

We will protect our children

By SUSAN DE MATTEO

TYLER – Father Gustavo Cuello’s case is a perfect illustration of why the diocesan Code of Ethics and Integrity for Church Personnel is both required and necessary, said Father Gavin Vaverek.

Father Vaverek is pastor of St. Mary Church in Longview. He also is the diocesan promoter of justice, responsible for coordinating the diocese’s response to allegations of sexual abuse by clergy or church personnel. He helped draft the policy, signed into effect last February by Bishop Álvaro Corrada, SJ, and, with Linda Porter, diocesan director of religious education, has led the training sessions on the policy required for church employees and volunteers.

“A number of the details and situations brought out in testimony during the case are exactly the kinds of things addressed in the code and in the training sessions,” Father Vaverek said. “The difference is that, back in 1996 and 1997 when this was all unfolding, the people who witnessed these things weren’t armed with the kind of knowledge we’ve spent all summer giving them through the training sessions. So either what they saw didn’t raise any warning flags with them or, if it did, they didn’t know how to report it.

“But the policy and the training have changed all that.”

For instance, Father Vaverek said, “during testimony, a number of witnesses said they saw the victim sitting in Father Cuello’s lap during church functions. Obviously this is not an acceptable behavior, and it bothered some people. But they had no idea who they should report it to.

“Others said Father Cuello was in the habit of giving the victim rides to choir practice, alone. Again, this is something that sends up a flag. Or it should. Again, though, no one knew who to report this to.”

Both of these behaviors are explicitly prohibited in the ethics policy.

“So all of those behaviors, which were classic examples of a sexual predator singling out and grooming a potential victim, were allowed to go on unchecked until they resulted in the repeated sexual assault of a minor. Gustavo Cuello was able to victimize a 13-year-old girl, to shatter her life and her family’s life and to tear apart a community because nobody knew what steps to take to stop him.

“That’s exactly what this policy and all the training we’ve done on the policy are designed to do,” he said. “Not to catch and punish perpetrators of sexual assault on children, but to spot them and stop them before they ever get that far. Our goal is to arm people with the knowledge of what is and is not acceptable, to help make everyone aware of what behaviors to watch out for in potential predators and what signs to look for in potential victims, and to make sure that everybody knows that if they see anything at all that makes them uncomfortable, they need to call the diocesan promoter of justice at 903-266-2159.”

Father Vaverek rattles off that phone number every chance he gets, and he’s got a reason for doing it.

“One thing the policy does that people need to understand,” he said, “is

that it makes every single person who's signed it, every single person who's been through either the three-hour or 30-minute training, responsible for reporting anything that might possibly be an indication of abuse. By diocesan policy, we are all obligated to look after our children and to make sure that they come to no harm. And where we suspect harm, or even the potential for harm, then we are obligated to report it to somebody. And I'm that somebody."

What the policy and training sessions also make clear, Father Vaverek said, is that the State of Texas legally mandates the reporting of any suspected abuse.

"As Christians we proclaim, 'I am my brother's keeper,'" he said. "In Texas, and particularly here in the Diocese of Tyler, we mean that."

But such vigilance requires more than simply signing a copy of the policy and turning it in to the chancery. Stopping abuse before it starts requires church workers and volunteers to understand the grooming process practiced by potential predators, and to stop that process before it ever matures into abuse.

"Some members of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Father Cuello's former church) blamed the victim," Father Vaverek said. "They said she wanted it, they said she instigated it, they said she raped him. And that's not true. No 13-year old child wants to be raped by a 33-year-old priest. No 13-year-old girl is capable of raping a 33-year-old priest. She is the victim, and blaming her only victimizes her again.

"People said she dressed inappropriately," he continued. "They said she hung all over him and he tried to push her away. So in their minds, she became the one responsible for what happened and Gustavo Cuello became the injured party. They can point to that and say, 'See? Father was trying to stop her.'

"What they don't understand, though, is that Father wasn't trying to stop her. He was simply trying to maintain his illusion of respectability, of innocence, in the eyes of a community he had manipulated into believing that he was a really great guy who loved everybody and would never hurt anyone. He created this image of himself in their eyes that made it impossible for them to imagine that he would ever do anything like this. How could he? He was a wonderful man!

"Yes, she would hang on him," Father Vaverek said. "Yes, she sat on his lap at church functions. Yes, she dressed up and made herself beautiful for him. Because these were all things he had taught her to do, things he had groomed her to do. He insinuated himself into her family, he singled her out, he told her he loved her and that he was the only one who loved her, he created division between her and her family, he manipulated her until she trusted only him, and all this happened before he sexually assaulted her.

"That's what predators do. They lay the groundwork. They take care and time to win the love and trust of everyone around them, to become the most wonderful person in any crowd, and all the while they're creating the kind of chaos, of division among people and groups, that keep people from getting together and comparing notes and seeing a pattern of behavior emerging.

"They are monsters," Father Vaverek said. "And they are monsters because their humanity is so deformed that what to us is horrendous to them is normal."

But, he said, the training sessions were intended to provide some education on these “monsters” and their grooming processes.

“Systematic sexual abuse is not something that just happens overnight,” Father Vaverek said. “The grooming process has to be there, and we have to know what to look for. Inappropriate physical contact – sitting on Father’s lap or hanging on him – should send up a huge yellow flag, and if it happens, somebody needs to call me. I will talk to the young person and I will talk to the priest, and whichever one of them needs help, I’ll make sure they get it.

“A minor should not be alone with Father in his office with the door closed. Father should not give a minor frequent rides in his car alone. Father should not lavish gifts on a minor. A minor certainly should not be alone with Father in the rectory or residence. If these things are happening, I need to know about them.”

Hopefully, he said, the policy and the training sessions have created in the Diocese of Tyler an environment where such grooming will be spotted, recognized and stopped before another child is harmed.

“We’ve had about 1,600 people go through the training sessions,” Father Vaverek said. “That means that we’ve got 1,600 church workers and volunteers who know what to look for, who know what’s allowed and what isn’t. How do I know they know this? Because I’ve got their signatures on copies of the policy that tell me they know this. Those signatures tell me that these people are committed to creating an environment where our children are safe and where they’ll be protected.

“More than that,” he added, “those signatures tell me that these people are obligated to create this environment. The policy and the training sessions have taken away those old excuses, used for so many years by so many people in the church, of, ‘Oh, I didn’t know what was going on’ or ‘I didn’t know what to do about it.’ If I hear that from someone and I’ve got their signature on a copy of this policy, then my next question to them is, ‘Why not?’

“The days of darkness and ignorance in the church are gone,” he said. “The days of hiding our heads in the sand and leaving our children unprotected are gone. The days of monsters being allowed to manipulate entire communities for their own evil ends are gone.

“From now on,” Father Vaverek said, “we here in the Diocese of Tyler are very big on the prevent defense, and our message to any potential predator is, ‘Don’t mess with our kids.’” -30-

Anyone with concerns or suspicions about the behavior of church personnel should call Father Vaverek at 903 266-2159 or email him at promoter@dioceseoftyler.org. Confidential faxes can be sent to 903-939-1037. Suspicions of child abuse must be reported to the State of Texas at 1-800-252-5400.