

From the San Mateo County Times –

PRIESTS-IN-TRAINING LEARN ABOUT CHALLENGES OF CELIBACY, AVOIDING ABUSE

By Emily Fancher, STAFF WRITER

Thursday, January 23, 2003 - MENLO PARK -- The Catholic Church has a reputation of having a prudish, cloistered clergy that condemns sex and shies from discussions of sexuality.

But at progressive St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, men training to be priests say this view of the church is outdated. A sexual-abuse seminar and class on sexuality has been mandatory for more than a decade at St. Patrick's.

A registered sex offender -- and churchgoer -- addressed the seminarians last week about his sex addiction. And the students were asked to ponder questions on the blackboard such as, "Who am I as a sexual person?"

"The seminary dealt with issues of sexuality before the present crisis," said the Rev. Gerald Coleman, the president of St. Patrick's, who teaches a course on sexuality.

Many of the students are older men who've had other careers and life experiences, and now want to join the clergy.

"The perception among the public and even among lay Catholics is that the church thinks sex is evil and tainted," said Russ Brown, a third-year student. "This is the worst misconception."

The Rev. Dr. Kibbie Ruth, an non-Catholic ordained by the United Church of Christ, taught an intensive three-day workshop on sexual abuse to 18 third-year students last week.

Ruth uses books, guest speakers, case studies, videos, and writing exercises to teach students how to spot sexual abuse in parishes, and how to steer clear of abusive behaviors themselves.

Through San Mateo-based Kyros Ministry, Ruth travels the country, teaching religious leaders of all denominations about sexuality and abuse.

Ruth began her work in the 1980s following a scandal in a Redwood City church where a pastor was having sexual relationships with parishioners.

"When I first started doing this work, no one believed that child abuse even existed," Ruth said.

Ruth has taught the mandatory seminar on sexual abuse for the last seven years, but last week was the first time she invited Bill, a recovering sex addict, to speak at the seminary.

"Hi, my name is Bill," said the man in his 30s. "I'm a sexaholic, a lust addict, and I'll do anything -- lie, cheat and steal, to get that."

Bill says his earliest memories are of being sodomized by a babysitter at age 5. He says he moved on to a sexually promiscuous childhood and adolescence.

Bill, a fervently religious man, said his worst fall from grace was when he molested his teenage stepdaughter. He went to prison before getting treatment for his addiction. He is a registered sex offender.

"I was close to the jumping-off point," said Bill. "I wanted to kill myself, but I was saved by God's grace."

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Bill was an active member in his church throughout his years of addiction and being an abuser, and his congregation, by supporting him instead of shunning him, helped him through his recovery.

"I was highly religious, but spiritually dead. I was a paradox," he said.

Students asked Bill about his relationship with his parents.

"I can't even remember seeing them express affection or hug or kiss," Bill said.

Bill confessed that when he enters a room, he still immediately scans it for women and begins fantasizing about them. He also said that a week before, after he spoke to a group of Episcopal ministers-in-training in Berkeley, he was so stressed that he had to call several support-group members to suppress his urge to look at child pornography.

"What advice do you give us as priests to deal with registered sex offenders in the parish?" asked a student.

"Remember that we are all God's children, and sins are forgiven," said Bill.

Ruth talked to the St. Patrick's class about how hard it is to protect children from sexual material. For example, "The phone book in Las Vegas has ads for prostitutes. Kids don't even have to look in pornography magazines."

Ruth asked the class how many of them grew up in families with codes of silence about sexuality. Hands popped up and heads nodded.

She asked about their homework, a case study in which a youth-group leader is flirting inappropriately with young people. How would they handle it?

"I'd take him aside and talk to him, not in a confrontational way, but in a caring way," said student body president Ulysses D'Aquila.

Caleb Vogel, one of the youngest students in the class at 25, says that standards of behavior need to be raised.

"We've gone from Little House on the Prairie to Jerry Springer," said Vogel.

Students say the seminar is enormously helpful.

"I think Kibbie's done a very good job of putting words on the psychological forces that drive people," said Brown.

But the class is an exhausting reminder of the hostility students may face when they are ordained.

"The whole church and seminary has been under the lens for a year now," said Brown, who says Catholic priests are unfairly criticized for celibacy.

Ruth said this year, seminarians at St. Patrick's are quieter than ever.

"They feel beaten up by this topic," she said.

D'Aquila said his fellow students are exhausted by the issue.

"Morale at the seminary is not low, but it's so painful to discuss these issues," said D'Aquila. "You feel it reflects on you."