

Victim Testimony

Pat and Kate, the Victim Assistance Coordinators, asked me to write this article to share with you my personal experience with sexual abuse by a priest. For me, it's a new and wonderful opportunity to unburden myself of something that very strongly influenced my life. I see the invitation to write this as an "opportunity," because I can see now how relating my story can have some very positive effects on another's need to come forward and unburden themselves, enjoy the blessings of healing, and make the leap from victim to survivor. What I strive for now is to celebrate life as God intended us to live it – to the fullest, unburdened. It's a picture that's been in process for close to 50 years.

I believe the difficulty is that sexual abuse is about a violation of a gift of life and spirit that is so fundamentally individual and personal. It is a violation that is utterly shameful, and the shame is borne not by the abuser, but by the abused. This shame is toxic; it's not some passing moment of pain and embarrassment. It can poison individual lives and the lives of their loved ones.

In May of 2004, at the beginning of my most recent, ongoing effort at disclosure and reaching out and getting help, I filed a "Complaint Form for Allegations of Sexual Abuse of a Minor" with the responsible archdiocese. (My abuse did not happen in Virginia; I moved here as an adult). In the "Information as to Allegations" section I wrote: "Summer 1960 – Summer 1961; St Theresa's rectory, Fr. Dan's bedroom; a number of incidents; I was an altar boy; he said he was sick." He said he needed "help," and I complied until he said something that made me realize how sick he really was. I listed the details of those incidents of my abuse that continued until I told my parents and the abuse finally stopped.

I didn't know the term "victim" in this context; I didn't know anything beyond somehow being "involved with" the priest. I had just turned fourteen; I was going to be a freshman in high school in the fall. It was a relationship I had with someone I respected, even loved, and looked to as a mentor, like a coach. I recall now how he asked me once, "How do you feel about our relationship?" My response: "It's like I have three fathers, my dad, God and you." I guess I was pretty well "groomed," as I was to learn decades later. I'd even signed the letters to him from scout camp, "love." It

felt rather strange, but that's what he'd wanted and I didn't want to disappoint him.

Lying awake one night in 1961, I wondered what to do about this situation I was in. How blessed I was and am to have realized that one option was to tell my mom. She listened and told my dad. They were distressed, clearly, but calm, comforting and loving. They went to our pastor and, a short time later, Fr. Dan told me he had to go away. I felt a combination of anger with him and mostly relief. And life went on, more or less, as it had before.

I graduated high school, went on to college with an ROTC scholarship and entered the Navy. I met that very special girl and, between Navy deployments, we were married. I didn't tell her about my abuse history. Out of the Navy, we explored and worked our way up the West Coast from San Diego, California to Bellingham, Washington. Every chance we got, we took in the magnificence of the sea coast and the mountains and canyons as we hiked and camped along wilderness trails and shores. All in all, we had a pretty nice life together, but something was increasingly strained, not quite right: I found myself increasingly moody, often irritable and angry. I felt unsure of what I was doing with my life. Our communications had somehow hit a wall. We tried the "Marriage Encounter" weekend. I learned to make a distinction between what one feels and what one thinks about something. What I thought was or should be good, I often felt uncomfortable about. We resolved to communicate more patiently, lovingly and effectively.

Communication, whole and intimate, is the protein of a healthy, growing marriage. The real intimacy, however, is not going to happen if one or the other is somehow withholding or has something locked up within them. I was increasingly defensive about any suggestion that I wasn't communicative. Looking back, it's as if I were struggling with some dark cloud I could not name, let alone talk about. I didn't know it then, but trying to bury the residue of sexual abuse and just get on with one's life is like trying to build a healthy, happy home on a toxic waste dump.

I had always thought I'd like to go to graduate school and she decided she would go too. We both went, but a long way apart: I stayed in Seattle; she went out to Bloomington, Indiana. The initial plan of four years stretched out to ten, as neither of us was making great progress, and we spent our Christmas and summer holidays together in Seattle. A good part of my survival routine, along with running and swimming, was heavy doses of

healing prayer, weekday Mass, the rosary, lots of self help books and personal journaling. I'd also started getting some counseling to deal with my long standing problems with concentration and self-image. All the while my frustration, anger and resentment about being stalled in my studies and separated from my wife festered and flashed.

Then one evening during a Christmas visit together, when I was doing my squirrely best at "communicating," my very frustrated wife grabbed my latest self help book, broke its spine and tore it in half, exclaiming, "What are you so guilty about, anyway?!" Suddenly, the shadow, that toxic creature, was outed; I blurted out what I'd never been able to or attempted to reveal to her before about that long ago abuse. She understood, or at least she could now discern, something behind the wedge in our marriage. The wall was breached; the tears and the words came. Midway through the following year, we moved back together to our home in Bellingham.

That initial exposure of the demon led to further breakthroughs, gradually and over many more years. We moved to the Diocese of Arlington, and I finally brought it out in confession. I tried to expose and shed what I felt to be hindering my relationship with Jesus, this thing I felt angered me with Him. Face to face, in the light, the priest said, "Come see me, you need to talk about this." And I did. He referred me to the Office of Victim Assistance here in the Diocese of Arlington. Then counseling followed, with professionals who are all too familiar with the whole sad, painful routine. From that counseling, I realized the fruits of bringing it to light, the truth about the distinction between a child's "going along with" abuse and the adult's "complicity" in an affair, and the pathetic nature of the sick soul with whom the responsibility and shame should properly rest - the abuser. Now, I look to moving from being a survivor to truly celebrating life with my wife, family, friends and community.

A recent Gospel reading about the paralytic hit a chord with my journey. The paralyzed man is carried through the crowd and lowered through the roof, so that Jesus might recognize the faith of the friends who'd brought him, forgive his sins and heal him. I am reminded once more what the sacraments are for. Our Baltimore catechism defines a sacrament as "an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace." So, what is grace? It's what heals us. All of the sacraments, Confession, Eucharist, Marriage -- all seven are for healing and bringing us to life in the fullest.

To others out there, I offer this: tell your story; be assured you are believed; discover you are not alone; learn and believe it was not your fault. These are the essential steps a person must take to find healing from sexual abuse. But it's never an easy journey. You have to go from the realization of how much you hurt inside, from an instance of intimate and personal abuse that may have occurred long ago, to a place of reassurance, trust and mutual sharing where you can really begin to heal. Four years ago, almost five now, I found that place right here in our Diocese. When you're not burning with anger, the place your abuser left you is cold, dark and painfully lonely. We don't have to be there. The Diocese of Arlington has an office of wonderful people (Fr. Specht, Fr. Mealey, Pat Mudd, Kate Kramer and others) devoted to reaching out to people like me and perhaps you who read this. We learn that gratitude is the antidote for resentment and I'm indeed grateful for the opportunity to share my experience with you. Come, surely it's the season to learn and believe what your rightful inheritance is: not shame, but glory.