News



by Jenn Morson

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The president of Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, announced Aug. 31 a new initiative aimed at better addressing sexual assault and abuse.

He also announced a review of university records by a law firm specializing in compliance with Title IX, the federal guidelines that govern how colleges and universities handle sexual assault cases.

The announcement came in an email blast to alumni and current students. The email provided links to the new initiative, Integrity and Truth, which is hosted on the university's official website (although there is no link from the university home page to the initiative webpages, which carry the headline, "Franciscan University Continues Strong Stance Against Sexual Abuse."

Franciscan Fr. Sean Sheridan, president of the private Catholic university in Steubenville, Ohio, also announced an external review of Franciscan's records by Husch Blackwell LLP, a law firm specializing in Title IX compliance.

"It is my belief that we have an obligation to determine if Franciscan University has complied with the applicable legal and reporting requirements when allegations of

sexual abuse have been made in the past," Sheridan said. According to the website, the Board of Trustees will receive a report from Husch Blackwell in January 2019.

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This new web page features video and text of Sheridan's Aug. 27 homily at the Mass to open the 2018-19 school year, also the Feast of St. Monica, where he spent considerable time addressing the sex abuse crisis in the church.

He said that Franciscan University strives for greatness but acknowledged that it is made up of flawed individuals like any other institution.

Sheridan offered apologies not only for any sexual abuse or violence suffered at the hands of the Franciscan University family, but also for any failure in handling these situations. "I also apologize for any way that we have failed to protect you or have not taken seriously any concerns you have voiced, and I again ask your forgiveness," he said.

Learn more about sexual assault on campus by following #DisHonorRoll.



In Sheridan's letter is contact information for the Steubenville police, Franciscan University's own Title IX/EEO Coordinator, John Pizzuti, and a link to EthicsPoint where anonymous complaints can be filed. A separate link to making a report is also hosted on the page.

Additionally, hyperlinks to Franciscan University's other policies related to sexual misconduct, protection of minors, whistleblowers, as well as requirements for external clerics are included on this new page. Employee conduct policies are also linked.

A campus-wide holy hour is being offered for victims of sexual abuse and violence, while special Masses are being said for reconciliation and reparation in light of the Pennsylvania grand jury report and other reports of sexual abuse within the church.

In April, National Catholic Reporter published "Alumnae Question Franciscan University's Commitment to Title IX." In response to that article, Franciscan University assured Catholic News Agency that they were in alignment with Title IX requirements, and according to Vice President of Student Life, David Schmiesing, "While many schools provide Title IX training that meets requirements, here, we hold our students to a higher standard."

[Jenn Morson is a freelance writer living and working outside of Washington, D.C.]