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A Survivor in the Arlington Diocese

Being a survivor of child sexual abuse at the hands of priests, I lived my Catholic life like a nameless beggar making rounds through a dark, bitter night. I spent hours gazing into festive lives in warm homes, sheltered and unable to hear me tapping at the windowpane. That was my cue to wander away.

Being a survivor is to know a truth that seems to elude everyone else. The wound remains because of the triumph of lies the predators fashioned – and wove like a shroud around my childhood. Adult sanity is secured by confronting these lies. For me, the first lie from my past is the Roman collar. Most priests honor it, but a significant few pervert it for their own evil ends. Without that truth, I cannot attend Mass and partake of the Eucharist. Sometimes I manage to endure my anxiety and pain and attend Mass, emerging elated for days -- I have joined in community on Sunday with the Eucharist. Other times, the thought of being in Mass, while crowds stare without fear at a priest, leaves me paralyzed, and I avoid Mass, instead spending days grieving and feeling lost. Weekday Mass helps a little. Eucharistic adoration helps more, but my faith languishes in this snarl. In the disastrous situation when predators can look just like holy priests, who has the credibility to break this unholy lock on my spiritual freedom so I can pray and work and sleep again? A therapist alone will not do.

When John Paul the Great was dying somewhere behind the little window overlooking St. Peter's Square, I lay on the couch searching for prayer services I might attend for him. On the diocesan website, I stumbled upon someone called the "Victims' Assistance Coordinator." Without the graces flooding our world during JPII's transitus, I never would have called. The telephone number led me to a skilled professional with a voice of grace, and she talked me off a ledge. She made it possible for me to ask the diocese of my childhood to resume paying for my therapy, and I began to stabilize. She offered me care, and I began to imagine I might regain my footing. She coaxed me slowly to begin talking to a priest, sitting with me so I was not alone with him. Her voice softly calls a hello from my answering machine, asking how I am, just out of the blue, for no reason. Has someone heard a beggar's tap -- and found the beggar?

I walked for hours into the evening, that night after I spoke to the priest. I was tottering on the brink of hope. Here is a priest who listened, recognized evil, and was not afraid. I did not offend him. Here is a priest who respects my suffering even when I cannot. Perhaps I have a chance at healing. Maybe my life is not after all litter created by random circumstance. Lately, I taste communion with the crowds who look on the priest at the Consecration without fear, because I find myself with unexpected hope standing before the bulwark of our Christian wonderment: Can even my suffering truly be redemptive?

Name Withheld By Request