



DIOCESE OF FORT WAYNE-SOUTH BEND

915 South Clinton Street • Post Office Box 390

Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801

May 15, 2025

Dear Pastors, Principals, and Parochial Vicars,

10 years ago, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) released *Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography Use*. My fellow bishops intended to provide hope and healing to those harmed by pornography and also raise awareness concerning pornography's pervasiveness and harms. *Create in Me a Clean Heart* was addressed not only to clergy, diocesan and parish leaders, but also, and perhaps most especially, to parents of our school aged children who are victimized by pornography through the use of a digital medium.

As technology advances, and we enter the world of artificial intelligence with an ever-increasing reliance on cell phones and the internet, I am reminded of Pope Leo XIV's recent reminder that this digital and artificial world creates a number of challenges to human dignity. At the same time, this digital and artificial world has the potential of elevating the human spirit and bringing us closer together as God intends if these technological tools are used correctly.

Consistent with the concerns raised in *Create in Me a Clean Heart*, there are increasing reports in our schools concerning the linkage between the internet and pornography. This phenomenon requires ongoing review of not only the educational and pastoral tools used in our schools, primarily grounded in Saint Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, but also requires ongoing review of Diocesan and school policy regarding instances when pornography, and especially child pornography, is knowingly spread, in any fashion, by our students. Pornography of any kind is harmful. However, the harm to our school aged children who are victimized by pornography is potentially devastating, and even life threatening.

It is not a coincidence the Indiana legislature recently adopted a statutory framework addressing "revenge pornography", defined as the distribution of an intimate image that depicts sexual conduct of an individual where such image has been taken, captured, created, disseminated or recorded by a person who knows, or reasonably should know, that the individual depicted in the intimate image does not consent to either the production, possession or distribution of the intimate image. Our State Supreme Court in *State v. Katz* correctly observed that in the modern age of social media, when anyone with a phone can instantaneously publish images worldwide, creates new potential harms unimaginable a generation ago.

Indiana's criminal code imposes either a Class A Misdemeanor or Level 5 or 6 Felony for violation of our state's laws dealing with obscenity, pornography, revenge pornography and "sexting". While violations of our criminal code distinguish between those tried as juveniles and those tried as adults, the severity of many of the crimes also turns on whether obscene, inappropriate

or pornographic materials or images contain photos, images or videos of children under the age of 18. Incarceration and monetary fines are a result of these crimes. This is not just a pastoral matter for the well-being of our young people, but also a criminal issue within our society that carries with it potentially severe penalties. I believe our disciplinary framework should reflect the seriousness of this type of criminal behavior that strikes at the very essence of the dignity of our young people.

Diocesan Educational Policies which are in effect for our schools often link the consequences of expulsion with certain conduct or criminal acts, but particularly those acts which may be deemed criminal in nature and which involve serious and grave harm to our minor children. Existing policies govern the appropriate use of the internet and its relationship to the creation, possession and distribution of obscene or pornographic material. Moving forward, I believe that certain violations of existing policy should be reviewed at the Diocesan level. I further believe it is necessary to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to knowing or intentional violations of policy involving the creation, distribution, possession, dissemination or recording of pornographic images, photos or videos of children under 18 years of age.

Policy P1010 of the Diocesan Educational Policies reserves to me, at any time, to add, rescind or modify existing school policy at any time. I have determined it necessary to do so now. Effective immediately, it shall be the policy of this Diocese, for all of our schools, both elementary schools and high schools that:

1. Knowingly or intentionally sending, displaying, possessing, accessing, uploading, downloading or distributing immoral, pornographic, obscene or sexually explicit materials, messages or pictures of individuals under the age of 18 through the use of written material, the internet, digital or "PDA" device, cellular telephone or through the use of an artificial intelligence medium will be deemed a violation of the Diocesan Educational Policies.
2. A violation in #1 above shall be deemed to occur whether the impermissible conduct occurs on school grounds or is found to have occurred off campus.
3. A principal having belief that a violation of #1 has occurred shall immediately report such violation to the Indiana Department of Childhood Services and/or local law enforcement.
4. A principal having belief that a violation of #1 has occurred shall immediately report such violation, together with any findings, to the Superintendent of Schools who, in turn, shall report such incident to the Vicar General who will relay the information to the Bishop.
5. The Bishop may then choose to seek the advice of the Diocesan Review Board, a consultative board which assists the Bishop regarding claims of sexual abuse. If a determination and finding is made that a knowing or intentional violation of #1 has occurred, the student shall be expelled from school with no right of re-entry. If a determination is made that the facts do not support a knowing or intentional violation of #1, the Bishop, in consultation with the school principal and pastor (as applicable), shall determine the consequence, if any, as provided in the Diocesan Education Policies.
6. The determination of expulsion or other discipline pursuant to #5 above shall be final and not subject to any appeal.

I have directed our Diocesan legal counsel to make the above policy statement available to the county prosecutors in St. Joseph and Allen counties to let them know of the seriousness our Diocese is treating this issue. Legal counsel will also request attention be given to any police investigative report filed with the prosecutor's office involving a potential violation within our

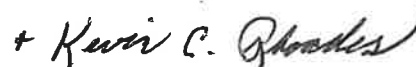
schools of Indiana's criminal statutes involving obscenity, pornography, revenge pornography and sexting. To the extent it becomes necessary to reach out to other county prosecutors in the Diocese where our elementary schools are located, outside of St. Joseph and Allen counties, we will do so.

As we now approach the end of the 2024-2025 school year, I will direct our Diocesan School Board, in consultation with our Catholic Schools Office, to recommend other modifications to existing Diocesan Educational Policies, and review individual elementary school policies and high school policies themselves, to assure uniformity, integration and compliance with the promulgated policy statements above. This work will be completed prior to the start of the 2025-2026 school year and will be distributed to all parents and students. Until then, should the above policy statements in #1-#6 conflict with any individual school policy or other provisions of our Diocesan Education Policies, the above policy statements in #1-#6 shall control.

I direct all pastors of our elementary schools and principals of our high schools to notify the parents and students of your schools and your respective faculty, staff members and school boards of this policy. I also ask that all schools work with the Catholic Schools Office on maintaining the practice of notifying both parent and student alike of the existence of Diocesan Education Policies and individual school policies at the beginning of each new year to assure continual and consistent messaging of all applicable policies.

The foregoing policy has the unanimous support of the Diocesan Review Board and the Catholic Schools Office. In no way is it intended to be punitive. Rather, it is intended to protect the well-being of our children and, as contemplated by *Create in Me a Clean Heart*, serve as a reminder to our students, their parents, school administrators, school faculty and our clergy that there is certain conduct so egregious, so palpably harmful, so potentially hurtful and even life threatening, that it has no place in our schools, our homes or anywhere in a world in which we all are to strive to be more Christ like in our treatment of each other.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kevin C. Rhoades". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

KCR/jg

cc: Diocesan School Board Members
Diocesan Review Board Members
Superintendent, Catholic Schools Office