites outside the Holy Land, even in Babylon.

“When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says the Lord.”

Taking time for daily prayer will give you the strength that is required for your roles. It will renew you and give you the energy you need to continue your efforts. Prayer will bring you closer to the Lord in your work that is directed toward protecting his little ones.

These are the three “P’s” that I propose as ways to strengthen your ministry on a daily basis. Prayer is the foundation that enables you to be pioneers committed to the goal of eradicating child sexual abuse, and to be prophets that speak the truth and challenge the Church and secular society toward that same goal.

How do these 3 “P’s” connect with our celebration of the Easter season? The painful reality of the sexual abuse scandal has touched all of us in ways we probably never could have imagined. Many of the faithful have experienced doubt, despair, darkness, and agony, just as Jesus experienced in Gethsemane. Victims of sexual abuse by clergy have had old wounds ripped open, and explored their own inner tombs. In the presence of such pain and suffering, it may indeed seem that God has forsaken us.

Yet that is not the end of the story. The mystery of Christ’s life, death and resurrection teaches us that affliction and sinfulness can lead to hope, healing, and new life. We will continue to acknowledge sexual abuse through a process of prayer, penance and outreach to those who were harmed while in our care. We will also search for new life by taking steps toward eradicating child sexual abuse, both within the Church and in our society.

Let me share with you a very moving experience that helped to transform my own ministry in working with victims of child sexual abuse. As you well know, bishops wear many hats besides a miter. One hat that we wear is that of “Chief Executive Officer.” This includes setting policies, implementing programs, and settling claims with victims of sexual abuse by clergy. Working with the victims of sexual abuse by clergy is undoubtedly one of the most challenging and difficult aspects of my ministry.

In every case, I make myself available to meet with any person who alleges child sexual abuse. In many cases, I do not get to meet the victim directly because they are involved in lawsuits. But in some cases I have been able to meet with victims. I would like to tell you a story of one of those encounters that I believe captures some of the things we have been talking about.

The victim in this case was one of the more severely damaged victims from the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. This person was in his late 50’s when I met him. The sexual abuse he experienced from an extern priest who had been in our archdiocese, was severe. As a result of this abuse, he had led a very sad and damaged life. Our lawyers had tried, unsuccessfully, to mediate the case. I asked our attorney if there would be a possibility of meeting with this victim. Our attorney contacted the victim’s attorney. Fortunately, he had an attorney who had his client’s best interests at heart. The victim was interested in meeting with me, so I traveled to a neighboring state to meet with the victim, accompanied by our attorney and a member of my staff. I met personally with the victim for several hours, while the attorneys and my staff person met in another room.

I clearly experienced this man as a child of God, and a person for whom the Church was responsible for much of the pain he had suffered throughout his life. The importance of settling the case with him diminished rapidly and the hope and opportunity for healing became the only goal for me in our encounter, which was a most difficult one. At the same time, the encounter was graced by the presence of the Holy Spirit. At the end of our time together, not only was the case settled, but there was reconciliation and desire for this victim to re-establish his faith. It was a conversion experience for everyone involved. This victim’s future opened up, this beloved child of God began the process of healing, and he experienced a Resurrection, as did I.

Conversion happens through individual encounters such as I have described. It also happens through systems, such as our Safe Environment programs.

In the Archdiocese of Seattle, we have had policies, training and background checks in place for almost twenty years. The procedures have been updated from time to time, and each time we improve upon our previous efforts. We launched our expanded Safe Environment Program in fiscal year 2006-2007. I have to admit to you that we thought we were doing pretty

well up until that point, given our rather well developed programs and procedures. I daresay that some in our Archdiocese were even complacent. Many people questioned the wisdom of allocating more resources to new efforts and new staffing. After all, we had been recognized as a national leader in our efforts. Other dioceses had borrowed our programs and policies. We had provided extended training for our clergy, and had a Review Board in place long before it was required by the Dallas Charter.

As we launched the expanded program, a rather amazing development began to unfold. We identified new trainers to lead the new trainings. Their enthusiasm and commitment were contagious. In an environment that included the national scandal in the Catholic Church, as well as news stories about teachers and others charged with child sexual abuse, new interest and a renewed sense of concern were evident. Our phones started ringing, with parishioners questioning why we were providing such training, or parishioners asking why we weren't providing more training. People called asking why our curriculum was so strong, and others called asking why it wasn't stronger. In short, people became more engaged and entered the dialogue about child sexual abuse prevention with an energy that we had not experienced in the past.

Another interesting phenomenon has been increased watchfulness on the part of our clergy, staff, volunteers and parents. We have received numerous telephone calls from individuals involved with programs who report having felt uncomfortable about a particular individual, or a certain behavior, for a period of time. With the expanded Safe Environment Program and the new publications and resources, they have found the courage and resolve to voice their concerns. We have had more reports of grooming behavior over the last year than ever before. I am convinced that it is not because the behavior is new, but because the awareness of its danger has been significantly increased.

These occurrences are examples of the Easter possibilities that are part of your work and your ministry. I'm certain that many of you have had similar experiences. New life, renewed energy, new callings, and new awarenesses have arisen out of the darkness and despair of the tragedy of the sexual abuse scandal. What began as an expansion of our program to assure continued compliance with the Charter and Norms has turned into an experience of conversion and a realization that we have an obligation to extend the ministry of Safe Environment far beyond the boundaries and memberships of our parishes and schools.

We have many important ministries in our Church, and I am well aware that we have limited resources. The relatively small investment that we are making in our Safe Environment personnel and programs, however, can have a ripple effect that is felt beyond the Church community and throughout the larger society, carrying a tremendous possibility of making a difference in the lives of our children. It is because we are being watched, and because we are experiencing our own conversion in this battle against child sexual abuse, that we are called to assure that our programs are the very best. If we plan to challenge our political leaders, our public schools, and our society to join us in increased efforts to eradicate child sexual abuse, we must set an example. Later sessions in this conference will focus on "best practices" and ways in which we can assure the effectiveness of our programs.

If the primary focus and direction of our efforts is to pass the USCCB audit, then we are engaged in the work of compliance. If, however, the focus of our efforts is to eradicate child sexual abuse in the Church and in society, that is a ministry of conversion.

It is exciting to be here with you during this Easter season, and to witness the sharing of ideas and experiences that helps to bring about new life. I want to thank you for all that you do

to help raise awareness and protect children from the evils of child sexual abuse. Each one of you is a pioneer, with your heart and mind set on an important goal. Each one of you is a prophet, with a message to challenge and transform our Church community and our society. And each one of you, rooted in prayer, is making a difference in our world today. You are living and breathing witnesses to the Easter Resurrection story by dedicating your significant gifts and talents to move beyond compliance toward conversion.