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By Msgr. Eric Barr, Vicar for Clergy and Religious

Secular Press reports about Father Campobello case are troubling

In my position as Vicar for Clergy, I often get to read the local press reports about priests from the secular media throughout our diocese. Lately, I've been troubled by their accounts of the Diocese's so-called attempt to resist the release of Diocesan information concerning Father Mark Campobello. We have seen from reading about other cases in other dioceses that, usually, the press argues that any attempt by a diocese to not release information is because that diocese "will do anything" to protect a priest. That's just not true. I'd like to make clear that the Diocese of Rockford operates under the following principles.

The protection of children is paramount. This is not simply a pious wish on our part. We actively seek out possible perpetrators through criminal background checks on clergy and lay employees and volunteers. Additionally, through a series of workshops and presentations by experts in the field, which we require all our employees and volunteers to attend, we are educating all employees and volunteers in the diocese on how to spot sexual abuse, how to report possible cases, and how to prevent abuse from occurring. The Diocese of Rockford is proactive and deeply involved in these ongoing efforts.

The diocese will release all lawfully requested information to the proper authorities. The big sticking point here is what "lawful" means. States often take the position that all documents should be released. We understand why they would make that claim, but there are a couple of things we have to consider.

First of all, the Church often has employee medical files—those cannot be released without the employee's express permission. The diocese does not have the right to release information which has been entrusted to us on the condition that we would keep such information confidential.

Second, the First Amendment of our nation's Constitution requires the separation of Church and state. The state is prohibited from running the interior life of the Church. While it is true that the bad actions of some Church officials in other dioceses have led to perpetrators continuing to abuse parishioners, those bad actions do not wipe out Constitutional rights for all dioceses. All of us are appalled by those bad actions and terrible decisions. But no crime or bad decision by an individual takes away the rights of others. The Church will fight to maintain her rights. To allow the state to have free access to all information in a particular case sets a precedent that would allow the state to have access to other unrelated information at another time of its choosing. Individuals, families, companies and other institutions would not allow such an intrusion on their freedoms. Neither must the Diocese of Rockford. At the same time, the Diocese of Rockford will not withhold information that would permit a child to be in danger, or that would allow a perpetrator of abuse to go free.

The Church of the Diocese of Rockford has decided to withhold certain documentation in the criminal case against Father Campobello. Some may conclude that we are hiding things. But we are not. We are protecting the right of the Church to have independence from the state, as guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution.

We are exercising the Church's right to protection from the state's intrusion into the internal matters of the Church. This is what the First Amendment is about. The State must not be permitted to review the Catholic Church's policies and practices on governance of its clergy and religious. For what will the next encroachment be?

But make no mistake, the Diocese of Rockford does not just passively sit around and let the State investigate an allegation of clergy child abuse. The diocese works independently to remove even an alleged perpetrator from his assignment or job immediately, regardless of whether the State also chooses to investigate. The Rockford Diocese will actively help to bring to justice those who break the law of this State, and/or the law of the Catholic Church. Judge our actions over the years and see that those actions match the above words. Some high officials in the Church throughout our country have squandered the credibility the Catholic Church at one time immediately commanded. Now, only actions can produce that credibility. We feel confident at the Diocese of Rockford that our actions do just that.

This article has been edited to fit our bulletin. The entire article can be viewed at the Parish Center.