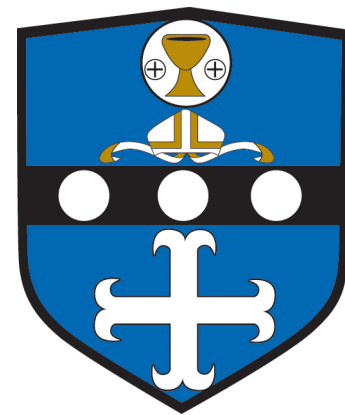


Supporting Children – Our Most Valuable Resource



By Tony DeGol

When Cindy O'Connor goes to work each day, she knows she must keep three things in mind: the past, the present, and the future.

O'Connor is the Director of the diocesan Office of Youth Protection – a position she has held for a little more than a year.

“We can't forget the past – it's daily in our lives,” reminded O'Connor about the tragic history of clergy sexual abuse in Altoona-Johnstown.

The present, she continued, involves the diocese's ongoing efforts to address the horrible situation, including the support of abuse victims and survivors. It also means continuing to raise awareness, and making available more training and prevention efforts, which all looks to the future.

“It's a process, and processes take time,” she admitted. “Is it fast enough for people? No, but people have said they have seen changes.”

In fact, the Independent Oversight Board – a five-person group responsible for overseeing the diocese's development and implementation of youth protection policies and procedures – recently noted that the diocese has made “significant headway” toward the effort.

The assessment came in the Board's first annual report released in late November. The Board's statement to the media is on page 14 of this edition of *The Catholic Register*, and their full report is available on the diocesan website.

Despite the diocese's progress, the Board recommended several steps to bring about what they call a “culture that places the highest value on protecting

and nurturing children.”

Achieving that “culture” is a goal for which O'Connor works tirelessly.

It's a “bottom-up” approach, as she calls it, which involves going straight to parishes and schools – ground zero for where the work must be done.

“Each parish has the uniqueness of its faith community,” O'Connor emphasized. “What are their challenges? In what ways are they being successful? Let's applaud that. Let's use that as benchmarking for other parishes to make sure everyone is in compliance to create the safest environment possible.”

Among the accomplishments of O'Connor's first year was the completion of a Diocesan Code of Conduct, which applies to all clergy and lay individuals. O'Connor also revised the required safe environment training program, which is mandatory for all clergy, employees, and volunteers.

“The information I gained today was absolutely necessary for my work,” said one participant of a recent training session.

“As a choir member, I'm not sure how it will apply, but actually this information is important for ALL people,” concluded another.

And yet another participant summed up the experience as follows: “It reinforces the awareness of the seriousness of protecting our children.”

The enthusiasm of those who completed the training is a good reminder that everyone has a role and responsibility in assuring the well-being of youth and vulnerable individuals.

In that spirit, O'Connor stressed, the diocese will continue on its way to creating the desired culture of child protection.

She also remains committed to strengthening relationships with law enforcement and the



CULTURE OF CHANGE: Cindy O'Connor, Director of Children and Youth Protection for the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, strives each day to promote a culture of change by ensuring that all clergy, employees, and volunteers are focused on protecting young and vulnerable individuals.

many victim assistance agencies throughout the diocese and the state.

So, the work continues for O'Connor, a member of Resurrection Parish in Johnstown. She is quick to point out how much she relies on her faith to sustain her in this challenging endeavor.

“We're all affected by this crisis,” she added. “The stories are heartbreaking. I've had the opportunity to talk with victims.”

She hopes that during such conversations, she is an extension of the diocese's unwavering commitment to supporting survivors on their journey. In doing so, she is truly recognizing the past, making a difference in the present, and working to ensure a better future.

Advent Prayer Of Preparation And Journey

Lord Jesus, you challenge us during this Advent time, this season of preparation, to put aside our pride and understand our need for repentance, forgiveness, and mercy. Help us to be less mindful of self, more mindful of others, and most of all mindful of you. As we prepare for our journey to Bethlehem and beyond, purify our hearts and sanctify our lives that we might serve you faithfully this day and all days. Renew us as a people of hope, who trust in your merciful love. We ask this through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, your Mother and Mother of the Church. Amen.