

## Homecoming

*My plans for you are peace and not disaster. When you call to me, I will answer you. I will bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you.*

*Jeremiah 29:10-13*

2010 marks my fifth anniversary in the Victims Assistance Program of the Diocese of Arlington. I approached Pat Mudd twenty-five years after being sexually and emotionally abused by priests as a child and teen. I had long ago left the devout Catholic home where I was raised in a distant diocese, but a wound still hobbled the successful life I was living here.

Attending Sunday Mass forced me to revisit terrible memories. Receiving other sacraments and simple social comfort in a Catholic community were impossible. Sometimes I braved distressing flashbacks while enduring Sunday Mass just so I could partake in Communion, but inevitably I paid the price of tremulous anxiety for the rest of the day – or week.

Like many survivors, I did not forsake faith. I relied on the rosary, which my parents had habitually prayed with their children. For several years, I fasted each week in petition to Our Lady. Certain novenas, which my mother had prayed, I recited faithfully. In Adoration, I relied on the emptiness as security; no predator could approach without notice. While these precious devotions are part of the vast wealth of our faith, I was still estranged from the sacraments.

For one long period, my idea of going to Sunday Mass involved parking near a church while Mass was underway inside, imagining sorrowfully the ritual by reading from a missal I kept in my glove compartment. I faithfully attended daily Mass, hoping it and “parking lot” attendance could somehow be calculated into a second-class holiness. In truth, nothing could have made me feel worthy of Mass attendance: I was sure I was at fault for all that had transpired in my childhood.

The wounds of abuse by a priest are distinct. Adults rely on faith, sacraments and our Catholic communities to navigate the sometimes daunting challenges of life. However, for adults who were abused as children by priests or other Church authorities access to these crucial things is compromised by terrible associations.

Therapy was not enough for me to heal from evil, yet the sacraments and community I needed were not available. Dark nights of soul characterized my struggle. My parents and Catholic school teachers had shown me that faith and sacraments and community are wellsprings of grace. Though they were all deceased, their faith carried me forward. No words could express the loneliness of the exile. My spirit was groaning. At the nexus of such impossibility, however, we are promised Christ will give us the strength to do all things.

Five years ago, my personal torment forced me to overcome the cynicism with which I viewed the Victims Assistance Program. I arrived doubtful at a prayer service offered for survivors of abuse. I was about to discover what too many still do not know. Our diocese has, among United States dioceses, an unrivaled pastorally skilled outreach to people who have suffered abuse or trauma.

Bishop Loverde offers trained social workers and priests. They listen to our stories. Eventually, a survivor hears a priest assure him or her that “It was not your fault.” This is the opposite of what pedophile priests told me. The decades between my encounter with these holy Catholics and my escape from the pedophiles turned out to be a passing exile, from which I have returned.

Sunday Mass can still be an emotional Everest, as lately when media coverage of the pedophile pediatrician in Maryland triggers chilling memories. Like all human suffering, these wounds are unique. They are part of a cross only I can bear. It is shared by no one and very easily proved to be isolating when I was estranged from God’s community – until someone offered charity.

Too often I have overheard Catholics criticize survivors of abuse by priests as refusing to “get over it,” as if we cling to an isolating distinction too long. Yet, like all people who suffer, we are, after taking all the right steps, still helpless to bestow healing on ourselves. We all need to be saved.

The Victims Assistance Program proves we are saved in relationship – with Christ and with those who serve Him. Jesus healed each person differently, reflecting their individual pain and identity. This diocesan program ended my estrangement from the Church community through a healing relationship with other survivors, with compassionate priests and remarkable lay Catholics willing to respect my struggle with trauma, with a bishop who assured me that it was not my fault. The doors of the Catholic Church reopened. Mass and sacraments took their proper role in the healing journey which forges identity in every Catholic – including me.

From my parking-lot pew I once sat baffled as people with children in tow teemed thoughtlessly through the church entrance to sit heedless side by side and receive Eucharist as routine. Now, it's different. As thousands of Catholics fill pews with wondrous complacency, I watch from my favorite spot in a parish where I attend (almost) comfortably, and I praise God for the blessings that permit all this to be.

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