

The Mission and Ministry of VIRTUS[®]

By Michael Bemis, President
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Very often, when people think or speak of VIRTUS, they associate it with the Protecting God's Children[®] (PGC) program. This is certainly understandable, because the PGC program is the most widely utilized—and highly awarded—safe environment program in the Church. Nevertheless, characterizing the VIRTUS programs in this way is inaccurate and invalid. The VIRTUS programs are, in fact, a far more comprehensive and far broader ministry.

The VIRTUS programs are The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc.'s risk control program. Risk control is a set of methodologies, protocols, and procedures designed to prevent losses entirely or to mitigate the severity of losses that could not be completely prevented.

The mission of risk control is very consistent with Christian precepts. As Christians, we are compelled to do our utmost to protect and care for others and to conduct our affairs in a manner that does not bring harm to others. We are also called upon to be good stewards of the resources we have been blessed with. Risk control, and consequently the VIRTUS programs, provides outstanding tools to help us fulfill these mandates.

Which VIRTUS programs expand this mission beyond the highly successful Protecting God's Children program? Here are two good examples—the VIRTUS program for the protection of vulnerable adults and the upcoming internet and electronic communication safety program.

Another example is the VIRTUS Bullying Prevention Program—now available. Research clearly demonstrates that most school shooters have at one time or another been the victims of bullies, were themselves bullies, or at different times in their lives, were both. If you can prevent bullying, you can dramatically reduce school violence. You will also significantly enhance the learning environment when students are no longer harassed, demeaned, and distracted by bullies. These are the goals of the VIRTUS Bullying Prevention Program.

Yet another example is the VIRTUS Treatment and Wellness Program—The Pledge to Heal, which is currently in final development and which will be introduced early in 2007.

Rest assured that we are absolutely dedicated and committed to maintaining the VIRTUS programs as the most effective and cost efficient risk control program available to the Church!



Vulnerable Adults: We Are All God's Children

The VIRTUS Programs

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The title, "Protecting God's Children," was chosen as a most appropriate name for a program whose goal is to create safe environments for all those who work and minister in Church settings. The question that is often raised when the title is introduced is "Who are God's Children?" The answer is simply "everyone."

Although the Protecting God's Children program is primarily designed to address the issues of creating safe environments for children and young people, much of what it promotes is applicable to the prevention of abuse of vulnerable adults as well. *Vulnerable adults* include people with a physical, mental, or emotional condition or an illness that renders them unable to defend themselves, protect themselves, or get help for themselves when injured or emotionally abused. The term can also refer to the elderly.¹ It is important to

remember, however, that at times we can *all* be considered vulnerable and it is thereby important to treat *all* individuals with respect and dignity.

When vulnerable adults are victims, some of the abusers use many of the same methods used by those who abuse children—they seek out and "groom" vulnerable adults. Others, like situational offenders, take advantage of particular situations and give into the pressures of those events by abusing others. Although this population is particularly vulnerable to unscrupulous con artists, most sexual abusers are family members, caregivers, and others who are known and trusted by the adults—just as with child victims.

Some of the principles addressed in the Protecting God's Children for Adults program also apply to the vulnerable adult population. The similarities and differences are evident in the *A Time to Protect God's Children* video and are also outlined in this article.

It is important to remember one key difference between the sexual abuse of children and that of vulnerable adults. We know that child sexual abuse is about sexual attraction as well as power and control. Child predators often think that they love the children and are sexually, socially, and romantically attracted to the victims. Abuse of vulnerable adults is the kind of violence that is committed against any adult in the crime of adult sexual assault. Sex is merely the tool used to exert power and control in the situation.²

Vulnerable adults suffer from sexual abuse, but they also suffer from physical abuse just as children do. In fact only an estimated one percent of abuse of the elderly is sexual.³ However, financial exploitation is a major form of abuse in this group. During our discussions, we will provide you with additional relevant information about the nature and scope of the broader problem of abuse of vulnerable adults.

Each year approximately 500,000 allegations of abuse of vulnerable adults are reported to Adult Protection Services. Some experts, however, estimate that only a very small percentage of cases of abuse are ever reported.⁴ In fact, studies

¹ http://www.webmd.com/hw/health_guide_atoz/stv5470.asp

² Abramson, W., Cameron, L.A., Mastroleo, C., *Sexual Violence and Persons with Disabilities*, <http://www.advocatweb.org/hope/default.asp>.

³ Teaster, P.B., *A Response to the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults, the 2000 Survey of State Adult Protective Services*. p.21 The National Center on Elder Abuse.

indicate that as many as 10 percent of the vulnerable adult population is subject to abuse and that only 1 in 6 will be reported.⁵

The small percentage of reports reinforces the assertions stated by experts that vulnerable adults rarely tell anyone about the abuse. The reasons for this failure to report are:

1. The fear of retribution. The people who commit these acts are relatives, business professionals and institutions, con artists, and caregivers. Vulnerable adults who fall victim to one of these people are often afraid of revealing the abuse.
2. They are embarrassed or ashamed.
3. They may have some debilitating physical and/or psychological impediment that prevents them from coming forward.
4. They may not remember what happened or become confused about what is going on.
5. They may not know that they have been victimized and therefore they cannot tell anyone.
6. They are adults—regardless of their vulnerability—and they have the right to decide whether abuse is reported, investigated, or prosecuted.⁶

The bias against vulnerable adults, including older Americans is a major contributing factor to the low reporting and prosecution rate. The same factors that impact prosecution of child sexual abuse also play a part in the decisions to prosecute when the victim is a vulnerable adult. However, it is also important to remember that these are adults and they have the right to consent or to refuse to participate in the report, investigation, and prosecution of the matter.⁷

When the victim is an adult with mental limitations, the offender is often a caregiver. However, when the victim is an elderly person, the most likely perpetrator is a family member. Forensic evidence is hard to find and it is a major challenge for prosecutors to find a way to convince a jury that an adult child would deliberately harm a parent.

Vulnerable adults face a serious risk of abuse, including sexual abuse. Applying the basic principles of Protecting God's Children to situations involving vulnerable adults can dramatically impact this problem and protect yet another segment of the population who cannot protect themselves.

Additional Resources:

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD):

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) serves as the voice for over 14 million US Catholics who live with physical, cognitive, sensory, or emotional disabilities. Since 1982, NCPD has implemented the call for greater access and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the life of the Catholic Church and in society. NCPD supports a network of diocesan directors of disability ministry and other ministry partners through training, resources and consultation. They continue to promote the culture of life in the way that VIRTUS and Protecting God's Children does—by defending the dignity of every human person, including those whom society deems unworthy of life because of disability.

VIRTUS *Online*:

VIRTUS *Online* articles can provide additional information to assist those working with vulnerable adults in recognizing the behaviors that indicate that an adult is at risk or that a caretaker is a risk to the person they are caring for. Although most will not bear directly on the issues relevant to this population, facilitators should recommend that everyone read the articles as part of our responsibility to create safe environments for all God's children.

⁴ Bensen, W.F., *Comments of the National Adult Protective Services Association for The White House Conference on Aging "Listening Session,"* Washington, D.C., September 2004. ; *National Elder Abuse Incident Report*, 1996.

⁵ *About Elder Abuse*, Utah Adult Protective Services; Hodge, P. D., *Elder Abuse: A National Scandal, United States Senate Hearings of the Subcommittee on Aging.*

⁶ *Supra*, note 2.

⁷ *Supra*, note 2.

Safety and the Electronic World

By Robert Hugh Farley M.S.

Consultant to the VIRTUS Programs

Recently, I was conducting an all day Protecting God's Children online training seminar at a Midwest diocese. During lunch a woman approached me and identified herself as a principal at a local Catholic elementary school. The principal thanked me for all of the information that I had provided to the participants about child and teen safety on the Internet. She went on to say that she was going to tell her parish priest about what she had learned at the VIRTUS seminar. She stated that she was hoping that he would now be willing to allow Internet access for the children at her school. When I told her that I didn't understand what she meant, she stated that the priest at her parish was worried about the Internet and its many inherent dangers for children. As a safety solution he had forbidden all Internet access for the children at her school.

In light of today's extensive, almost nonstop media coverage of Internet child sexual predators, the concerned priest's solution for protecting the children at his school is certainly understandable. Many people, concerned about the dangers of the Internet and who are in positions of authority, have forbidden or strictly limited Internet access for children and teens at schools, churches, teen clubs, summer camps, and homes.

However, trying to ban the Internet is just as futile as the attempt by adults who attempted to ban teens from listening to rock and roll music in the 1950s. Simply banning the Internet for young people at a school is not a realistic or practical safety solution in 2006.

Even though access to the Internet may be banned at a school, Internet access may be readily available for a child or teen at home, a friend's house, or the public library. With wireless technology or as it's commonly known "Wi-Fi" becoming more and more popular, young people with portable computers can also go online free of charge at many unsecured locations. It is also possible for children and teens to access the Internet from portable electronic devices such as cell telephones or personal digital assistants (PDAs). In addition, some of the newer video games are also Internet enabled.

Today, the Internet has never been more popular among youth. Our young ones have grown up in a world that is immersed in cyber technology and electronic communication. In fact, children and teens of today probably cannot imagine living in a world that doesn't have chat rooms, instant messaging, social networking sites, online gaming sites, web cams, or text messaging.

Unfortunately the technology gap between adults and young people continues to widen. Children and teens think that today's technology and the many communication devices that are available are completely safe and very entertaining. On the other hand, many adults view computers and electronic communication devices only as tools for work and serious matters, not as a relaxing or fun pastime.

The best way for an adult to keep up with the technology gap is by learning to use the technology safely. Young people need "technology conscious" adults, with open and honest lines of communication, to teach them how to make smart choices about whom and what they will find when visiting the Internet or communicating in the electronic world. Adults, by simply engaging in open communication with children or teens about the technology, may actually be the best weapon against child sexual predators and the many other online dangers.

In order to educate the clergy, teachers, parents, and other caring adults about how children and teens can safely communicate in the electronic cyber world, VIRTUS will soon offer a new, state of the art program that will provide adults



with step-by-step safety solutions to combat the ever growing problem of sexual predators, bullies, and others who target children and teens via computers, the Internet, and portable electronic communication devices.

The new program equips adults with necessary technological tools to level the playing field with computer savvy young people. By protecting young people in the electronic world, we can offer them a safer and happier life.

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