

April is Child Abuse Prevention month. It is a particularly embarrassing time for the Catholic Church to be mired in a continuing controversy over the sexual abuse of children by priests. These are confusing times. The Cameron newspaper this week carried one editorial calling for adults to report the abuse of children and another editorial calling for increased spanking at schools. The *Kansas City Star* dredged up old accusations against a retired priest last week, and this week's *Catholic Key* accuses the *Star* of twisting the truth and hiding relevant facts. Now an accuser has sued Bishop Boland and the Vatican among co-conspirators in child-abuse racketeering. The *Star* publicized this lawsuit before it landed on the bishop's desk. He has denied the allegation. Meanwhile some university professors have produced papers saying sexual activity between adults and children isn't such a bad thing. And when congress tried to eliminate child pornography on the internet, the Supreme Court struck down the legislation because it conflicted with first amendment rights of free speech.

The abuse of children is a highly volatile topic. The seriousness of this crime should not be minimized. But it will take careful discernment in a time when the media are hyperventilating over this issue to cut a clear path that protects our children from harm.

Whenever abuse or neglect happens it must be reported. If you suspect child abuse or neglect, call the Missouri Division of Family Services. They will help. Abuse is most frequent within families. Most adults who commit crimes against children are part of the family, just as most abusers of women are husbands or men whom they trust. Whenever abuse happens it needs to be reported. In the year 2000, there were 900,000 cases of child abuse in this country. That number is up, but probably because people are reporting it more.

If the current crisis in the Catholic Church causes victims to get the help they need, so be it. But it does not help when the media equate credible accusations with questionable ones, when our political leaders cannot tell the difference between freedom and pornography, when church leaders try to protect

reputations instead of children, and when parents neglect their responsibilities to watch and protect their kids.

Jesus says a flock of sheep faces shepherds and thieves. He is the gate. The shepherd will enter through him. The thief will climb over the gate and attack the sheep. Whether we are clergy, parents, teachers or leaders in any capacity, we must do no harm to those in our care and report others who do.