

8-16-08 - A Garden of Healing Can Divide as Well
By JESSE MCKINLEY, The New York Times

The interior of Oakland's nearly completed cathedral is striking, but perhaps the most notable thing is outside: a garden devoted to victims of priests' sexual abuse.

OAKLAND, Calif. — Rising on the shores of Lake Merritt, the Cathedral of Christ the Light in downtown Oakland is striking. Its glass exterior shimmers, its nave is ringed in Douglas fir, and a high-tech image of Jesus floats above its marble altar.

The garden, which has split members of the Oakland Diocese as well as victims, was developed by Terrie Light Jennifer Chapin, both sexually abused as children by a priest.

But for all that, what may be most remarkable about the \$190 million Roman Catholic cathedral, now nearly completed, is a small garden devoted to a group whose very existence was long hidden from view: victims of sexual abuse by priests.

While some parishes have offered exhibits, small memorials or apology Masses dedicated to victims, the "healing garden" here will be the largest and most prominent recognition of the scandal ever built at an American cathedral.

Even before its scheduled opening in October, the garden has touched on the delicate and often contentious issue of how to acknowledge a scandal that has shattered the Roman Catholic church for much of the decade. Its presence has divided some church members as well as victims and their advocates, who feel that the display threatens to cast a note of closure over an issue they consider still painfully alive.

"To me, it's an empty gesture," said the Rev. Thomas Doyle, who has fought sexual abuse in the church since the early 1980s. "It would be the same as if in 1946 the German government said let's put up a statue to the victims of the Holocaust and said let's be done with that."

The cathedral's provost, the Rev. Paul D. Minnihan, disagrees, saying the garden provides a permanent recognition of past sins and "a venue where healing can continue."

"It's not just built for a hundred years," Father Minnihan said, "but hundreds and hundreds of years."

But some parishioners inside the diocese are not so sure about its long-term usefulness.

"Setting up these little gardens for people to stroll around and feel nice is one of these feel-good California-style exercises," said Michael Arata, a member of the diocese from nearby Danville. "And I don't see a practical benefit for something like that."

What makes the debate in Oakland all the more fragile is that the garden was developed by two women who were both sexually abused as children by a priest from the Oakland Diocese.

Those victims are Jennifer Chapin, 35, and Terrie Light, 57, who says she is not surprised that the garden has met with skepticism.

"Look, 99 percent of survivors might think this is stupid and meaningless," Ms. Light said. "But there might be a few people who say, 'This is everything to me.' And then for them, it would be worthwhile."

Oakland is not the only diocese dealing with how to address the scandal publicly. Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral in Los Angeles recently drew an angry reaction from some when a chapel devoted to victims of sexual abuse, including a large wooden cross covered with pictures of young victims, was converted to another cause.

Tod Tamberg, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which agreed to pay \$660 million to victims last year, confirmed that the cathedral had moved the cross to its archives and rededicated the chapel to the victims of violence in Darfur.

Mr. Tamberg said the healing process in the archdiocese had moved beyond things like the exhibit to more concrete measures and pointed to the opening of a victims assistance office, new policies to deal with complaints of abuse, and meetings between victims and Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, archbishop of Los Angeles.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said memorials to victims were a mixed blessing.

"It's easy for church officials to make symbolic gestures like this, in part — without being cynical — because it's good P.R.," Mr. Clohessy said. "But prayers and memorials are not a substitute for real, concrete change."

He added that memorials were often welcomed because "many survivors' expectations and hopes are so minimal."

"So it's important psychologically for some to get any kind of validation," he said.

Ms. Chapin received her first validation in January 2004: a \$3 million settlement from the church for having been repeatedly raped by a priest as a child. About a year after the settlement, she approached the diocese — whose previous cathedral had been rendered unusable by the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 — about some sort of memorial, and thought an outside garden might be apt.

"A lot of survivors won't go inside a church," she said. "So we wanted something that wouldn't make people go inside."

To make her case, Ms. Chapin enlisted the help of Sister Barbara Flannery, former chancellor of the diocese, who founded an outreach ministry for victims, No More Secrets, with Ms. Light and others in 2002.

Sister Flannery urged the church to consider the garden. "I figured if they could spend that much money on the cathedral," she said, "we should have something for the survivors."

The church eventually agreed to the garden, and that it be designed by victims, not church officials.

Ms. Light, Ms. Chapin and a small group of other survivors met with Craig Hartman, the cathedral's design architect, who suggested a sculptor for what would become the garden's central image: a stone broken in three pieces.

Ms. Chapin said the sculpture deeply resonated with her.

"It's smooth on top, but below it's very rough, which is like a lot of survivors," she said. "And it's a man-made break. It's trying to come together, but it can't ever heal completely."

A plaque at the site will say: "We remember, and we affirm. Never again."

For now, the garden is little more than a barren triangle outside the back door of the cathedral. The final design provides for two benches, rows of hedges and little else — a compromise between a more lush original vision on one hand and design and logistical issues on the other. Ms. Light finds it sparer than she would have liked, but is satisfied nonetheless.

"I think the important part about it is that it exists," she said. "It's a physical statement. And it's going to be really hard to pull this up and pretend it wasn't there."