

A private retreat was held recently at St. Ann Church in Arlington for victims of abuse by priests and others in authority in the Church. The evolving nature of the Office of Victim Assistance, a diocesan program, which began in 2004, was evident. Now, long-time participants offer encouragement to newcomers. As Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde said during the prayer service, "You are like the good Samaritan – carrying others who are wounded to the Divine Innkeeper, ready to assist healing."

Our gatherings allow us to hear what media seldom covers -- how other victims have survived and then thrive in life because of (not despite) the wounds of abuse. Attendees are quick to agree that we can even feel gratitude for surviving our suffering, because we have emerged with a unique capacity to offer solace to those struggling with grief and pain. These gatherings, for many, have been a starting point in a journey beyond private agony.

The bishop wisely has expanded our groups to include victims of other abuse and violence. The opportunity motivated many of us to remain so that our own suffering could serve others. Now, retreats and prayer services bring people with painful experiences to the spiritual care of the Church and her sacraments and they permit survivors to enrich that care-giving.

Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist Sr. Gabriella Pettrossi, FSE captured the idea when she offered perspective to our group as a trained therapist. She recounted how St. Francis once invited his brothers to preach, leading them silently through the tiny town of Assisi. They were confused until he referred to their walk saying, "Preach always, but use words only when necessary." In this diocese, people whose need to weep - long ago silenced by the denial of others- have been heard. Now another witness is growing. These survivors now speak with their presence before they ever say a word to others who arrive, ready to begin the healing journey.

Oblate Father Mark Mealey, OSFS is particularly trusted by our group, which can be skittish around priests and religious for obvious reasons. Countering the priests who harmed us years ago, Fr. Mealey calls us to the healing power of God's love. Unlike traditional therapy, which offered some of us limited insight about our childhood experience of evil, Fr. Mealey's counsel helps us make sense of the evil and find ways to survive our encounter with it. He led the retreat spiritually, walking us gently through a meditation on why God could have let these terrible things happen to us as children. He invited us, no matter how our encounter with evil may have left us doubting our worth and sanctity as children of God, to do as St. Francis de Sales did, and let our lives be entirely transformed by a deep experience of God's unconditional love.

A relaxing dialogue with Bishop Loverde followed a period of private meditation. One survivor interrupted the train of thought, and everyone chimed in spontaneously. Our gratitude to our treasured bishop, who has cared about us, is profound and personal. We, who have felt deep pain being considered pariah among many Catholics, tried to find words to thank him for inviting us to heal within the care of the Church, indeed, for restoring our sense of sanctuary.

A window above where we prayed together depicted St. Ann, with Mary as a child at her knee. I sat there feeling something unusual to feel sitting in a church. I felt as safe as Mary looked – and as safe as every child can now be in a diocese that is willing to witness evil and to care without flinching for those wounded by it.