

Pat Mudd, the Victims Assistance Coordinator for the Diocese of Arlington, asked me if I would be willing to share my experience as a victim of child sexual abuse by a member of the clergy. Because I have a difficult time saying “no” to someone who has been so helpful to me, I agreed.

When I was nine years old I was sexually abused by a priest I did not know, for reasons which I will never understand. It was a secret I kept from my family, and successfully hid from myself, for many years.

I spent my twenties rejecting God, his church, and all things good. It was my decade of death, and I made the most of it. My thirties were spent pregnant, raising children, and returning to the church. My desire for Baptism for my babies brought me back. In my forties, it was time to accept what happened and address it in a way that was not self-destructive. Eight years ago I started counseling and spent most of that time crying. I stopped counseling for several years during a time of family crisis. Four years ago I started counseling again, with a different doctor, because I was having panic attacks, always associated with the fear of being trapped. Driving in traffic was difficult, elevators were avoided and riding the subway was impossible. I had to sit on the aisle in a movie theater and at the end of the pew in church. Every place I went, I always had to have an escape plan. This was not living.

Two years ago, my healing began in the most unexpected way. There was a newspaper article about Bishop Thomas Gumbleton who admitted that he had been abused as a teenager by a priest. I cannot put into words what a powerful impact that article had on me. I admired him for his courage, and envied him at the same time. When you live in fear, courage is what you desire most.

After talking with my doctor, I decided to begin the process of reporting the abuse, which occurred in a different diocese. I attended a Mass for victims of abuse, met with Pat Mudd several times, wrote to Bishop Gumbleton to thank him for his example, attended support group meetings offered by the Arlington diocese, and met with Bishop Loverde. It was during this meeting, when I was able to tell the Bishop what happened, how it affected my life, and express my rage at the abuser and the hierarchy that protected men like him, that I felt most courageous. I was fighting back, something I wasn't able to do when I was nine.

Where am I now? I'm on my way to being well, but not there yet. I still avoid some situations where I might feel trapped, more out of habit than fear. I feel for those

whose abuse was much worse than mine, and I pray for them. I have absolutely no tolerance for people who deny the enormity of this problem. I am very grateful that Bishop Loverde was willing to meet with me and I am indebted to Pat for her compassion and understanding. I consider myself fortunate to have found a kind and competent doctor. I am thankful for my friends, the few who know and the rest who don't, because they are always there for me. I know I am not capable of forgiving that priest on my own, but I'm starting to think about possibly, maybe, asking God for his help with this.

Most of all, I am grateful for my husband, because those who live with victims of abuse suffer as well. Without knowing why, my husband had to live through my many difficult stages. Every decade was like being married to a different woman, none the one he chose. When it comes to spouses sanctifying one another through marriage, in this regard, I have over-achieved!

You may be wondering – who am I? I'm the survivor of abuse, sitting next to you, in the middle of the pew.