

## Professional Counseling, Reformed Attitudes Work To Heal Hurts

By Robert Delaney



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Barbara Thorp  
Director  
Archdiocese of Boston’s  
Office of Pastoral Support  
and Outreach



Overcoming being hurt by someone in the Church can be a long process – sometimes a life-long process – say experts in dealing with victims of clergy sexual abuse. But the Catholic Church throughout the United States stands ready to help victims obtain professional counseling.

And besides help in recovering from past wrongs, the Church hopes the damaged relationship between abuse victims and the Church might also be healed.

Dioceses throughout the United States have officials who function as victim assistance coordinators, offering a point of contact for the reporting of sexual abuse by clergy or other church employees.

While other diocesan officials will investigate and determine what action should be taken in regard to an employee named in a complaint – and civil authorities will determine possible charges – the victim assistance coordinator offers help to the survivor of abuse.

In many ways, the process of healing parallels what would be involved in the case of abuse by someone in any institution – schools or government, for example – but it also has its special aspects because for the survivor of clergy abuse “the Church represents God,” says Michael Morton, executive director of Guest House Institute in Lake Orion, Michigan. The Institute is an educational and training program of Guest House, known for its addiction treatment programs for clergy and religious.

Since the adoption of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2002, the church has generally done a better job of dealing with offenders and helping victims than have other institutions, such as police and schools, Morton says.

Generally, he says, survivors of clergy abuse now are not only heard, but credited; action is taken to deal with culprits; and there is not only an expression of contrition, but concrete assistance is offered. There are, however, some exceptions, “and some people in leadership positions still need to understand better the gravity of the situation.”

One of the dioceses that figured prominently in the clergy abuse scandal has had one of the most active programs to help survivors.

“In the Archdiocese of Boston, over 700 survivors or their family members have contacted us, and 464 have received support from the archdiocese for therapy,” says Barbara Thorp, director of the archdiocese’s Office of Pastoral Support and Outreach. Many survi-

vors of clergy sexual abuse suffer from conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic anxiety, depression or addictions, and some have difficulties on the job or problems with family relations, she continued.

The archdiocese also pays for any psychopharmaceuticals that might be prescribed. Thorp stresses that the willingness to pay for independent licensed therapists and prescriptions is totally without regard to any litigation the victims might be pursuing against the archdiocese.

While many people have benefited from counseling or therapy, healing the spiritual damage survivors have suffered remains “such uncharted territory” that there is no single path indicated, Thorp says. When a priest or other Church employee becomes a “faith-destroyer rather than a faith-nurturer,” the results can be soul-searing. “This is probably the most profound aspect of the problem,” Thorp says. On the one hand, she says she considers it “presumptuous” to advise a survivor that he or she should work on repairing that breach, but if asked by the survivor she will readily put them in touch with a spiritual director.

Considering how abuse often also involved the profaning of a sacrament – in the confessional or in the sacristy before or after Mass – the fact that many survivors do manage to overcome the damage to their spiritual relationship is testimony “to the remarkable resilience of true faith,” she adds.

Sr. Sheila McNiff, a Sister of the Holy Child Jesus and the victim assistance coordinator for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, understands how hard the healing process can be from having listened to hundreds of survivors. “I have felt like a container for the rage that is so deep and so destructive of a person’s being. I have silently watched them as they angrily enter counseling. Then some join or start support groups and eventually struggle to talk with their family and friends about their pain and shame,” she says.

Morton says individual cases vary so greatly, depending on the extent, duration and severity of abuse, as well as the person’s age when the abuse began, that there can be no single formula for successfully dealing with them. But he says the entire church – not just the leadership – can resolve that all future contacts with the church will be characterized by trust.

Thorp points to the efforts in Boston to show sincere contrition. Not only is there a monthly Mass in the cathedral chapel for victims and survivors of clergy sex abuse, but Cardinal Sean O’Malley also led a nine-day Pilgrimage of Repentance and Hope in 2006 to churches that had experienced abuse incidents. “Cardinal O’Malley also invited the priests in attendance to prostrate themselves with him while a litany was sung in a true expression of atonement,” she said.



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