

# The Clergy Abuse Crisis: DIDN'T WE FIX THIS?

*A look at the progress the Church has made — and where we go from here*

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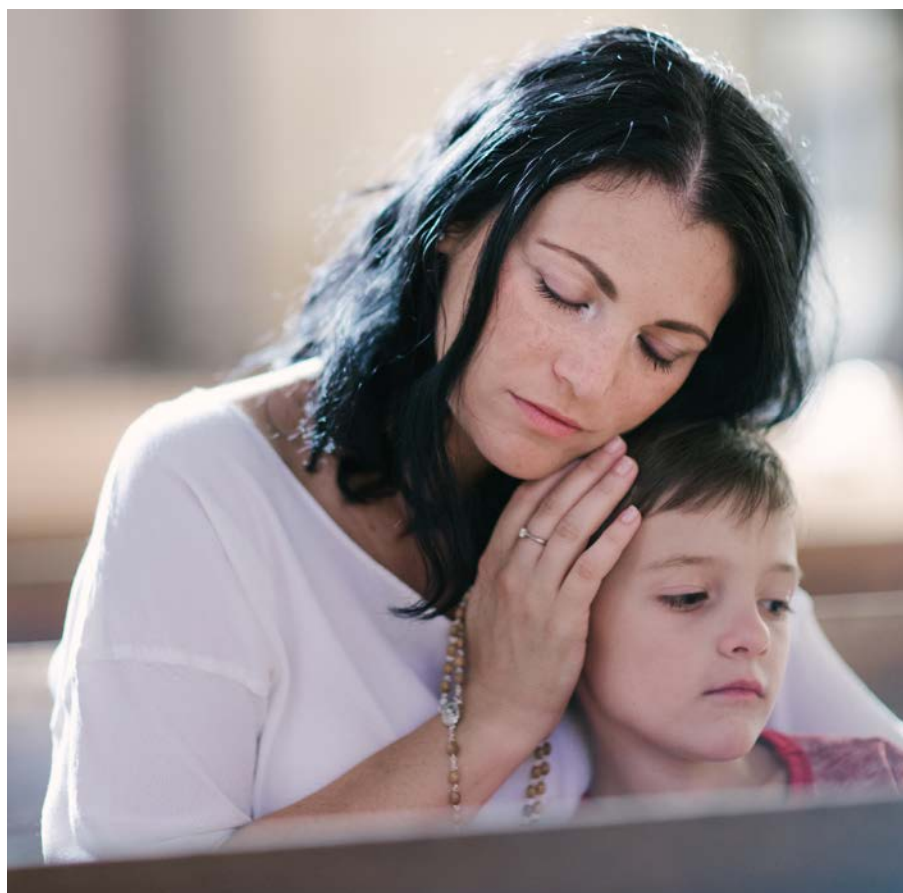
**By Msgr. Stephen J. Rossetti**

In 2002, the bishops of the United States adopted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which has become known as the Dallas Charter. I was privileged to assist their ad hoc committee in its drafting. After excruciating months of wilting media coverage, they adopted a series of strong child protection steps: mandatory reporting, zero toler-

ance, background checks and mandatory child-safe education. They also committed their dioceses to having a victim assistance coordinator, safe environment coordinator and an expert review board with prominent lay membership.

Since then, allegations of abuse of a minor in the Catholic Church in the United States are reported to the civil authorities. Any person, including a priest, known

to have abused a minor will never minister again in the Catholic Church. All clergy, as well as any person who works with minors, is subject to a background check and must receive safe environment training. Church leaders have a group of lay experts to help them deal with cases. Victims have a dedicated person to contact, most often a female social worker, to be their advocate and to shepherd them through the



healing process.

### Is It Working?

Did the Dallas Charter work? The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Child and Youth Protection informed me that, since 2003, 4 million children and 2 million adults have gone through the Church's safe environment training program. I just returned from my annual priest convocation in Syracuse, New York, where a roomful of priests and deacons received the updated child-safe training. Anywhere in the United States, if you ask assembled priests if they have received the safe environment training, every hand will go up.

Since 2002, criminal background checks are accomplished on every seminarian, priest and also every layperson who works with minors. I recently asked a couple of seminarians if they went through such a check. They both nodded. I asked, "Were you fingerprinted?" Again, they both nodded, and one said he had

been fingerprinted three times.

The USCCB's Office for Child and Youth Protection also noted that, since 2004, the Catholic Church in the United States has spent \$400 million on child protection. Last year alone, the Church spent nearly \$35 million. This is not including legal fees, civil suits and the like. It is money spent solely on education and prevention of child abuse.

Moreover, allegations indeed are being reported to civil authorities, and anyone with a substantiated allegation of child sexual abuse is removed from ministry for life. The Pennsylvania grand jury report is proof of the point: 44 percent of the priests mentioned in the report were dead, and all the living priests with substantiated allegations had been dismissed from ministry. What the grand jury gave us was a long list of dead and defrocked priests. The U.S. bishops pledged themselves to zero tolerance, and they fulfilled it.

Most important, today's data clearly show that incidence of child sexual

abuse in the Catholic Church in the United States has plummeted, starting in the mid-1980s when the Church began dealing with this issue. The John Jay "Nature and Scope" study found that about 4 percent of clergy had sexually abused minors from 1950 to 2002. This number reportedly has dropped to less than 1 percent. Similarly, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University published statistics of alleged offenses by Catholic clergy. CARA noted that this chart is not likely to shift significantly with the passage of time, despite the typical delay of victims in reporting (see Page 28).

Commenting on this plunge in allegations, CARA said, "incidence of abuse today is rare."

Data show that the child-protection efforts of the Catholic Church are working. We must continue to promote and improve these efforts. Given the recent searing public criticism, it would be easy to give up and say, "What's the use?" In truth, education and prevention do work. But our goal is not just zero tolerance, but also zero abuse. Until every minor is safe, our work remains incomplete.

### A Frozen Narrative

Today's public conversation is stuck in a frozen narrative. The pervasive feeling that the bishops have done nothing about child sexual abuse and simply cover it up and move abusers from parish to parish no longer is true. It is disheartening for the thousands of child-safe environment workers in the Church to have their efforts all but ignored in the public forum.

I recently agonized with a newly appointed bishop who is trying to do the right thing in child protection. He realized that whatever he does, it will be criticized and cast in a negative light. He looked at me and said in so many words, "I can't win."

Our first thought might be, "This is not fair!" But whenever I hear such things, the voice of my saintly mother rings in my

ears: “Life is not fair.” Every public figure knows that they are first tried in the media, and such hearings very often are not fair. Politicians have to toughen their skin when they enter the public arena. So must Church leaders — bishops and priests alike.

Shortly after the 2002 crisis, I was given the privilege of addressing the 300-plus assembled bishops of the United States. I reflected much and prayed intensely about what I would say. I mentioned a number of things, but my central point was this: “Do not try to craft a policy in order to win public approval. You are unlikely to get it. Rather, do what is right because it is right, and let the chips fall where they may.” It seems those words were inspired by the Spirit. They certainly are applicable today as well.

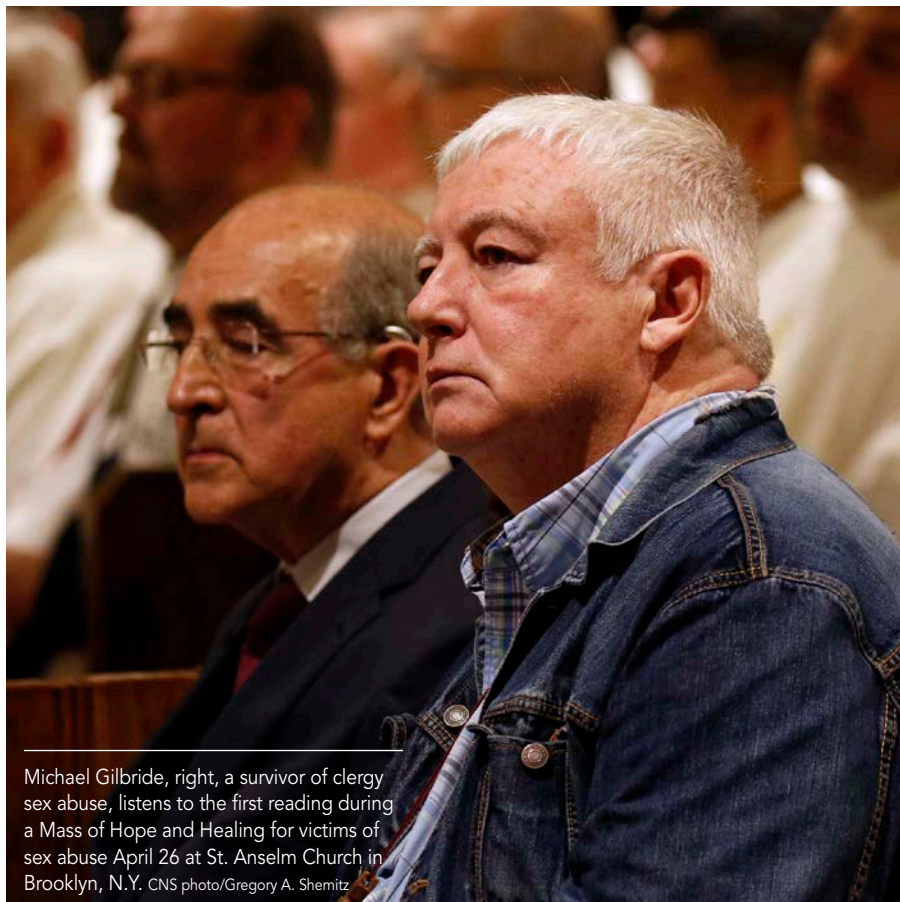
In the child-protection program of the Dallas Charter, the bishops did what was right. They crafted a program second to none. Whether they are given public approval or not, it was, and still is, the right thing. We pray that the Lord “who began [this] good work ... will continue to complete it” (Phil 1:6).

### **McCarrick and the Seminarians**

The situation surrounding Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, the former cardinal-archbishop of Washington, D.C., has added a new public dimension to the crisis. He was accused of sexually exploiting seminarians, even as a bishop. These events were reported to have been known to some in the hierarchy years ago. Recently he was accused of abusing a minor as well. When the latter surfaced, Pope Francis removed him from ministry. He directed him to live a life of prayer and penance, and to cooperate with the remainder of the canonical process.

I have found that priests are particularly angry about this. They are more upset than I have ever seen them. Priests are particularly angry at least for two reasons.

First, many of us have our own stories



Michael Gilbride, right, a survivor of clergy sex abuse, listens to the first reading during a Mass of Hope and Healing for victims of sex abuse April 26 at St. Anselm Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

to tell of troubles in seminaries, particularly in the 1960s through the 1980s. From sexual to theological wrongs, seminaries were not always the houses of formation they should have been. Having worked with many U.S. seminaries in more recent years, it seems that these abuses largely have been cleaned up (though not all). But the scars remain from the prior tumultuous years, and the McCarrick case opened up these old wounds.

Second, priests find it particularly appalling that a bishop would abuse a seminarian. The seminarians are our young, and they are the future of the priesthood. They are the ones who will take our places when we are too old to continue. Priests find it equally appalling that such a person would have been appointed a cardinal. This is very upsetting to priests.

Perhaps this experience is a good reality dose for us priests. Parents are enraged when their children are abused. It is hard for chaste and celibate men, who do not

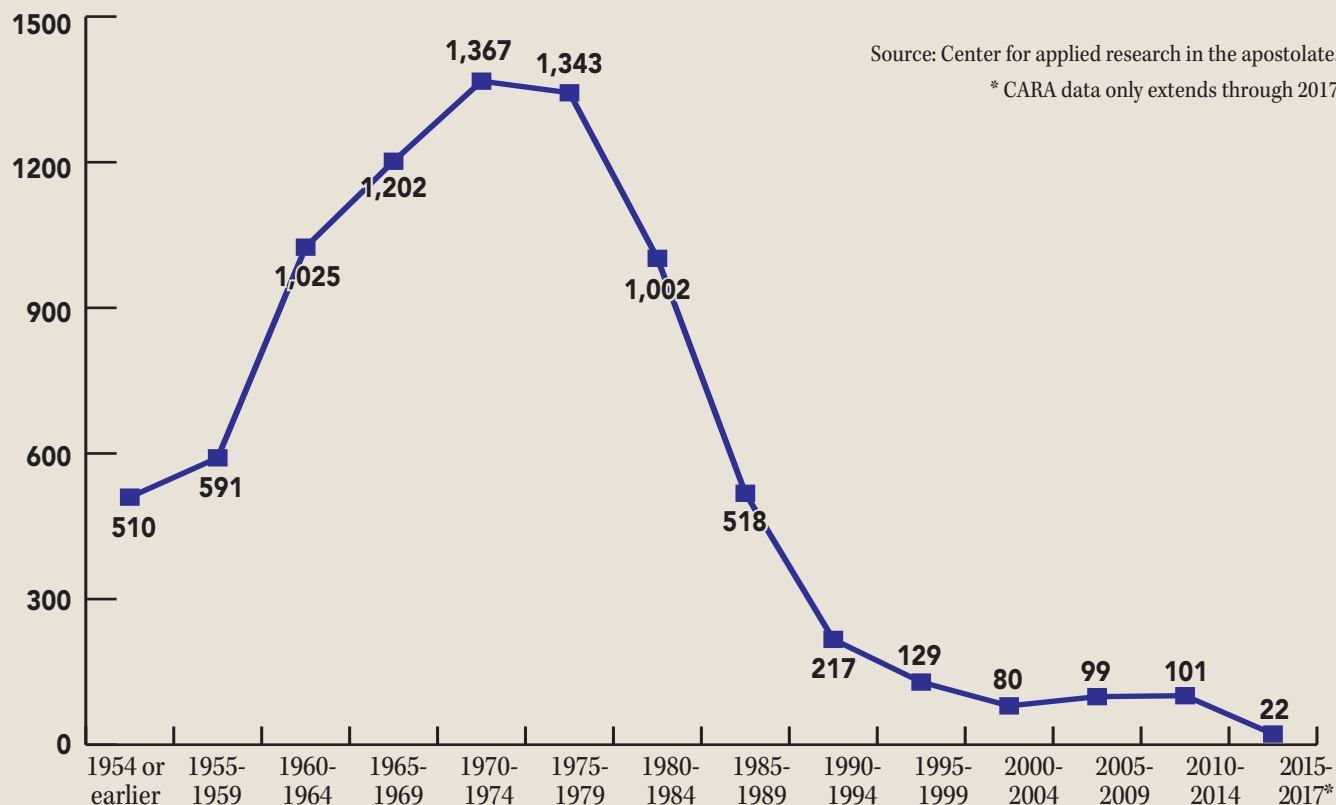
have children of our own, to understand fully the primal wound caused when parents' children are harmed. For parents, child abuse shatters their basic identity as parents. Perhaps it is similar to us in the McCarrick case. The abuse of seminarians shatters our identity as priests. Part of what it means to be a priest is to protect our own young — our seminarians. In this case, we failed.

The focus of the Church's protection program has been on protecting minors. As we enter this new phase, we will need to expand our protection efforts to include seminarians and other adults who place their trust in us.

Moreover, it is clear that some in the hierarchy failed to respond adequately when information about McCarrick's problem began to surface. The bishops of the United States have no authority to discipline each other, but they do have the ability and, at times, the obligation to communicate with those who do (the Holy



## NUMBER OF ALLEGED ABUSE OFFENSES REPORTED



See, for example).

It is important that the pope and the Vatican dicasteries address the accountability and disciplining of bishops. Pope Francis began to address this issue in his 2016 apostolic letter “Like a Loving Mother.” Obviously, more is needed. The Dallas Charter was not intended, nor can it address, this issue. Other vehicles, with the authority of the Holy See behind them, are needed. To ensure long-lasting change, there must be transparent accountability.

### Accelerating Secularization

For priests today, the situation feels even worse than 2002. With the prospect of other states’ attorneys general convening grand juries to investigate clergy abuse, plus the likelihood of more lawsuits, including “look back” legislation that opens up windows for civil suits no matter how old, we can only expect further decades of pain and shame. In 2002, we hoped that

the Dallas Charter would put an end to it. Now it seems clear that, as the newly appointed bishop noted, no matter what we do, we are on a long, ugly road.

The upshot certainly will include a falling away of some American Catholics, especially those currently on the fence. Their alienation cries out for our persistent solicitude for them. Others will stop supporting the bishops, including financially. This already has happened in some places with chanceries receiving strong letters from laity withdrawing their financial support.

It does appear, by and large, that the core of the faithful will stand firm. Everyone — laity and clergy — will demand change. The laity will want a greater voice. This is a good idea. While they will be more skeptical of bishops, most will not step out of the barque of Peter. We have been through the trauma of 2002 and are a bit battle-hardened already.

Sadly, this latest crisis likely will affect

the young, who already are leaving the Church in significant numbers. The increasing secularization will be further accelerated by the crisis. The impressionable young will find themselves even more alienated from organized religion.

Pope Benedict XVI said that the Church of tomorrow will be smaller as a result of secularization. It already is in many parts of the world, now including our own. But those in the pews will be strong and battle-hardened. I am impressed by the young people I see in our university Newman Centers and in our other ministries. Their fervent faith is inspiring.

Similarly, I am encouraged by the seminarians of today. They, too, are strong in faith, talented and full of energy to serve. They are determined not to make the mistakes that we made, and that is a good thing. Their eyes are wide open to the reality of the Church today. There are not as many as in the post-World War II era, but

this influx was likely an anomaly. In reality, there will be more than a few young priests in this country, and they will be a powerful force for the Church of tomorrow.

But the priests of today are being hard hit. They are sandwiched between an angry laity and beleaguered bishops. By and large, they want to be supportive of their bishops, but they also live among the laity and want to minister to them. The bishops need the priests' support. So do the laity. Perhaps the priests and pastors of today will be the glue that helps hold the Church together. Is this part of the call for what it means to be a priest today?

### **Paranoia vs. Prudence**

In the wake of this new trauma, we priests have a variety of emotions, all coexisting in an internal jumble. Parish priests are on the front lines and are directly taking in the anger of the people week after week. For them, this can feel devastating. They themselves are angry alternative-

ly at the bishops, the media, the Vatican, the child molesters and/or the offices of the attorneys general. Some have told me they feel betrayed — strong language. Just about every priest feels shamed in some way.

We are bracing ourselves for another round of people assuming there is something wrong with us just because we are priests. We thought we were done with this in 2002. Others are just plain tired. "Are we going to go through this again?" A few priests are gritting their teeth and doubling down on their commitment to the ministry; they will not be cowed by the onslaught!

A common feeling among priests is the desire to hide, and they do so in many different ways. One way of hiding is not wearing clerical garb or doing your best not to be identified as a priest. One priest told me that, as a result of the crisis, he would be meeting me for dinner but not wearing his clerics in public. And just about every-



### **'SPEAK CLEARLY'**

During an Oct. 13 meeting with seminarians from Italy, Pope Francis told the group that if they see or suspect abuse by a priest or bishop, they must report it immediately. "On this point, speak clearly," he said. "If you see something like [abuse], [go] immediately to the bishop."



Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison, Wis., center, kneels in prayer during Mass on Sept. 14 with Father Scott Emerson, left, and Msgr. James Bartylla, vicar general for the diocese. The Mass was part of a day of reparation for sins of sexual abuse by clergy.

CNS photo/Kevin Wondrash, Catholic Herald

one feels paranoid about being close to a child. If priests were cautious before about being with children, many now are practically phobic. One priest said he was in the sacristy before Mass and a child walked in, and he had a panic attack.

It is important to balance such paranoia with the facts: false accusations are still rare. Priests should try to relax and simply be prudent in our ministry, follow the child-safe guidelines of the diocese and maintain proper boundaries. But to avoid children altogether is an overreaction and would be a tragedy for them and for the future of the Church. And we should wear our clerics in public! The people need to see their priests today more than ever.

### **Our Contribution to the Crisis**

One dangerous development is the increasingly mentioned distinction between “good priests” and “bad priests.” Some have looked at me and said, “Thank God you are a good priest.” These exclamations, while well-intentioned, should make us all feel uncomfortable. Where in the Gospel does it make such distinctions? I thought we were all sinners. I am reminded of the response of Jesus when someone called

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## *The true antidote to the crisis is a complete chastity of heart and an absolute humility.*

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him good: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mk 10:18).

We may find ourselves tempted to lapse into self-pity. But I am reminded of my many years of ministering to priests in difficulty. More than a few fell into moments of self-pity and then justified subsequent bad behavior. Pity parties are dangerous. Or, when reflecting on all the shame and pain of today, a little voice can whisper in our ears, “You don’t deserve this.” I can imagine the cross with Jesus hanging on it, and under it the caption reading, “I didn’t deserve this.”

The prayer of the Pharisee should haunt us, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or even like this tax collector” (Lk 18:11). It was an ugly prayer full of pride and self-deceit. The spirit of the Pharisee is behind so much of the public rhetoric today.

At root, the crisis is about priests not

fully living celibate chastity, and it is about Church leaders abusing their authority. The true antidote to the crisis is a complete chastity of heart and an absolute humility. There have only been two who have successfully and fully done so:

Jesus and Mary. The rest of us are contributing, in some way, to a sinful Church.

At the outset, rather than pointing to bishops or priests or the media or attorneys general or the left wing or the right wing or homosexuality or celibacy or anyone or anything that we believe is the culprit, we priests might begin with the old-fashioned Christian approach and look within. In what ways am I not chaste of heart? In what ways do I abuse the authority entrusted to me? What can I change about myself that might make things better?

### **The Call to Sanctity**

The calling of priests today is loud and clear. We are called to live our priestly vocations with complete integrity and a holiness seemingly reserved in past ages to the great saints. Mediocrity, if it ever was an option, is not enough today. Priests must be completely faithful to celibate chastity in mind and in body. Bishops must govern with a searing humility and a fully transparent accountability.

Looking ahead, perhaps after a couple more decades of thrashing in the media and its finances being stripped away by civil suits, the Church of tomorrow will be very humble and very much poorer. This may not be all bad. Then we certainly will see Jesus on the cross.

An important part of the higher levels of sanctity is embracing one’s crosses. It is not enough simply to accept them. We must embrace them and give thanks. Only madmen or great saints give thanks for those who persecute them or slander them. But this is precisely what Jesus asks of us: “Love your enemies, and pray for

### **‘THIS SIN MUST NEVER AGAIN BE FOUND IN OUR MIDST’**

***Bishop Frank J. Caggiano of Bridgeport, Connecticut, spoke during the recent Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment at the Vatican. In his address, he spoke about the ongoing abuse scandal.***

“It is a both a crime and a sin that has undermined the confidence and trust that young people must have in the Church’s leaders and the Church as an institution, so that they may again trust their priests and bishops to exercise true spiritual fatherhood, serve as adult figures in their lives and as authentic mentors of faith. The *instrumentum laboris* speaks insightfully of young people’s growing disaffection with civil and social institutions and their desire to address issues of discrimination and exploitation. Building upon this, we must continue to face courageously and honestly the betrayal of young people by clerics to whom they were entrusted. This sin must never again be found in our midst. Only in this way can the youth of the world believe our synodal call to offer them reassurance, comfort, hope, and belonging.”





Archbishop Charles C. Thompson of Indianapolis lays prostrate on the floor of Sts Peter and Paul Cathedral in Indianapolis on Sept. 15 during a Holy Hour for prayer, penance and healing for victims of sexual abuse. CNS photo/Sean Gallagher, The Criterion

those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44).

I think one of the best spiritual practices that I have done in recent years is to pray for those whom I judge negatively or who judge me so. When they curse me, I try to respond with a blessing and a Hail Mary. These days, I am saying a lot of Hail Marys! But I feel incredibly freer inside. It is a great grace to give up our hurts and our angers. When we embrace the cross, we are truly free.

Just as important: Don't give away your joy. In my studies of priesthood, I have documented the high levels of happiness, and indeed joy, of our priests. Paradoxically, this joy can and actually is flourishing in the midst of our public pain and shame. It is tempting to succumb to a negative view of anything or everything. It is tempting to see a dour priesthood as something holy and proper today. This is a false sense of sanctity.

We are joyful, not because of any false optimism but because of the indwelling of a God who is madly in love with us. Our joy is the Spirit that wells up in our hearts and cannot be suppressed. It is this joyful Spirit that is an authentic sign of God's presence for which the people thirst. In the wake of all that has and will transpire, be joyful and be holy.

I was speaking to a wonderful priest, mentor and beloved pastor this morning. He is recovering from a serious fall, and when he returned from the hospital there were four large boxes of get-well cards waiting. He said, "The people still love their priests." Yes, indeed. The gates of hell will not prevail against it.

### **Standing with Victims**

If anyone sexually abuses a minor, it is a terrible tragedy. All the more so if the perpetrator is a Catholic priest. Pope Benedict XVI rightly called it "filth" and Pope Francis likened it to a "black Mass." If we only try to stop abuse in the Church, we priests are missing an essential calling from the Lord.

Jesus loved the children and said we must be like them to inherit his kingdom. He spent his ministry among those who were poor and suffering. Why is it that we are not identified as walking with the victims? When victims of abuse gather, why are we not among them giving our support and bringing Christ's healing? We are meant to be their voice when they are voiceless and their advocates when the system will not listen.

There are signs that things are changing. No longer do I hear priests or bishops

debating the adoption of zero tolerance. We love our brothers, but when they abuse a child, they can no longer function as priests. Period.

Also, the years of child-safe education are working. Bishops and priests are becoming more aware and sensitive to the real pain of victims. The child-safe program is really a program of conversion for us all. It is a program designed to change hearts. During these recent months, many, many clergy are calling for prayers for victims and their families, and they pray for them with a heartfelt commitment.

More and more I sense that the priests and bishops finally do get it. Our hearts are changing. The Church leadership slowly is coming around to standing in the corner of the victims. We are not there yet, but the tide is turning. The Church united with the victims will be a powerful force for change. This is our calling. But we are not there yet.

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