

April 29, 2007 - Examining church sex abuse
Cincinnati (OH) Enquirer, by John Johnston

Justice promoted, awareness raised at [VOTF] forum

David Hoehne still fights an emotional and spiritual battle 27 years after he was sexually abused by the priest of his Catholic parish.

Hoehne was 12 when it happened. He remembers that the headboard of the bed where the abuse occurred was against the western wall. The comforter on the bed was white. He remembers where he sat, where his molester stood, where the abuser's hand went.

"These memories never leave or fade away," the 39-year-old Akron man told about 150 people on Saturday at a sexual abuse conference at Xavier University's Cintas Center.

Issues surrounding the church's sex-abuse crisis won't go away, either. That was a key message of the daylong conference, titled "A Gathering for Justice: Sexual Abuse, Secrecy and Healing." It was presented by the Cincinnati chapter of Voice of the Faithful, a national organization formed in response to the clergy sex-abuse scandals.

"It's not just a Catholic issue," said Christi Eisenberg, chairwoman of Cincinnati Voice of the Faithful. "We want all of society to be aware of (sexual abuse) and do something about it."

David Hoehne, his wife, Brenda, and his parents, Larry and Ginny Hoehne, all spoke. But David's talk was particularly emotional.

As a result of the abuse, "I lost my religion. I lost my faith in God," he said. His first marriage lasted only a year.

Hoehne said he was abused in a rectory of a parish in west-central Ohio, where his parents still live. He didn't muster the courage to tell them until 15 years later.

"The thought that a man of God, someone we trusted above all men on this planet, would hurt my child was almost more than my mind could grasp," Ginny Hoehne said.

The priest admitted the abuse in 2002 and was permanently removed from priestly ministry by the Vatican, according to the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. Hoehne sued the priest, but the case was dismissed.

Hoehne had filed the suit after the statute of limitations had expired.

Saturday's conference came two weeks after a report was released on the Roman Catholic Church's child protection reforms. It said the number of clergy sex-abuse claims received by the nation's Catholic bishops and religious orders has dropped.

There were 1,092 abuse claims in 2004, 783 in 2005 and 714 in 2006. The vast majority of the allegations date back decades. The survey, which included nearly all 195 U.S. dioceses and non-geographic districts, was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

The Archdiocese of Cincinnati says there were 23 abuse allegations brought forward in 2004; 44 in 2005; and two in 2006.

The Hoehnes want people to know that the anguish of abuse, for them and for many others, continues.

Ginny Hoehne said that "for us, justice does not mean a monetary settlement, although I believe all victims are deserving of that. Rather, for us, justice comes in the form of accountability, truthfulness, openness and financial transparency from the bishops, cardinals and pope."

Hoehne and other conference speakers said church leaders have been slow to deal with abusers and make changes to safeguard children. She criticized church officials for

lobbying against a provision in an Ohio Senate bill last year that would have allowed victims of sexual abuse to sue their abusers up to 35 years after the offense.

Church officials said it made little sense to reopen decades-old cases that would be difficult to prove. The provision was dropped from the bill.

Thomas Doyle, a Dominican priest from Virginia and one of the conference's keynote speakers, said policy changes that Catholic bishops have made have come about only because of pressure from courts, legislatures and the news media.

Doyle, co-author of "Sex, Priests and Secret Codes," also criticized the lack of pastoral outreach to victims. "A letter that says, 'We're sorry this happened' does nothing but insult (people)."

Reached at home, Dan Andriacco, the spokesman for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, said: "Archbishop (Daniel) Pilarczyk on many occasions has met with victims who are willing to meet with him. I don't think we can ever do enough."

One positive thing that's come from the sex-abuse crisis, Doyle said, is that people are discovering they don't need to rely on an institution; rather, "the reality (is) that the kingdom of Christ is within (each of) us."

David Hoehne discovered that. In the years after being abused, he drifted further from God. But he eventually met Brenda, his second wife. He's now a stepfather of three.

"Although I am no longer Catholic," he said, "it has been with (my family's) love and support that I have been able to begin my journey back to God."