

May 12, 2007 - Voice of the Faithful meets in Cincinnati
The Catholic Telegraph, by Eileen Connelly, OSU

Welcome to the online edition of The Catholic Telegraph, the official newspaper of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati Serving 500,000 Catholics in the southwest Ohio counties of: Adams, Auglaize, Brown, Butler, Champaign, Clark, Clermont, Clinton, Darke, Greene, Hamilton, Highland, Logan, Mercer, Miami, Montgomery, Preble, Shelby and Warren.

ARCHDIOCESE - What is being done about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Cincinnati and nationwide? How can our community work together to ensure that the abuse of children will never again be tolerated?

These and other questions were the focus of "A Gathering for Justice: Sexual Abuse, Secrecy and Healing," sponsored by Greater Cincinnati Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) on April 28 at Xavier University's Cintas Center. More than 200 people registered and attended the daylong event, which came near the end of national Child Abuse Prevention Month and was geared toward raising awareness and educating the community about sexual abuse.

"Our church and our community have had numerous and tragic outcomes from abuse, and we need to take steps to better recognize the signs of abusive relationships and work toward effective measures for overcoming the shroud of 'secrecy' that allows abuse to continue," explained Kathy Weyer, VOTF coordinating committee member and one of the conference organizers.

The conference began with David Hoehne, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, sharing his experience and the impact it had on his life. Hoehne, who was 12 when he was abused by the pastor of his parish in west-central Ohio, still remembers the painful details and said, "These memories never leave or fade away."

As a result of the abuse, Hoehne, now 39, said, "I lost my religion. I lost my faith in God."

Hoehne's wife, Brenda, and parents, Larry and Ginny Hoehne, also spoke, and his mother said, "The thought that a man of God, someone we trusted above all the men on this planet, would hurt my child was almost overwhelming."

The priest in question admitted to the abuse and has since been permanently removed from priestly ministry by the Vatican.

The conference came in the wake of a report recently released by the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops regarding the church's protection reforms indicating that the number of sex abuse cases received by the bishops and religious orders has decreased. According to the survey, which included nearly all 195 U.S. dioceses and non-geographic districts, there were 1,092 abuse claims in 2004, 783 in 2004 and 714 last year. In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, there were 23 abuse allegations brought forward in 2004, 44 in 2005 and two in 2006.

Ginny Hoehne noted that true justice for abuse victims doesn't come from a monetary settlement but in the "form of accountability, truthfulness, openness and transparency from the bishops, cardinals and popes."

The keynote speakers for the conference, Dominican Father Thomas Doyle, A.W.R Sipe and Patrick Wall, authors of Sex, Priests and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church's 2,000-Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse, echoed Hoehne's sentiments in their respective presentations. Father Doyle spoke of the need for greater pastoral outreach to abuse victims. "There are some well-meaning, well-intentioned men in the hierarchy that want to do the right thing, but they're formed to believe that's through programs," he said.

In terms of pastoral outreach, Dan Andriacco, director of communications for the archdiocese, responded in interview. "We can never do enough. That's something we've talked about internally for sometime. We keep trying to find ways to reach out pastorally to the victims and improve the policies and procedures that we have to protect our children."

The afternoon sessions of the conference offered attendees the opportunity to hear from speakers who are committed to helping survivors of sexual abuse. They included Liz Harvey, executive director and founder of Transformation House, an organization that is pioneering an effort in restorative justice for violent crimes, which seeks to put a human face on victims and offenders, and Rebecca Born, founder and director of Connections, A Safe Place, Inc., a resource center for female survivors of sexual abuse.

The question-and-answer period that followed highlighted many areas of concern about the problem of sexual abuse and how the church and community are struggling to address them, noted Weyer, and the "What now?" discussion brought several suggestions, such as educating the larger community about the issues, the need to work for financial disclosure by the church, continuing legislative efforts to protect children, naming perpetrators, teaching parents about the grooming process and what warning signs to look for, and endorsing political candidates that support the protection of children and justice for victims.