

A Path to Healing

The Story of a Victim of Clergy Sexual Abuse

Joe was 11 years old when he was sexually abused by a priest in another diocese in 1957. Forty-eight years later, Joe sat with his wife, Maggie, in the back row of a small day chapel in a quiet church. They sat side-by-side, not holding hands, but the sense of support that Maggie lent Joe was palpable.

In a quiet but clear voice, Joe related the real-life nightmare of being a child victim of clergy sexual abuse.

By GRETCHEN R. CROWE
HERALD Editorial Assistant

"For quite a long time I stewed about it," said Joe, (not his real name). "I'm not going to mention the (priest's) name. It was quite a search to find him."

Joe's investigation led him to the bishop who had been in charge of the priest at the time Joe had been abused. Joe emphasized his caution in making an accusation.

"I wanted to be very careful it was the same person," he said. "I found the bishop to be extremely understanding."

Joe and Maggie said the priest had already been suspended for other allegations, but that no charges were pressed. The offending priest was not defrocked, but was taken out of active ministry. In Joe's case, the statute of limitations had passed.

Though Joe was unable to take legal action, his search opened the door to the path of healing. He attended counseling and, when the Arlington Diocese, under the supervision of Victim Assistance Coordinator Pat Mudd, scheduled regular Masses to pray for the victims of sexual abuse, Joe and his wife attended the first one at Arlington's Cathedral of St. Thomas More in June. Joe said the healing Masses were a "tremendously good idea" and "very thoughtful on the part of the bishop."

It was at this Mass at the cathedral where Joe and his wife first met Mudd. They had seen an article in the HERALD about her ministry, so they picked up her card at the Mass

and met with her later. Mudd suggested that Joe and his wife talk directly with Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde.

Joe was quick to give the bishop credit for donating his full time, attention and energy to Joe and Maggie as they spoke.

"For that hour and 45 minutes, there was nothing else going on in that bishop's world but me and Maggie," Joe said. "I think one of the messages that has to get out is that he is a very kind and compassionate man. I think he could help anybody. He's sincere. He's one of the good guys."

Joe said that meeting with the bishop can be a valuable resource for victims. And, because victims react to child sexual abuse in a variety of ways, different methods to promote healing must be offered, he added.

"Each one of us has our own story, our own approach, our own way of dealing with it," he said. "The hardest thing is coming forward. The hardest thing is saying here I am, this happened. Everyone has a degree of guilt — (of thinking) this is my fault, I made this happen. You've got people on a spectrum that remember it like it was yesterday and people over here who have repressed it. Each one of us is different, so the process has to be somewhat different."

In Joe's case, he repressed the sexual abuse for almost 40 years, telling no one, including his wife of 22 years, before he decided to take an active role toward healing. Joe discovered that the key to his healing was in using his negative experiences to generate positive experiences for others.

"In my case, there was a decision to

be made: whether I would stay a victim, or whether I would become a survivor," Joe said. "(I asked myself) what do you do with (this experience) for the good? How do you help other people who might be going through what I am living with — what I will live with until the day that I die?"

Joe said that for his survival, he needs to help the people who are searching for a way out of the pain.

"Others deal with it differently, but for me, this seems to be working," he said.

The biggest piece of advice Joe can offer victims is to open up to someone who will just listen.

"It did get a little better when I talked to somebody — somebody who truly listened to me," he said, nodding gently toward his wife. "You gotta come forward ... talk to somebody you can trust. The longer you let it sit and fester, the worse it gets, the worse the behavior gets, the worse the destruction is."

Mudd said she understands how difficult coming forward can be for victims of sexual abuse.

"It's hard to make that first call — that first contact," she said. "I try to make that as easy as possible. It can be very emotional. Certainly many of them are very angry and have been through a difficult experience, and it's not easy to get through. Sometimes I see the tears. It's an important step they take."

Joe and Maggie said that one of the best ways of communicating is through support groups — which Mudd is currently trying to implement in the diocese.

"One of the most powerful experiences I've ever had was in a support group with six other people," Joe said. "That was the first time I was in the presence of other victims — of other survivors. Some were doing something with it. Some weren't. But at least there was a bond. It's great to just be among other people who can say 'I understand.'"

Mudd said that she hopes to organize a conference or a retreat for victims, in addition to the ongoing initiative of victim support groups, and a prayer service in addition to the healing Masses.

Joe and Mudd both emphasized that the healing process is a continual journey.

"I hear from victims what kind of ongoing process this is — over a lifetime," Mudd said. "I think people can go along pretty well and something happens that triggers it again."

"For some it's more painful than others," Joe said. But "at least you're doing something about it. You're taking some control. That's important."

Mass to Pray for the Healing of Victims of Sexual Abuse

May 9, 7 pm

Sacred Heart Church, 120 Keating Dr., Winchester.
Bishop Loverde to preside.

June 14, 7 pm

St. Anthony Church, 3305 Glen Carlyn Rd., Falls Church.
Bishop Loverde to preside.

September 24, 11 am

St. Elizabeth, 12 Lossing Avenue, Colonial Beach.
Bishop Loverde to preside.

October 13, 7:30 pm

St. Francis de Sales, 37730 St. Francis Court, Purcellville.
Rev. Patrick Posey to preside.

November 7, 7:30 pm

Our Lady of Good Counsel, 8601 Wolf Trap Road, Vienna.
Bishop Loverde to preside.

Reception to follow all Masses

For information call Pat Mudd, Victim Assistance Coordinator, at 703.841.2530.

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