

RESOURCES FOR PRIESTLY MINISTRY IN THE FACE OF CONCERNS ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE CHURCH

Accusations against any priest undermine the faith and well being of all parishioners and the credibility and reputation of all priests. The current national spotlight on sexual abuse of minors by priests and the mishandling of many cases places serious personal and ministerial challenges before all priests. For you, daily life is now more stressful because the issue is everywhere: always “in your face”, on the minds of parishioners, in the eyes of strangers who see you wearing the collar, on every news program and on the lips of those at family gatherings and other meetings. In addition to ministering to others through this crisis, you face your own reactions, such as anger, doubt, isolation, depression, confusion and embarrassment. These reactions wax and wane. Often they change from one day to the next.

QUESTIONS LIKE THESE CROSS THE MINDS OF PRIESTS NOW:

- Should I bring this up in homilies or in prayers of the faithful? And what do I say that can actually help and not do more harm?
- What do people think when they see me wearing the collar? Many look at me differently now.
- People put me on the spot with questions about this all the time—no matter what else I am doing and no matter where I am. Am I supposed to drop whatever I am doing or just avoid the whole thing?

- Why can't the media focus on the faith, fidelity and good done by so many priests in the Church?
- Why has it taken the Church so long to “get this right” and will we get it right this time?
- Why does a person who was abused keep silent for years after it happened and then come forward?
- People ask me why priests and bishops that I've never even met handled things badly. What am I supposed to say to that?
- What credibility do we priests have now as spiritual leaders?
- What would I do if someone accused me of abusing him or her years ago? Or tells me now about abuse by someone I know?
- In the Church's current effort to right past wrongs, what other injustices will be done?
- Can't I just put this out of my mind for a few days and take a breather?
- What am I supposed to do with my anger? Shame?
- Do leaders of the Church understand and accept what parishioners believe about what should be done?
- How did some Church leaders miss the point that sexual abuse is a crime? And is it always a crime?

- Is a “zero tolerance policy” the solution? What new issues will that create?
- Should I avoid being with children or teenagers? Being affectionate with them? Do parents trust me with their kids anymore?
- What about ministering to other priests and lay people I know who were abused as children? Should I reach out to them now?
- Can parishioners be honest with me about how they think and feel about this? Do they still trust me?

SOME EFFORTS TO COPE WITH THE ENSUING STRESS CAN ACTUALLY MAKE THINGS WORSE. THE FOLLOWING DO NOT HELP:

- Avoiding the issue as it affects your own life and the parish life.
- Taking it personally when parishioners bring up the issue.
- Increased drinking, smoking.
- Focusing on this too much.
- Failing to integrate the topic into ministry and parish life.
- Remaining isolated from other priests and parishes who face the same issue.
- Working too much.
- Deciding people will no longer trust you.
- Taking questionable risks regarding boundaries with parishioners.

WHAT HELPS PRIESTS?

- Becoming better informed about the issues at stake here: How victims of sexual abuse recover, why people often remain silent for years, the role of prayer and faith in recovery, legal issues, factors that contribute to boundary violations in ministry, treatment of sexual disorders, etc.
- Identifying ways to minister to people effectively and lead a parish during this crisis.
- Regular self care: Exercise, healthy eating, relaxation, time with family and friends.
- Awareness of the effect of media coverage about this on you and taking a break when it is too much.
- Prayer, both personal and communal about how this issue affects you and those you serve.
- Dialogue and collaboration with lay parish leaders about how to use this crisis to strengthen parish life.
- Participation in and organizing meetings, celebrations and other gatherings of fellow priests.
- Quiet reflection on and conversations about good things done by priests you know.
- Reflection on Scripture passages and events in Church history when God brought good out of evil.
- Consultation and resources on how to minister during this crisis (see *“What Helps Parishioners?”*).
- Spiritual direction and personal counseling.

WHAT HELPS PARISHIONERS?

For most people, their local parish is the Church. It is heartening and helpful when they see that despite this problem, they will continue to find that Church at their parish. In addition, their faith life will be strengthened if they see that their local parish can face these questions with realistic hope and help them face it, too. This problem will be with us for many months, perhaps years. Effective leadership will require looking at the parish response as a process that will suggest different strategies and activities at different times. The following suggestions may help to organize that process:

- Priests maintaining a strong presence, support and leadership at parish functions and events: School, religious education, sacraments, visits to the sick, etc. Although some people now have mixed feelings about priests, most people feel reassured when their priests do not withdraw from them.
- Openness and availability of the parish staff; providing forums or listening sessions to talk about this. Bringing up the topic to parishioners and asking how you and the parish leaders can help them.
- Identifying the specific needs your parishioners have at this time and providing events, activities and resources to address those needs.
- “Checking in” regularly with parish staff, parish board and reflection on how to use this crisis to revitalize the parish and its mission.

- Listening with acceptance to parishioners’ thoughts and feelings about this issue.
- Providing parishioners with resources to answer any questions they may have: Archdiocesan policies, Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, the role of the American College of Bishops, phone numbers and functions of the Office of Assistance Ministry and the Vicar for Priests, educational programs, discussions and materials on this topic, such as sexual abuse, professional boundaries in ministry, fitness for ministry.
- Providing parishioners with the names and addresses of national and archdiocesan Church leaders to whom they can convey their thoughts, feelings and suggestions for how the Church should handle this crisis.
- Providing resources to parents and teachers about how to talk to children and adolescents about sexual abuse and about the current issue in the Church.
- Integrating this issue into the prayer life of the parish; homilies and prayers of the faithful.
- Respect and sensitivity to all opinions. It is very important to be aware that many parishioners were sexually abused by someone in their lives; others may have personal or family experience with being accused and/or falsely accused. General opinions from priests or other members of the parish staff about why victims or perpetrators do things can be very destructive.

Christ promised to remain with us always—through the most difficult of times. With his help, we will meet the challenges before us and renew our parishes and our Church.