

Saint Patrick School

May 19, 2010

Concerns reported to Principal Julie Hess

On Monday afternoon I called Rhonda Stucinski at the diocesan office to inquire as to the appropriate procedure for reporting concerns of this nature. She connected me directly to your office.

I seek to fulfill my responsibility as school principal in relaying a growing body of parent and teacher concerns regarding Pastor Shawn Ratigan's perceived inappropriate behavior with children. Parents, staff members, and parishioners are discussing his actions and whether or not he may be a child molester. They have researched pedophilia on the Internet and brought in sample articles with examples of how Father Shawn's actions fit the profile of a child predator. I am worried about Father, about our school, and about losing our families to the negative impact of gossip and rumors.

As you are well aware, all teachers, caregivers, coaches, and parent volunteers are required to take the workshop "Protecting God's Children". Every teacher receives monthly Virtus bulletins, which outline the boundaries of appropriate adult-child interaction and explain what to look for in adults who may be "grooming" children for future abuse. Some of Father Shawn's behaviors have raised significant red flags amongst the adults who work with children at our school and parish.

In accordance with the diocesan Children's Safety Curriculum, and in light of the priest abuse scandal in the Catholic Church and its devastating effects, I would recommend that priests across the diocese observe appropriate "Circle of Grace" physical boundaries for our children, instead of blurring and crossing those boundaries. We would expect Father Shawn to model, teach, and practice the Child Safety guidelines across all settings in the church and in the school, and not insist that he has a right to "be close" to children or tell teachers that he knows the rules. We do not like the uncomfortable position we are in, and do not wish to create an adversarial relationship with our pastor.

Although concerns about Father Shawn surfaced early in the school year, in the last week they have grown much stronger. The proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back" was reported to me by phone (I was in St. Louis) last Thursday, May 13, 2010. During a school field trip to Platte Falls, Father allowed a fourth grade girl to sit on his lap and lean her body back against him. He did not immediately move to re-direct her; she sat there for at least five minutes, until teachers moved to stand next to him. Then he rose and went to play Frisbee with a group of students.

Numerous parents were on the field trip, as well as five teachers. All of the teachers spoke with me on Monday, May 17, about this and other concerns they had throughout the school year. Four parents have also come forward to speak with me regarding this and other incidents involving Father Shawn that have occurred. One of the parents met with Father yesterday to tell him that he has not set appropriate boundaries with our kids, and how she and other parents are upset.

On the day of the field trip another incident occurred which, in itself, would not raise a red flag, but which has become a matter of great concern because of the reaction and response that Father Shawn displayed after the incident.

It was about 4:15 and most of the students and teachers had left for the day. One of the fifth grade girls was waiting outside for a ride, and the teacher on duty had to leave. Father Shawn offered to stay outside with the student until her parents arrived. Another teacher was walking to her car, noticed Father Shawn waiting with the girl, and volunteered to take over supervision of the girl. Father Shawn insisted on staying, so the teacher remained and visited with the two of them until the parents came. The teacher thought she was doing the right thing; however, Father Shawn saw *her* as a problem. He confided in our sixth grade teacher (who reported to me), "A teacher who's not Catholic is giving me trouble about being close to the kids. She stands right by me when I'm near the kids and watches me very closely. I know there's some talk out there...some perceptions about my interaction with kids...when I'm around, the little ones come up and want me to swing them around and she always stops it." The sixth grade teacher tried to explain about our training and how we are teaching the kids about boundaries, the world we live in, etc., and Father replied, "I know the rules, OK? It's OK to have them sit on the end of your knee. I'm not going to break the rules..." He also confided to a parent, "I don't know what to do about "Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ ; she has a problem with how much I hug the kids." Word circulated and now many of the first grade parents are upset that Father Shawn is thinking of "doing" something to one of the best teachers at our school.

Before things escalated yesterday, Father had intended to come and talk with me "about a problem with a teacher". When he realized this situation was bigger than he thought, he called me over to the parish office and said it was just a "heads up" about rumors that were swirling around. When I mentioned that he had wanted to discuss a "teacher" issue, he told me that the first grade teacher, who is not Catholic, interferes when students try to get close to him at recess. I explained our safety training and the importance of teaching physical boundaries and the "Circle of Grace" to our children. He interrupted to tell me that little children need to be touched and hugged, and even though "they" advised against it, he felt it was the right thing for kids. He said he would never hurt a child and all he wants to do is help them all get to heaven. At the end of the short conversation, he said that maybe he should just quit being involved in the school all together. I assured him that no one wanted that, and I wanted to say more, but I could tell it just wasn't the time.

**Additional incidents that have been reported to me are described below.**

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The concerns fall into several categories: 1) inappropriate physical contact with children; 2) general inappropriate behavior; and 3) general concerns. Specific examples of concerns in each category are described as briefly as possible.

**Inappropriate Physical Contact with Children**

Besides the incident that occurred last Thursday, these have recently been reported to me:

Father allows students to climb on him, grab his leg/s, and reach into his pockets for candy. When they climb/jump on him, he may swing them up over his head or spin them around.

- At the middle school Valentine's Day party two teachers reported they were very uncomfortable when Father swung a fifth grade girl up over his head, even though she was wearing a uniform skirt.
- At an all-school basketball game in the gym, the P.E. teacher reported that Father was sitting very close to a first grade girl, who had wrapped both of her hands and arms around his arm and was trying to cuddle up to him. The teacher interceded with the student, moving her to the row behind Father and explaining that she was intruding on Father's Circle of Grace. When the teacher checked later, the girl had moved back next to Father in the previous position.
- When first grade Brownie Girl Scouts were planting flowers in Father Shawn's home garden, a parent reported to me that her husband became "incensed" when he saw Father rubbing circles on his daughter's back. The dad immediately called his daughter over to him to get him away from Father and texted his wife that Father had better keep his hands to himself or there would be trouble. \* More about this trip to Father's house in the section "General Concerns".
- A kindergarten parent expressed a concern that her daughter is "all over" Father Shawn and he does nothing to stop it. Her husband is also upset by the physical contact.

### **General Inappropriate Behavior**

- Early in the school year, parents expressed concerns with Father's Facebook page showing pictures of children sitting on his lap, and tossing a young girl in a 2-piece swimsuit up in the air while swimming. Father continues to communicate with some of our students on Facebook (whose full names and pictures are there on the Internet), and has requested to become "friends" on Facebook with at least one eighth grade female student who has ignored his requests, saying that she thinks it's "creepy".
- In September, teachers expressed concerns about Father interrupting their classes, sharing inappropriate information with students, and not setting physical boundaries for himself with the kids. At the next faculty meeting, the teachers agreed to intervene and directly tell the children not to jump on Father, not to hang on his legs, and not to put their hands in his pockets any more.
- Father takes hundreds of pictures of the kids, not just during special events, but on field trips and in their everyday school activities. A few parents have mentioned that they think it's strange and wonder what he does with all the pictures. He has not checked with the school office regarding parent releases to photograph their children, nor has he submitted any pictures to our yearbook committee or school newsletters.
- In October, Father seemed to be "obsessed" -- as a staff member put it -- with one of the fifth grade girls. He was constantly talking about her, and wondering aloud to office workers, and teachers, "I don't know why so-and-so doesn't like me." He also described their conversations and interactions, as if other adults would be as interested in them as he was. Another staff member brought it up at a Parish Staff meeting as a concern, in terms of his apparent emotional

involvement in the situation and the inappropriateness of his “peer-to-peer” relationship with the student.” Teachers report that Father spends a great deal of time talking with the girls in that particular class, saying, “He’s always talking to them.”

- During one of Father’s classroom interruptions, a teacher reported the following: Using a sing-song voice, Father entered the 5/6<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class with “I got an invitation, I got an invitation!” waving the paper in the air. When asked what he was invited to, Father answered, “To a Cinco de Mayo Party”. One of the kids grabbed the invitation from his hand and said to him, “It’s to the PRE-school party!” and everyone laughed. Somehow the conversation turned to Reconciliation and the fact that Father wished that the Pius students would confess their *real sins*, and not just the “little stuff”. When the kids asked what he meant, he said, “Sins against the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment.” Later, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader asked the teacher, “Does Father Shawn think the kids at Pius are having affairs with their neighbors?”
- Shortly before Palm Sunday, one of the parishioners was at the Parish Office helping out. She was working downstairs and had her young son with her. When she came upstairs, she couldn’t find her son and called for him. He answered, saying, “I was in Father Shawn’s office. He wanted to show me something.” The mother was very uncomfortable with this, since Father has a back room off his office that no one can access and her son was alone with the priest.
- On an out-of-uniform day, a fourth grade boy wore a shirt expressing pride. In front of the class, Father told him that pride is a sin and the shirt was inappropriate. It was the boy’s swim team shirt, and he had just set a team record the weekend before. The parent called me to ask if Father was “a total idiot”. She shared this incident with other parents.
- Early in the school year Father asked the fifth and sixth graders if they were “Pro-Life”. Teachers said the kids were confused, and weren’t sure how to answer. Clearly, Father is unaware that most of the kids at that age don’t understand how babies are made, probably don’t know what abortion is, and may not understand the deeper meaning of being “pro-life”.

### **General Concerns**

- Parents who accompanied the Brownie Girl Scouts when they planted flowers at Father’s house reported that they were somewhat disturbed with the inside of Father’s home. “It’s very kid-friendly,” one mother said. “There is a big fish tank in the living room and stuffed animals all over the furniture.” There is a giant stuffed animal on the bed in the guestroom and the kitchen hand towels are shaped to look like doll clothes. The mother told me, “I got the willies all over.” Earlier that day, this same woman had found a pair of girls’ panties inside one of the planters in Father’s back yard. She told me she’s not sure if her daughters will attend any school field trips that Father goes on and that Father has raised the warning-bell instincts of numerous moms. She added that he’s established no boundaries with kids “and it’s clear he wants it to stay that way.”
- Parents of students in Children’s Faith Formation classes have discussed that Father Shawn visits regularly with their children on Sundays, but even though the parents are standing right there, he doesn’t make eye contact, nor does he speak to them. “He’s never talked to *me* but he talks to

my kid.” They say that Father ignores them. Our senior parishioners who attend the all-school Mass on Wednesdays also complain that Father ignores them and only talks to the kids.

- Father always wants to play with the kids in Physical Education classes. The P.E. teacher has told me that Father has no personal boundaries, the children flock to him, their hands are all over him, and their hands are in his pockets. Other teachers have had to step in and say to the kids, “That’s not appropriate!” and hoped that Father would get the hint.
- Staff members have expressed concern that Father seems unwilling to find the time to meet with them to discuss parish issues; one in particular has tried numerous times to set up a meeting with him to no avail. They believe that Father spends so much time at school he isn’t able to get other important things done. Father is at school every day for long periods of time. He is usually present at arrival time, during morning prayer, recess, lunch, dismissal, and after school. He also visits the early childhood center most every day.