



Elements of Healing

By Michael Hoffman

Editor's Note: The VIRTUS Programs recognizes the great importance of listening to survivors of sexual abuse. Because people who have been abused have courageously come forward to share their stories, it assists us in our efforts to learning more about how to help prevent sexual abuse from occurring as well as how to address it appropriately. We offer our sincere appreciation for all survivors who have come forward to share their stories and recognize their role in helping to foster healing and prevention in our church. This article was written by a survivor about his own experience and how caring adults can work together to prevent abuse.

Preview:

All good childhoods should include safe environments where children can flourish and grow the way God intended.

Article:

I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse by clergy. I kept my story a secret for over 30 years before I had the courage to speak about it. My efforts to find healing and hope from underneath devastating pain and sadness involved many people, and were intertwined with the same Church that allowed my abuser to remain in ministry. I'd like to take the time to articulate the elements that have come together to help me with my healing journey, with the hope that you might be able to assist someone with theirs.

Many might find it to be surprising that I feel gratitude toward that same Church, and, to the Archdiocese. I am grateful to the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office of Assistance Ministry for offering survivor outreach services. Additionally, I am grateful to the Cardinals and leadership of my archdiocese for their courage and examples of listening to the voices of abuse survivors like me, and many others. These are the elements that have made a tremendous difference in the recovery process for me, and other survivors.

On September 15, 2012, surrounded by my family and parents, I attended the Archdiocese's annual Mass for Hope and Healing for the first time. Cardinal Francis George celebrated this Liturgy. The two Scripture readings were about the despair and isolation felt by a person in exile in the *Book of Lamentations* and, the comfort of God's mercy in the Beatitudes—all sentiments that many survivors experience.

In his homily, Cardinal George spoke about the need for balance and integrity in every human life, saying that *"Victims of clerical sexual abuse, often years or decades after*



the abuse occurred, talk as though they put that experience in a box and closed it off from the rest of their lives. But they must open the box to live fully integrated lives.” He also spoke about priests who have abused children and youth, and how they often attempted to compartmentalize their lives by continuing to still engage in positive actions.¹

I will never forget sitting there, listening to the Cardinal, thinking to myself that he was really “putting himself out there” and taking a risk, especially as he referred to his brother priests. It made me happy to know a Church leader was saying such right and appropriate comments, even though it may have been personally difficult to do for a man in his position.

I thought to myself, if he can take a risk by speaking about healing from abuse, then maybe, just maybe, I can do the same. And, so, I did—and I haven’t stopped telling my story since then, for myself, and for others. Church leadership can have a tremendous impact on the survivor—how they listen, how they react, what canonical processes are trigger, how they allocate resources, and what services they provide.

Family and friends can also have an integral part in the healing process. I have described my wife’s reaction to my childhood experience in a previous article,² which was a pivotal moment in my recovery. Despite my fears to the contrary, she responded to me with compassion, love and understanding.

My parents also responded in a way conducive to helping me along my journey. It took me years of counseling in adulthood to finally tell them their boy was abused by their close priest friend. When I did this, we cried, and we cried, and we cried until we couldn’t cry anymore. Reflecting back on the experience, we were able to reconcile ourselves to the truth, that the difficulties we experienced in our family back at that time were the result of the cumulative effects of one man’s manipulation and grooming upon myself and our family as a whole. Coming to terms with our past took heroic personal courage for me and my parents. The effort, as we move forward together, has brought joy, laughter and fond memories back to our family over time. I asked my parents how they felt as I began to tell my story to others, since part of my story talks about theirs, too. Very directly they said to me, they hoped that speaking about our painful family story would be an example of healing, faith and forgiveness to others. They are my inspiration every day.

The effects of the successful Church outreach to victims in my Archdiocese and the response of my family and of those surrounding me, and the reconciliation of my family history has all brought healing and peace to my heart. The combination of these healing elements has helped me be able to live a more fulfilling life.

¹ Homily by Cardinal Francis George. September 15, 2012. Annual Mass for Hope and Healing, Holy Family Church, Chicago, IL.

² Hoffman, Michael. (2021). Gratitude from an Active Catholic and a Survivor. Published via the VIRTUS Programs.



All good childhoods should include safe environments where children can flourish and grow the way God intended. This includes environments where all adults are trained to understand the warning signs of inappropriate behavior adults exhibit, complete screening processes, monitor all environments, are attentive to children and youth and communicate when they have concerns. I didn't have the opportunity to thrive in a safe environment as a child because of my abuser, who took so much from me. In spite of it all, I have never allowed his memory to interrupt my Faith, which cannot be said for all survivors. With the work of so many people—my family, my friends, and many priests who have walked with me on my healing journey—I have been able to reclaim what was lost to the truth of the abuse. It is my hope and prayer other survivors of childhood sexual abuse across the world, no matter who committed the crime, may heal over time and eventually flourish—and that you have the courage to be a part of that process. Hopefully, with God's Grace and your help, they may regain the laughter, joy and the innocence due to children.

I also want to express my gratitude to you for being open to the voices of abuse survivors and for everything you do to protect children, youth and the vulnerable from harm within your programs, ministries and communities.