

▲ Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio



Put Out Into the Deep

Healing the Wounds of Sexual Abuse

My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

This week we celebrate the Feast of St. Joseph, protector of the Child Jesus and model for the Church in the protection of children. The sexual abuse crisis in the Church was highlighted, especially, at this year's Academy Awards with the Oscar for Best Picture going to the movie "Spotlight." The movie chronicled the investigative journalism work of the Boston Globe's "Spotlight" unit which identified the depth of the sexual abuse crisis in the Archdiocese of Boston and precipitated a review of all dioceses.

In 2002, the Bishops of the United States met in Dallas, Texas and signed what is now known as the Dallas Charter. This Charter has guided the Church in the last almost 15 years to redouble its efforts in creating a safe environment for children within the Church. The issue of sexual abuse by clergy and other employees of the Church is a page in our history that we must not forget, since it causes us to see the harm and pain which has been caused as well as drives us to make sure that such a situation will never happen in the future.

A study done by John Jay College entitled "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010; A Report Presented to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops by the John Jay College Research Team," first printed in May of 2011, was an important independent study (This study can be found on the USCCB Page: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/reports-and-research.cfm>).

Unfortunately, the study did not get much coverage in the press. The most important finding was that this crisis truly took the form of an epidemic; which means that it had a beginning, a rising occurrence and then a quick end. It began some time in the 1960s, peaked in the late 1970s and 1980s and dropped off in the 1990s.

But why did this happen? The causes are difficult to pinpoint. However, the historical situation of a lack of moral adherence in a sexually-charged culture was a major contributing factor. More importantly, it was the misunderstanding and mishandling of this phenomenon by Church officials that truly became the scandal which we still need to heal. Often, priests were sent for evaluation and rehabilitation once a report of abuse was

brought to the attention of officials, although many cases went unreported. Worse yet was the constant moving of priests without rehabilitation or counseling. While that was in the minority, it nonetheless does not diminish the pain and suffering caused to victims.

The overall impact in comparative terms, perhaps, is not a great number: four percent of the approximately 110,000 priests who served from the period of 1950 to 2000. Let me state that although it was a small percentage of the total number of priests at that time, four percent is four percent too many. This never should have happened, and I believe that it will not happen again given the safeguards that have been implemented. The Dallas Charter mandated "zero tolerance" for any act of sexual abuse by a clergy member against a minor or young person, meaning that no priest may be reassigned once it is proven that he has committed a sexual act with a minor or young person. This is a rigorous policy that has proven to be the antidote to this horrible epidemic.

Presently, in the State of New York we face legislation commonly called "Look-Back Legislation" which is the lifting of the Statute of Limitations on these old cases of sexual abuse. The principle of the Statute of Limitations is a wise legal principle that states after a time memories fail, witnesses are not available, and, in fact, people die or are recused, making it almost impossible to have fair hearings or trials.

The Diocese of Brooklyn, however, does not ignore victims who come forward. We have set up a Toll-Free Reporting Line (1-888-634-4499) so that all cases are reported directly to the prosecutors and district attorneys in Brooklyn and Queens. This system prevents any possible contamination of the report by anyone involved in the Diocese and ensures that appropriate investigations ensue. Once a victim reports an incident, the Victim Assistance Coordinator, a licensed social worker, immediately contacts the victim and offers counseling, without the necessity of any proof of the abuse.

In working with a group of survivors of sexual abuse committed by clergy, it has been very clear that healing from sexual abuse takes place in many ways: therapy, meeting other victims, being active in helping other victims/survivors, retelling what happened and having one's story witnessed. One of the ways this is done is in my meetings with vic-

tims, where I express the sorrow and the concern of the Diocese for their victimization. Furthermore, spiritual direction, prayer and Mass also hold an important role in the healing journey, made evident by the group's request for a healing Mass.

Last year, the Diocese held its first Mass of Hope and Healing. This year, a second healing Mass will be held on Thursday, April 21, at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Forest Hills at 7 p.m. Healing is offered for all those that have been impacted by sexual abuse, especially sex abuse committed by members of the clergy.

In this past year, the Diocese of Brooklyn increased its outreach efforts and assisted 151 victims and their family members in overcoming the long-term and far reaching impact of sexual abuse. This number is higher than in 2014, when 34 victims and their family members received on-going support. The number of those assisted has risen as new initiatives to support victims are developed and as contact is attempted and renewed with anyone who has come forward with allegations in the past, to inform and offer them these important services.

It is particularly during this time of Lent that we recognize the need for healing and forgiveness. Those in the Church who committed abuse are also in need of healing. The Church recognizes the needs of all who claim that they have been abused by a member of the clergy or lay faithful. The Lenten call to prayer and penance, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist throughout these holy days, can be an effective source of hope and healing for victims of sexual abuse. It can be a source of strength in overcoming the horrible effects of what was done to them.

As a Diocese, we do put out into the deep waters, and often murky waters, of dealing with those who have been sexually abused. We are assured, however, that the healing powers of the water that came forth from the side of Christ while He was on the cross can make us whole if we acknowledge our sinfulness and ensure the safety of those among us who are most vulnerable.



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