

One Telephone Call

I first spoke to Pat Mudd the Monday after our Holy Father, John Paul II, had died. Seeking a service for him, I came upon a section of the Diocese of Arlington's website that mentioned a Victims Assistance Coordinator. "Window dressing," I scoffed, thinking of my vain attempts over the years to work with another diocese, the diocese of my childhood. A year later, I would look back and chuckle, recalling a grade school nun carefully enunciating, "It's the unconfirmed saints who make the great miracles." John Paul the Great is not yet a saint, but a year after I first began to talk to Pat, and through her to Fr. Mark Mealey, and through them to Bishop Loverde, I would see a miracle his death brought to my life.

My first call to Pat was not so upbeat. I asked something pointed about the dressing of windows. I know I said I had no idea why I was calling. Pat was prepared. The diocese could offer a list of skilled therapists, some Catholic and others not. She had a list, also, of several types of other support – spiritual guidance from specially trained priests, a therapeutic support group, a non-therapeutic support group, Masses offered for my healing, prayer services offered if I no longer felt comfortable at Masses with priests, assistance speaking with the diocese of my childhood, meetings with her, meetings with Fr. Mealey, or a meeting with the Bishop. If this was window-dressing, it sure was a crowded window.

For several months I would tentatively agree to attend a Mass or prayer service and there finally to meet Pat, but I would just as routinely find a reason not to go. What was the point? I had failed to inspire change in my childhood diocese, when all I cared about was ensuring children were safe from what had happened to me and to far too many friends from my youth. I was prepared to tend my personal burden alone. What could a prayer service or Mass do for me that a good rosary couldn't? Later, when I did attend the prayer services and Masses, I heard the diocese had trained tens of thousands of adults to protect children. A ghost that had haunted me for years began to recede.

I was, before Pat coaxed me into dialog with her, jaded. Besides a futile prior effort with the Church, I had "done my time" in therapy with well-meaning counselors and had successfully, not without some effort, avoided the pressures there and elsewhere to sue the Church, which for reasons of my own did not seem a prudent course for me. I had devoured published works, which offered the most cutting-edge help through the years as a helpful crutch, yet it could so easily have become an identity; when victims cannot find enough safety in faith settings to renew a relationship with God what alternatives do they have? Central as it was, the therapeutically sound literature, however, never supported my desire to remain Catholic. My healing and my Catholicism ran in parallel, seemingly irreconcilable tracks.

In the end, what saved me was surviving two serious physical illnesses, just barely in the second instance; recovery followed a terrible struggle during which every day I woke to lean entirely on Christ and to manage each day with sometimes terribly flawed and often comical results. Surviving those heart-breaking months was a miracle itself, and what I

gained was a sense I had been given life anew. It left me giddy, gleeful to have even a life hobbled by wounds. But I had been taught something far more central to my Catholic journey by heroes I had met who suffered from illnesses similar to mine and whose struggle with the effects would be difficult and lifelong. The message of their example said something to me that the Church was not yet saying to survivors of sexual abuse by priests. Being ill, or wounded, can render us uniquely kind and aware, reveal our heroism as much as our weaknesses, and cultivate in us a defining thirst for justice and, sometimes, an absolutely steadfast in devotion to Christ. Our suffering can make us particularly good friends, neighbors, siblings, children, spouses, colleagues, role models and community leaders.

So, what was the problem? You may wonder why I called Pat at all. I wondered the same thing, but I still dialed the phone.

It was not as if, the day I called her, I had any doubt I was Catholic. The road had been circular and confused, admittedly. For long periods I would attend Mass and savor the faith of my mother and my father, of my grandmother, of history itself. Then, exhausted from the spiritual grief I felt every time I walked into a church and saw a priest, or a child, I would for months actively endeavor to leave the Church – to become any other kind of Christian. Maybe even a Buddhist. If the welcome and kindness I found in these other communities had been enough, I would have stayed. Yet, I kept trudging home.

Sometimes I returned when I found a gentle priest in the pulpit whose understanding of the scorched heart made him safe – from afar. Other times, my return involved reading or observing some spiritually fulfilled Catholic. Sometimes my return could bring me no further than to drive by a church on Sunday because I could not bring myself to enter for Mass. Or, it meant I attended daily Mass but could not endure what felt like a throng of unknowing on Sundays; was I sure children were not being abused in the back corridors – or, as I had been, in the confessional? Sometimes, the best I could do in a week was keep sweet company with the Eucharist in the silence of adoration. Sometimes, seeking safety in anonymity, I drove to attend the earliest and most unpopulated Masses in different churches on Sundays. No matter how backwards or sideways, I returned home because the ache in my heart knew my spiritual journey had only one destination despite all the tangents I was trying, only one resting place, only one truth despite all the lies that comprise and then follow the experience of child sexual abuse, only one answer for all the confusion and struggle, only one true love – and that was the Eucharist.

The reason I called Pat remains a mystery. The result is clear. Now, I am deeply grateful to Bishop Loverde for choosing Pat, an experienced social worker, to be sitting by the phone the Monday after John Paul II died. I am grateful to the Bishop, and to Fr. Mealey, for their steadfast charity toward all, not just toward the people who fit a mold that makes it easy to offer care, but also toward marginalized survivors who have had to endure not only childhood horrors but also shocking misrepresentations by news media and voyeuristic television shows, misinformed speakers and poorly trained therapists with false agenda, weak courts and uninspired legislatures, as well as disgruntled therapists,

colleagues, friends – even former spouses in divorce proceedings and annulments claiming they got stuck with damaged goods.

The social momentum for misconception about us survivors is the same as any false view of the meaning of suffering. By contrast, the Bishop, Fr. Mealey, and Fr. Terry Specht are leading good and holy priests to be *the* antidotes to the evildoing of predators who hide in priests' clothing, offending the holy Roman collar while breaking hearts and spirits of children entrusted to them. A good and holy priest is dedicated to finding the broken hearted, which is the humble offering God prefers to any burnt sacrifice. It was Fr. Mealey who first reminded me that my suffering was, indeed, redemptive; I had never heard my past cast in such esteem, offering a chance for joy and hope. It was both Fr. Mealey and Bishop Loverde who pointedly assert, service after service, again and again, what most of the world otherwise denies. I can hear their voices now assuring me that we survivors are not to blame, that we are innocent of this crime. I did not think I really cared enough to need to hear this, yet to be a survivor and to hear this truth spoken by holy priests and to be able with time to internalize what they say is to be restored.

I do not know why I called Pat Mudd, but I do know that because I did I can witness this truth: In our Bishop and bishops like him, and in Fr. Mealey and priests like him, and in Pat Mudd and laypersons like her, the Catholic Church lives its right leadership as fearless witness to injustice – and as messenger of hope – for yet another group of society's pariah whose suffering has meaning and whose hope is indeed found in the healing graces of Christ. To live in this diocese is proving to be a matter of joyful identity – and conviction.

A Survivor in Arlington