

▲ Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio



## Put Out Into the Deep

# Praying with Survivors of Sexual Abuse

*My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,*

Over the course of my ten years as Bishop of Brooklyn, I have been meeting with survivors of sexual abuse by members of the clergy. Each encounter is heart wrenching for me, as their bishop, to listen to their stories and to apologize in the name of the Church, and to offer my own personal support for their journey towards healing. On April 15, our Diocese will take another step in the healing process, when a Mass of Hope and Healing is offered at 7 p.m. at the Cathedral-Basilica of St. James in Downtown Brooklyn.

This type of Mass has been celebrated in other dioceses, and the survivors, themselves, have asked that we do the same. Our Diocese of Brooklyn is committed to the spiritual and emotional well-being of victims who become survivors, and what an important way to begin with this focus group of survivors who have shared with us what would be meaningful to them.

I am grateful to this group for their courage, as well as to our Victims Assistance Coordinator, Ms. Jasmine Salazar, LMSW, and our Safe Environment Coordinator, Ms. Maryellen Quinn. It is humbling that the survivors have invited me to journey with them and asked that I offer this Mass.

The celebration of the Eucharist is perhaps the greatest gift that we have from the Lord, Jesus, who teaches us that He is the great healer and that the Eucharist is the medicine for our souls.

We wish to continue opening up pathways towards healing for those who were abused. It is our hope that this Mass of Hope and Healing will serve as a springboard for opening such pathways. It is our survivors, themselves, who have become the core team planning the Mass. As one member stated, it is hoped that other survivors who have been walking this journey alone will see that they are not alone, and that the Diocese provides ways to accompany them and assist them in their journey towards healing.

It has been over 13 years since the scandal of the sexual abuse of minors and young adults broke into the news. We all certainly remember the shock to all in the Church, including the priests and bishops, to the extent of sexual abuse within our own Church, and the misguided steps in trying to deal with the scandal. We have learned a lot

regarding prevention and the proper handling of criminal offenses.

Here in the Diocese of Brooklyn, we have always offered victims counseling. Our Victims Assistance Counselor is able to provide counseling referrals or allow victims to choose their own therapist so that they can grow in the healing process. The deep wounds of sexual abuse take many years to heal once someone comes forward and makes known that they are a victim of sex abuse. The road to survival is a long one for many.

As best practice dictates, we in the Diocese continuously review our policies and programs to assess their efficacy and areas of needed improvement. More importantly, however, we must take steps in the healing process.

With this objective in mind, I asked our Victim Assistance Coordinator to work with a focus group of survivors of clergy abuse to assess the needs of those victimized and develop forms of pastoral outreach. During the last year, this group of survivors came forward and asked that we have a Mass of Hope and Healing.

There has been much darkness in the past regarding this issue, but it must come out into the light. We must own up to past mistakes and seek to heal those who have been abused.

This Mass of Hope and Healing is not only for survivors, but also for all others affected by the sexual abuse crisis. We acknowledge that it is not only the survivors, who are affected, but also their significant relationships, family's parish communities and the dedicated members of the clergy who suffer as well.

At the same time, we recognize that there are others who have suffered sexual abuse, not at the hands of clergy or members of the Diocese, but by others who were also in need of such healing. We welcome them to participate in this Eucharistic celebration.

I must take this opportunity to publicly thank those who have come forward to help us shed light into the darkness of this most serious issue. These survivors have shown us that there is hope for healing and have helped us to identify the pastoral resources which our Diocese makes available to assist them on their journey.

This Eucharist will be celebrated during Child Abuse Awareness Month, which goes hand-in-hand with the mission of our child abuse prevention efforts which are quite extensive.

In May of 2009, I published a paper for the people of the Diocese in Brooklyn and Queens entitled, "From Shadow to Light and From Scandal to Healing: the Experience of the Diocese of Brooklyn with the Sex Abuse Scandal."

All volunteers of the Diocese of Brooklyn submit to criminal background searches which are rerun every five years and sign a code of conduct. The code of conduct is a document which acknowledges the importance of legal, professional and responsible conduct of all who work with children and young people. In addition, the Diocese offers extensive training programs.

All volunteers are required to attend the Virtus "Protecting God's Children" training. The Virtus program for adults is a three-hour live awareness session instructing adults of the Church that to protect children you must have continuous awareness and vigilance. This awareness session makes trainees understand the signs of child sexual abuse, the methods and means by which offenders commit abuse, and five empowerment steps one can use to prevent child sexual abuse.

The Diocese also provides safety awareness training for children in our schools and faith formation programs. Child Lures Prevention is a program used to empower children to keep themselves safe from all predators who might harm them.

We certainly will put out into the deep with the celebration of the Eucharist for healing and reconciliation, because it is the first time when we have publicly brought together victims of sexual abuse to pray with/for them as the community of Brooklyn and Queens.

I ask you to join me in praying for these victims that we can assist them by our prayers and support in their healing process. It is the Lord, Himself, the Great Healer, to whom we make this petition.



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