

# Catholic counseling available at St. Pius X center

Stories by AMANDA WILLIAMS

An estimated 200,000 people in the Tulsa metropolitan area suffer from depression, and Catholics are among them. But many do not know there is a confidential, professionally staffed parish-based Catholic counseling center available to help them.

Depression or some form of mood disorder affects more than 19 million Americans every year, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, and the 200,000 local estimate comes from the Mental Health Association in Tulsa.

"We recognize that Catholic Christians have a need for professional and Catholic counseling," said Father Mike Knipe, pastor at St. Pius X Church.

The Counseling Center at St. Pius X has served the needs of more than 1,000 Catholics and non-Catholics annually for more than 20 years, said Kelli M. Erwin, licensed professional counselor and alcohol and drug counselor, who operates the center. Mrs. Erwin's journey to her current position began with a national tragedy.

At the time of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Mrs. Erwin had for 13 years been the employee assistance coordinator for Tulsa Regional Medical Center. That day, she realized she had 3,000 distraught employees and couldn't share her only solution with any of them - prayer.

The next week she read an ad in the EOC about a counseling position at St. Pius X Church. She was amazed by the timing and pounced on the opportunity to work in a faith-based professional role. "This did not happen by accident; it was God."

Since then, Mrs. Erwin has provided counseling to many individuals with diverse personal issues. Most referrals from priests and parishes are related to addiction and marital problems.

The center's divorce support group began Oct. 18 and will run through Dec. 20. Mrs. Erwin said the timing is ideal because it provides additional support around the holidays - a time when coping with divorce may be more challenging.

Mrs. Erwin said the counseling center has a unique problem. From one perspective, she would like to see it strongly promoted so everyone who could benefit from the services would know where to find them. However, she also cherishes the solace and privacy that accompanies word-of-mouth advertising.

"People are afraid their privacy will not be honored or they will be judged because of their problems," she said. Mrs. Erwin stressed that she is ethically bound as a licensed professional to honor all rights of those seeking counseling and maintains a professional facility. The center is adjacent to the parish office in a renovated home near St. Pius X Church which, she said, makes clients more comfortable, as opposed to walking



The offices of the St. Pius X Counseling Center are in this converted residence across the street from the church at 1727 South 75th East Ave.

into a clinical-type setting.

To reassure patrons skeptical of the therapeutic process, Mrs. Erwin explained one of her first conversations with individuals is about any previous counseling. She said most apprehension stems from prior uncomfortable or bad experiences.

"I have struggled with my own share of demons," she said. "Everyone deals with problems, not just those seeking services."

She attributes a general lack of understanding of mood disorders to the rise

in self-medication and misguided self-diagnoses. "Research supports the notion that a good diet and adequate rest are a big help when dealing with problems adjusting to daily life," she said. "We must be willing to rearrange our lifestyles."

One simple tool is sunlight. Mrs. Erwin said she tries to get 15 minutes of sunlight every day. Other tips include exercise, even if it's just walking and praying. "I like to think of it as multitasking," she said. She also encourages quiet meditation in the middle of

the day to focus only on one's self and personal relationship with God.

At one point in her career, Mrs. Erwin began to feel the weight of all the pain she witnessed in those she was helping. Msgr. Gregory Gier, rector of Holy Family Cathedral, advised it was not her job to carry other people's pain; that was Christ's job. She said that statement changed her, and she shares it with many of her clients who carry difficult loads.

Though the counseling center serves individuals from all walks of life regardless of denomination, Mrs. Erwin believes faith is the foundation of her practice vs. the view held by a number of clinicians that it is one of many alternative methods for recovery. "When I was in school, you did not talk about faith; it was all science," she said. "Society has pushed for more spirituality in the helping profession."

"We are physical-emotional-spiritual beings and we need to receive emotional help in the context of our faith," Father Knipe said.

Mrs. Erwin said she will continue researching ways to promote the clinic and ensure that those in need of support and counseling know how to find it. She also will protect the sense of privacy and comfort the counseling center has maintained for the past two decades.

For more information, call 622-4488.

## Not enough counseling available

Bishop Edward J. Slattery said he sees "an enormous amount of suffering" in the world and believes that education and support are desperately needed. He also is a strong supporter of group counseling because each person realizes he or she shares experiences, pain and resilience with other participants. He described the group counseling dynamic taking place at St. Elizabeth Lodge as "a beautiful thing."

People need each other, the Bishop said. "Loneliness in terms of solitude and prayer can be a positive, self-learning experience." However, chronic loneliness can be dysfunctional and unhealthy.

The Catholic counseling resources in the Diocese often are overlooked or misunderstood, but they are available to all members of the community. In addition to the center at St. Pius X Church, Catholic Charities offers fee-based professional counseling on a sliding scale and has a variety of other programs tailored to meet specific needs.

Catholic Charities Counseling Center, 585-8167  
www.catholiccharitiestulsa.org

St. Pius X Counseling Center, 622-4488

# Priests reflect on counseling aspects of pastoral care

When people are in crisis, they often turn to their parish priest for guidance, but many priests are not trained to handle complex psychological issues. Among the priests in the Diocese of Tulsa who have advanced education in the social sciences are Bishop Edward J. Slattery, Father Jack Gleason and Father Paul Amaliri.

Jesus was the "Divine Physician" who healed people physically, emotionally and spiritually, said Father Gleason, director of vocations and pastor of Church of the Madalene, who earned a bachelor of science degree in psychology and holds two master's degrees in theology.

Guiding or counseling from a Catholic perspective involves appreciating people's experiences in the context of faith, he said.

There is a growing focus in the Catholic Church on mental health needs, Father Gleason said, adding that the Second Vatican Council embraced the sciences in a faith context.

"In terms of the priesthood, we function on the level of spiritual guide," he said. Humans are holistic beings - physical, emotional and spiritual - and pastoral care addresses the spiritual needs that may arise from issues or crises affecting people's ability to cope with daily life.

"We explore the meanings, perspectives and belief systems that affect functioning," said Father Gleason.

Bishop Slattery holds a master's



Father Paul Amaliri



Father Gleason



Father Harder



Bishop Slattery

degree in education, specializing in counseling, in addition to his bachelor of arts and master's degrees in divinity. He said he chose the counseling specialty because he was interested in marriage counseling, saw a need for the service and believed the priesthood was ideally suited to provide it.

"Counseling becomes a part of a person and a way of communication; it affects your relationship with yourself and with others," said Bishop Slattery. "The most important skill I gained was self-awareness - I learned how to counsel myself, therefore I am in a better place to help others."

However, right after he earned his degree, then-Father Slattery was appointed in 1971 to the Extension Society, where he was unable to actively use his counseling skills.

Father Amaliri, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Cushing, appreciates the connection between clinical counseling and spiritual guidance. He earned a master of science degree in

counseling last December and is now working toward a doctorate in pastoral counseling and licensure as a professional counselor. He said the advanced training "comes in handy in homilies, the confessional, office consultations and with the prison groups I work with."

"I love counseling, active listening, and learning how I can help. People come up with their own solutions; I just listen to them, prompt them to explore themselves and then validate their decisions." He said he chose pastoral counseling to learn how to apply clinical skills to faith, which he believes is the foundation of counseling.

The curriculum at seminaries lasts four to five years and is primarily focused on theology and philosophy, but includes a few courses in pastoral care, said Theresa Witcher of the Vocations Office. The seminarians receive hands-on counseling training during their practicum and gain experience in their associate pastoral role after graduation.

Bishop Slattery said seminarians are encouraged to pursue all the counseling education and experience they can, as it prepares them for the diverse life issues they will encounter as priests and confessors. But, he added that "counseling is just a word with many nuances."

In reality, it is simply the process of two people connecting and communicating in a way that enhances their relationship. "We are part of a culture that is highly mechanized," Bishop said. "We have become overly intellectual and willful and have forgotten that we all have feelings and emotions." He said this is evident in the outbursts of violence documented in the media. He thinks people need to relearn the skill of human interaction.

Bishop Slattery said that where people used to say "you're welcome," the phrase is now "no problem."

"Life is not full of problems but exchanges, communication, affection, mistakes, forgiveness." All are part of the richness of being human, he said.

Counseling is still close to the Bishop's heart, and he said he tries to incorporate active listening and reflection in all his interactions. One of his most cherished perspectives is "unconditional positive regard." This phrase is discussed in many settings be they academic, clinical, pastoral or casual.

The term means that a person holds a positive view of someone

despite what he or she might have said, done or thought. "I accept you regardless of what's inside of you; the baggage you carry does not affect my positive regard for you."

The most important, yet often most difficult, component of unconditional positive regard is to hold it for oneself. The Bishop said that through prayer life people are able to meditate on what they bring to human interaction.

"You should ask yourself, 'why do I think this way?' or 'why do I react this way?' Being able to deal with the shadowy areas within us is powerful yet can carry great risk. It takes courage to know yourself and accept yourself - the good and the bad."

The most important element of any counseling situation was echoed by all the priests contacted: "Know your limits, and don't go beyond them."

Father Ken Harder, pastor of St. Francis Xavier Church in Stillwater, has degrees in mechanical engineering, not counseling. He said he sees the priest's role as a gatekeeper who helps people he is able and qualified to help; people with more complex and multi-dimensional issues should be referred to a professional.

"Every priest has his own area of expertise. You use the tools you have to provide the strongest and most effective support," Father Harder said. "We are called by God and have a job to do, but we're also just people with strengths and limitations."

## Healing is at the heart of Rachel's Vineyard retreats

Scripture says God always forgives, but Mary Lee Ingram, director of adoption services for Catholic Charities, said women who have had abortions often can't forgive themselves and need emotional and spiritual healing.

To foster the process of healing and acceptance, Catholic Charities offers Rachel's Vineyard retreats for any person struggling with the emotional or spiritual pain of abortion. The retreat is based on Catholicism but is open to, and welcomes, individuals from all denominations.

The weekend is designed for 12 participants beginning on a Friday evening and lasting through Sunday afternoon. The program is based on Scripture and allows women to share their life stories, read through Scripture - placing themselves in the biblical roles - and participate in activities designed to

engage all the senses in the healing process.

"Many participants say they have buried their pain so deep that they have layers of numbness," said Mrs. Ingram. "When they enter into this setting, each experience helps them break through those layers in a supportive, caring way."

Retreats are led by teams of licensed therapists, priests and previous retreat attendants. At the end of the retreat, many participants ask "what do I do from here?" Mrs. Ingram said some return to church, where they haven't been in years; others receive ongoing spiritual direction or, if not already in counseling, accept referrals to licensed professionals who are familiar with the post-abortion healing process.

Available follow-up care is a vital part of the ministry. Donna Mancini has worked with women who have had abortions at St.

Elizabeth Lodge, where she is director, in addition to other retreat-style settings. "When people uncover wounds, follow-up care is important," she said. "You don't want to leave someone in a fragile or unstable place."

Mrs. Mancini said she witnessed many tenants at the lodge transform through individual and group counseling and start to feel safe sharing their pasts. "The women realized they could talk about personal issues such as prior abortions and know they were not judged - only loved."

Faith Boudreau, a licensed clinical social worker and counselor at Monte Cassino Middle School, is familiar with Rachel's Vineyard and plans to be part of the retreat team in 2007.

Mrs. Boudreau co-presented a session on psychodramatic techniques at the Zarrow Mood Disorder Symposium held in late

September. Such techniques often involve role-playing, writing in journals and group disclosure, methods that can help individuals revisit and cope with past traumatic events.

Rachel's Vineyard is centered on the concept that all who ask forgiveness shall receive it, and the brochure includes this statement from Mother Teresa of Calcutta:

"Jesus Himself said that He came to call sinners and not the self-righteous. I pray that all who participate in Rachel's Vineyard with the longing to be free and to be healed by Jesus, may find Him, the source of true joy, peace and love, and allow God to restore them to wholeness and happiness. I am praying much for you."

A Rachel's Vineyard retreat was scheduled for Oct. 27-29.

Catholic Charities is now scheduling retreats for 2007.