

3-14-08 - Bringing Clergy Abuse Out of the Darkness

By Christine Chagaris, Greenwich Citizen



Helen McGonigle, an attorney from Brookfield and a survivor of clergy abuse, speaks about her experiences at the Voice of the Faithful meeting at Christ Church.

Those gathered in the auditorium of Greenwich's Christ Church Saturday listened attentively as John Marshall Lee, chairman of Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport's chapter, addressed a topic that is current and weighty.

The topic concerned abuses across the board - from sexual to financial - in the Catholic Church, abuses both alleged and those proved by the courts over the last 60 years.

Lee acknowledged that it is vital to have all of the facts for each abuse case but noted grimly, "Many survivors of abuse have lawsuits that follow after three decades, because people in the Church hierarchy, such as bishops, generally don't seem to want to acknowledge anybody over the age of 25 with any kind of payout."

Voice of the Faithful is a national organization comprised of Catholic parishioners, with a membership in excess of 40,000, whose purpose is threefold: "To support those who have been abused, to support priests of integrity, and to shape structural change within the Church."

The theme of Church accountability regarding abuse claims was foremost on the agenda. Members of a visiting group, BishopAccountability.org, were also on hand to present their findings as well as offer recommendations regarding remedies for the problem.

It was noted in the meeting that approximately 66 percent, or roughly two-thirds, of the parishes in the Roman Catholic Bridgeport Diocese (which encompasses all of Fairfield County), are known to have had a priest accused of abuse in their rectories.

Some of these clergy, according to Lee's group, are not documented but are known, and others are kept private so there is no precise actual number. One case in Fairfield County that has received recent notoriety is that of Rev. Michael Moynihan, formerly the pastor at St. Michael Church in Greenwich.

Church officials found that Moynihan could not provide an explanation for over \$400,000 in church funds that were kept in hidden accounts to which he had access. The Diocese of Bridgeport contacted federal authorities regarding these circumstances, and last month Moynihan was stripped of his duties as a member of the clergy after his living situation with his parish's former children's choir director - a man - came to light.

BishopAccountability.org seeks to archive and document such cases online so that people can have a central site to visit to reference names and data relating to abuse cases. The group has compiled records of thousands of churches and other establishments (such as hospitals) where accused clergy have been assigned, according to Suzy Nauman, an organization board member.

The Boston-based nonprofit group compiles information from all sides of the issue, stressed president Terry McKiernan. "We don't say any clergy member (or person associated with the Church) is guilty. We present data that is out there, which people can access by visiting our site," he said.

The organization hopes to place 40,000 pages of documents online - in addition to those already on its Web site - spanning those from the court system and the various dioceses- to the Vatican in the near future. They also are looking to add 10,000 pages this year from treatment centers for abuse survivors.

One meeting attendee posed the question of whether some abuse claims may be false. McKiernan responded by saying although he is a skeptical person by nature, he acknowledges there have been people who have come forth with fraudulent abuse claims.

"Generally, survivors' memories don't die," he said. "A priest who was a therapist for abuse survivors told me that where there is smoke, there is almost always fire.

"So many survivors have been open about the fact that they are putting their names and lives on the line by coming forward. We hope that the survivors who haven't come forward are emboldened when they see the data."

Anne Barrett Doyle, a board member of the organization, noted that the potential is likely that abuse cases may be more widespread than those currently documented.

"The bigger focus has to be on the survivors that never talk about what happened to them for a variety of reasons, such as shame and embarrassment," she stated.

She also said that many cases have not gone to trial and therefore have no opportunity for proof because the statute of limitations in many states presents settlement problems. "Most of the settlement monies come from the particular diocese, and many dioceses have declared bankruptcy, which stops the discovery process."

One positive sign that was noted is that the state of Connecticut recently raised the age limit to 48 for its statute of limitations on persons filing cases of abuse with the court system.

One survivor who has candidly come forward with her compelling story was Helen McGonigle, a Brookfield-based attorney and Church abuse survivor, who was also a speaker at the meeting.

McGonigle, who advocates on behalf of those affirming Church abuse among other clients, had an unwelcome awakening of sorts in 2005 when she says that she began to remember the trauma she endured at the hands of a priest named Rev. Brendan Smyth, who was later arrested and convicted of many counts of sexual abuse of minors in the U.S. and Ireland. Smyth, known as "Father Gerry," was a parish priest during her childhood in Rhode Island. She recounts the years of abuse as being from 1967-71. McGonigle subsequently located another of Smyth's victims online in 2007.

"It's strange, but I had disassociated amnesia about my abuse where I blocked it out," she said. "Anything having to do with church, such as attending services or my wedding, which I sobbed through, I avoided as it brought back bad memories. I had worked with survivors of sexual abuse, but not specifically clergy abuse until my memory fully returned, because it was too painful to do so."

McGonigle recounted that it was later revealed the priest also abused her late sister and her neighbor's son, as well as countless other survivors who corroborated her story with their own. McGonigle secured a letter from the vicar of the Diocese of Providence acknowledging the abuse, and the diocese has paid for her treatment to deal with its after-effects. Smyth died in prison in 1997.

A book detailing the Smyth cases, *Betrayal of Trust, the Father Brendan Smyth Affair and the Catholic Church*, was written by Chris Moore.

McGonigle said that she still has faith, which she counts on to help her take steps to reform accountability of abuses in the Church. She went on to say that the problem with accountability among

abusive clergy is that dioceses shuffle many of these priests from parish to parish, which helps to keep cases under the radar and make abuse incidences hard to track.

Such was the case with Smyth, who served at different parishes around the U.S. and Ireland before being convicted. Both groups present agreed that it is vital for several things to happen to properly address the problem of clergy abuse. One important step they recommend is to mobilize to pressure Pope Benedict and Cardinal Edward M. Egan of the Archdiocese of New York - and former bishop of Bridgeport - to release files of priests who have been accused of abuse to more accurately and fully document cases.

"In addition to shining the spotlight on Cardinal Egan, we must start locally by reaching out to still-silent abuse survivors in the Bridgeport Diocese, and push legislation that will benefit survivors," said Barrett Doyle.

Lee summed up the impassioned mood of the meeting by asserting its goals. "As a group, we have to practice openness and let people know the facts of what is going on with clergy abuse," he said. "We can be hopeful and make our movement solid. The more people that are in the mix, the better off we are."