

CARE FOR VICTIMS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Any kind of abuse has a terrible and horrendous effect in the life of a victim. When that abuse is physical, sexual or psychological, the effects are far-reaching not only on the victim but also on the family of the victim. When the victimizer or perpetrator is a person in whom trust has been placed, the effects are compounded. This certainly is true if the perpetrator or victimizer is a doctor, a teacher or a therapist, and poignantly so when the perpetrator is a priest.

A priest should be one who gathers, not scatters. A priest should be one whose whole life is caught more in giving than in receiving. A priest is one who lives his life after the mission of Jesus Christ, a life that is a mission of healing, certainly not of hurting. A priest is one about whom there should be positive, healthy, and nurturing memories, not nightmares because of harmful actions in the past.

Whenever a person is victimized in any way, be it physical, psychological or sexual, emotions borne out of that victimization come forth - emotions of anger, hurt, confusion - and too often within the depths of the victimized sometimes a tendency even to hurt out of the hurt. When the victimizer is a priest, and certainly whenever the victim is an adolescent or child, then the Church must stand ready to reach out in the most dramatic way to victims and their families.

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The reflections that I will share here are reflections borne of my own particular experience as Coadjutor Bishop and Bishop in the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana.

In June, 1983, the news broke concerning the sexual misconduct of a certain priest in the Diocese of Lafayette. The family of one of the victims was the first to have filed a suit. Since that time, over eighty cases have been settled in court or out of court, and a tremendous amount of money has been paid to the victims and their families because of violations and victimization by a very small number of priests. Some cases have been dismissed because of prescription, but vast amounts of money have been spent as compensation to victims, attorney fees, ongoing medical and psychological expenses and even school tuition which was part of many settlements made by the diocese. These funds were supplied by diocesan contribution, insurance company payments and monies that were procured by our own diocesan insurance program.

When one realizes the financial implications of sexual abuse, it would be very easy, indeed, to forget that the Church is still the Church and that the bishop is still the shepherd. It would be easy not to reach out in a pastoral way to those who have been violated even though we might even appear, at times, to be in adversarial roles because of the litigious circumstances in which we find ourselves.

It seems to me that the underlying presence a bishop should have in a relationship with anyone who has been victimized is a listening presence. A listening presence is borne out of prayer. It means that we are able to be still in the presence of another and not feel that we must say something out of defense or explanation. It means asking ourselves what this person is saying, and what is being left unsaid. We are looking at the person, and letting that individual express his or her pain in any way that seems appropriate at the moment.

There is always the tendency to interfere, and to try to respond immediately to every detail that is raised. However, a listening presence means that we really don't respond until in some way the person's pain has entered into our own lives. In other words, only when we have experienced some of the pain of the other person should we attempt to respond.

Isn't this true in all situations in which a person is distressed, filled with anxiety or in pain? If a minister of the gospel tries to respond to that pain without having felt any of it, there is a certain violation of that person. This is true in the relationship of the victim of sexual abuse to a bishop when sexual abuse has been perpetrated by someone within the Church, such as a priest. The bishop must learn first of all to listen. He must learn to be conscious of that moment when he first experiences the pain of the victim and then learn when it is time to speak.

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After the first suits were filed in the Diocese of Lafayette, Bishop Frey, who was Ordinary of the diocese at the time, visited the homes of some of the victims and listened to their expression of hurt. Indeed, it was very painful for him, as it was for anyone who accompanied him. When I arrived in Lafayette in 1986, I continued to do this to some degree. There was a tremendous amount of anger expressed. Sometimes that anger was so deep and far reaching and coming from so many sources that one could not help but wonder if at least some of the anger was not misplaced. However, the bishop has to be extremely careful about making this judgment.

In other words, the answer to the question of when there has been enough expression of anger is a mystery, and I don't believe that the bishop is the one who should try to respond to that mystery. Rather, he needs to realize that every victim is an unique individual and every family has its own corporate personality history, and style of dealing with problems. He needs to realize that there is every reason in the world for any victim of sexual abuse to be angry and for family members as well. His role is simply to be there and let that anger, hurt and confusion be expressed. Again, his role is a listening presence, and that listening presence needs to take place either in the home of the victims or in the bishop's office, but the bishop needs to quiet his own heart and be able to receive the confusion and hurt before attempting to respond to it.

When many victims come forward at one time, it is necessary for the bishop, after personally being involved with those victimized to provide in some way for that healing to continue. This can be done by providing professional therapists for those victimized or by permitting the victims to choose their own therapists. Another option might seem less professional, but yet is adequately pastoral to reach out to those who have been victimized.

The Diocese of Lafayette hired a Religious Sister skilled in counseling to visit the families of victims in their homes, to listen, and to let the bishop know what more could be done. Many good things happened from this. This particular Sister was well known to many of the families, through her teaching in a school attended by parents of victims. She was readily able to gain the trust of the parents and to respond to them truthfully and with openness without appearing to be defensive on the part of the diocese. In other words, she represented the bishop and the diocese, but she knew well her role which was to represent the needs of the victims to the bishop. She wasn't the only presence for the victims, she was another presence.

I believe that it is important to remember that the more ways we find to reach out to those who have been victimized, the more effective will be the final healing.

It is good for an archdiocese or a diocese to host educational workshops periodically on child abuse - physical and

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sexual. It is good to offer these not only in the see city, but in several locations. The Diocese of Lafayette set up such workshops in 1986. They were administered by the diocesan Office of Family Life and featured psychologists and counselors who addressed every aspect of the subject of abuse. These professionals not only made helpful presentations but were available to meet with individuals and groups.

It was interesting to note the number of victims who were from families in which there had already been physical abuse, verbal abuse or alcohol abuse. One can't help but wonder whether that kind of background made the youngster fertile territory for any kind of perpetrator. I often wondered whether the anger of some which seemed so extensive and unusually prolonged, and without apparent abatement was borne out of the reality that other abuse had occurred and the expression of continued anger was a misplaced way of dealing with it.

It is my firm conviction that every archdiocese and diocese should have an annual liturgy for victims of violence. The liturgy that we held in the Diocese of Lafayette attracted those whose family members might have been murdered or hurt in any way, victims of sexual or physical abuse, victims of assault or rape. This particular liturgy scheduled in early December, was one of the most effective healing agents within the Diocese of Lafayette. Every year victims of various kinds of violence, including sexual abuse, would attend that liturgy - new faces and familiar ones. Every year they would experience the pain once

again and then come to a new level of healing and wholeness. There was always a substantive number of persons, though never an enormous crowd.

In the beginning, we held this liturgy in the Cathedral. Then we moved it to the smaller Immaculata Chapel on the grounds of the diocese's Catholic Center. People attending those liturgies heard the Word of God on forgiveness and the power of God's Word on His wonderful and everlasting love. The Eucharist played a significant part in the whole process of healing. And after the liturgies people had an opportunity to meet in a very small and private reception. It was a powerful and effective way to reach out to those victimized in any manner.

I believe there is no limit to the good that can be done by the bishop's personal involvement with victims or with the families of victims. I can remember attending a funeral of a young man who had been victimized by a priest. He had committed suicide. His mother was an employee of the diocese, and his four brothers, all pall bearers at the funeral, had also been victimized. I went to the funeral so that I could in some way extend myself to that family and let them know that I stood with them in their pain. It was painful for me.

When I left Lafayette to come to St. Paul, the mother of that family wrote me a beautiful letter and told me how meaningful it was on that occasion to look up and see me sitting in the sanctuary at the funeral of her victimized son who had

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committed suicide because he could not apparently live with the pain.

There is a part within each of us that does not like to walk into situations that are uncomfortable. We are diffident to do so. However, when we have the grace and courage to walk into those painful situations, a tremendous amount of healing can be done, and that healing is born out of our pain.

After settlements are made with individuals who have been victimized, there is a tendency for us to think that everything has been taken care of. That is not always true. I recall a young man coming to visit me who had been a victim of sexual abuse by a priest. The young man had received a settlement from the courts, but never really had an opportunity to sit down and express his feelings. His parents also wanted to express theirs. They came to see me and told me how terribly angry they had been because of this victimization. I listened to them and they spoke at length. At the end of the conversation, I simply said that I was sorry for all that they had gone through, and hopefully that such perpetration would be minimized because of their own coming forth. This young man had been victimized from the time of his First Confession and on each occasion until his last confession. In other words, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, rather than an opportunity for healing and nurturing, was a time for hurting. After that initial visit, I offered to go to their home and have dinner. I did. It was healing for them and certainly so for me. I can recall standing at the door of the church on one occasion

bidding the parishioners good-bye and someone tapping me on my shoulder. It was this young man and he smiled and said to me: "I just want you to know that I am all right, Bishop."

There is a tremendous grace in a healing moment in saying, "I'm sorry." On one occasion I had a meeting with a woman who had been sexually victimized years ago by a priest who has long since died. She had been dealing with some of the psychological effects of that victimization. One day I met her in my office and listened to her story. At the end of the story, I simply said to her, "I'm sorry." "I'm so sorry that you have experienced this." "I'm so sorry that you had to carry this with you all these years." She responded with a beautiful smile and said, "I have never heard those words before." Those were healing words for her. The words were powerful because they were spoken from my heart and I had listened to her pain before I spoke them. I think this is the secret of responding to any kind of victimization. We should experience some of the pain ourselves before responding. Only when our hearts are heavy and only when the pain burdens us should we respond. If we respond before we experience that pain, there is a certain violence done to the victim, a violence that is unnecessary and certainly unwarranted.

(I might add that there are no easy guidelines on how much time and attention to a person or a situation within our ministry is enough; how to respond to the many other problems that often are present in the families of victims; at what point after many

and varied attempts to heal we might begin to enable people in a problem situation instead of helping them get on with their lives. Personal judgment and the ministerial and social service resources of the diocese and the civic community attuned to these issues can help give perspective.)

Finally, the bishop must remember that he is ministering in a human situation that is often filled with many complexities. He must also remember that he himself is limited and responds with different levels of intensity and attention on different occasions. It is possible that at times he may not appear to be pastoral, even uncaring. It seems to me that we want to do the best that we can and reach out in the most loving way. At the same time, we are human and limited and will not always rise to this challenge perfectly.

Besides accepting others and listening to others, we need to listen to our own hearts and accept ourselves as good human beings who try to bring new life and resurrection out of situations that are broken and painful. Our God will be the final healer and we need to leave something to Him.