

Forgive and Forget?

By Mona H. Villarrubia

On the way home from a hospital stay several years ago, my husband and I stopped at a toy store to buy presents for our two sons. I did not want to arrive home empty-handed because I wasn't sure of the reception I would receive. I don't remember what we bought the boys, but I do remember we bought me a bear. I named him Hug because he has wide-open arms. I slept with that bear held tight to my chest for many months after returning from the hospital. Recently I began sleeping with him again.

That event followed my first hospital stay for major depression, a general diagnosis of my inability to function. My sons didn't understand what was happening, and they were scared. I understood even less, and I was terrified. But I knew what had brought me to that state. It is the same tragedy that brings me to write this article: as a small child I was sexually molested by a Catholic priest. It didn't happen just once; it happened every couple of weeks for a number of years. I was not the only victim; I know of two others in my immediate and extended family. I was not an altar boy. I was a four-year-old girl.

I did not talk about my experiences until I entered therapy. At that point I was 32 years of age and had two sons. I remained in therapy for seven years but probably should have stayed longer. Many Catholics are wondering why accusations of abuse are being made concerning crimes that were committed 10, 20 or 30 years ago. If there are no sudden, recovered memories of abuse, why speak up now? I did not report my abuse to my bishop, for example, until I was in my 40's. By that time my molester was deceased, and I had already struggled through years of individual and group therapy and two hospital stays. So why did I come forward at that time? What would it serve? Why not just let it go, as some family members had advised? One simple answer is that coming forward helped me heal. Putting the accusation on record made me feel stronger, and I hoped it would encourage other members of my family to do the same.

But I am a Christian; isn't it my duty to forgive and forget? I am a religion teacher, too; isn't it especially hypocritical of me if I don't do this? Catholics have come forward in defense of priests who have been accused of child molestation years ago and have led exemplary lives ever since. These Catholics believe that victims should forgive and forget. In response to these Catholics I suggest that if they have not been abused, they have no right to counsel forgiveness of an abuser; and if they have not been abused, they have nothing to forget. Some years ago in an article on suffering published in U.S. Catholic, the Rev. John Shea suggested that only the sufferer has the right to interpret her own suffering. I would add that only the sufferer has the right to offer forgiveness.

It seemed until the U.S. bishops' meeting in Dallas in June that our church authorities had already forgiven and forgotten. They had forgiven themselves for their poor judgments in

dealing with accused and often admitted pedophile priests, and they had forgotten their responsibilities to the victims of these priests, innocent children whose bodies and trust were violated. The *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* that the bishops approved at their meeting expresses a commitment to provide "counseling, spiritual assistance, support groups, and other social services" to victims and to offer outreach to the victims' families. If this pastoral response is put into effect, then we should see no more of the adversarial approach taken by diocesan lawyers toward alleged victims.

The charter describes the damage caused by sexual abuse of minors as "devastating and long-lasting." I would have been even stronger in my language: the effects of abuse are lifelong. These effects may exist hidden from your awareness for many years, but they affect every relationship you form. And even after you become aware of the levels and degrees of the effect on your life, even after you write and talk about and probe your suffering in therapy for years, even then the effects of abuse continue to maim you.

One priest's single act of pedophilia 20 years ago may have been the result of a moment of drunken weakness. And perhaps that priest has led an exemplary life since then and left his behavior in the past (although I find that very difficult to believe). But the child he touched, the child he masturbated, the child he raped does not have that choice. If you are a victim, you cannot leave it in the past.

Once you have been molested as a child, everything in your life changes. Every relationship with adults is changed by this experience. Every physical touch you receive for the rest of your life can be colored by this experience. Every moment of sexual intimacy has the potential to reconnect you to this experience. Memories of the abuse can surface without warning, triggered by a completely unrelated event. The resultant psychological turmoil experienced by the victim might be temporary and relatively bearable--such as tears, anxiety and sleeplessness--or completely devastating, including suicidal depression, self-mutilation and alcohol or drug abuse.

I cannot forget my abuse. Although days, even weeks, might go by without consciously thinking about being abused, it inevitably resurfaces, and once it does it may remain with me for months. The trigger might be a planned trip home to see my parents, it might be going to Mass, it might be having sex with my husband, or it might be a newspaper article. Whatever the trigger, it serves to remind me once again that the person I am was fundamentally changed by the man who touched me as a child. I am forever a victim of sexual abuse; there is no changing that fact.

The impact of the abuse occurs on an ontological level; it affects who I am at the level of my being. It is part of what defines me. I will never know myself apart from my abuse. What kind of person would I have been? What choices would I have made? What kind of parent or lover might I have been?

The impact of my abuse is also experienced on an emotional and psychological level in the struggle with depression and anxiety, in panic attacks listening to news items dealing

with child abuse and in an inability to really open up to and trust another person.

The impact of the abuse is felt in my relationships with my sons. How can I forget my abuse, when I look at my grown sons and recall the excruciating fear I faced years ago? There is always the fear that I, like so many other victims, might myself become a victimizer and molest my own children, that I might become what I abhorred.

The impact of abuse on sexual intimacy is painfully evident on those days when I feel I cannot breathe if my husband is in bed with me, or when I cannot bear to have him touch me. So, I repeat, victims are unable to forget because the impact of childhood sexual abuse is lifelong and pervasive. I suggest that the impact in the life of an identified pedophile priest should be equally lifelong and pervasive.

But what about God's grace? Can't a priest be forgiven and receive the grace of God to overcome his compulsion to abuse children? As Elizabeth Dryer eloquently expresses it in *Manifestations of Grace*, grace has the power to transform, to bring life out of death, hope out of despair. I firmly believe in God's grace and that I am alive only through the power of God's grace. God's grace is not in question. The issue, however, is not God's grace, but the power of the human person to remain open and respond to that grace. Repentance is not enough. Repentance does not have the power to change a sexual disorder. Our bishops made this assumption in the past with horrific results, but now it has become clear to them: pedophile priests must be taken out of ministry.

In Dallas the bishops heard from victims and responded in a way that many feel went too far, affirming that "for even a single act of sexual abuse...of a minor--past, present, or future--the offending priest or deacon will be permanently removed from ministry." But for many victims, including myself, this was not far enough, because it does not mandate dismissal from the clerical state. Generations of Catholics have been raised to assume that a priest is a safe, trustworthy person; and this deeply ingrained attitude has not been changed by the daily revelations in the news media. If a priest is guilty of child abuse, whenever it occurred, he remains a risk, and his history should be made known. Someone who has abused a child should no longer be allowed to use the title of "Father"; he has forever forfeited that right.

What about forgiveness? From Doris Donnelly (*Learning to Forgive*) I learned that forgiveness allows us to let go of the burden of anger so that we can be free to love. I know that remaining angry hurts me, not my abuser, and I have worked hard to release my anger. But in these last few months I have become angry all over again reading story after story of sexual abuse by priests and the complicity of their bishops. There has been so much pain carried in silence for decades. And there are so many of us. We are lay people; we are priests; we are religious. We are practicing Catholics; we are ex-Catholics. All of us are hurting, and none of us can forget. So how can we forgive? My only response is that for me forgiveness is a journey, not simply a destination, and my journey is far from over.

As a survivor who wishes to remain a Catholic, the most pressing issue right now is not how can I heal (I have learned what I need to do) but how can the church heal? In his opening address in Dallas, Bishop Wilton Gregory called for a "genuine reconciliation within the church...a reconciliation that heals." Such a reconciliation can come about only if we include the priest-abusers. They too are part of our church, and they should not be abandoned. This may seem ironic coming from a victim, but years of struggling with my own compulsions has helped me develop a level of compassion for my abuser and for the struggle I imagine he lived with. Compassion has helped me move closer to forgiveness. I have learned that many pedophiles were themselves bruised and broken in their own childhood in some way. So if the church is to heal, we must reach out with compassion not only to victims like me, but also to those who have abused us.

Dallas was just a beginning. We need to use some form of group interaction or therapy on the local level to heal our church. Can I imagine sitting in a group session with pedophile priests and other victims and being able to breathe, let alone share my story? No. But perhaps that is what needs to happen. It will require lots of professional guidance, but I don't know how else we can move forward. Meetings of victims' groups alone will not bring healing to the community. As church we cannot heal unless it is together. Can I forgive God? When asked this question, my reply is that I do not need to. I do not believe that God sends us suffering in order to teach us a lesson or make us a better person. I am profoundly offended by the suggestion that this crisis has been brought about by God in order to change our church structures or to bring about greater participation by the laity. But I do believe, as Jesus himself modeled, that the greatest challenge for any Christian is to turn evil into good. Great evil has been perpetrated against our children; the pain of healing will be no less than the pain caused by that evil. Our journey to forgiveness and healing will be long.

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