

(KY) Something Very Special

A report received from Vince Grenough, Coordinator, Louisville area Voice of the Faithful

Dear members and supporters of Voice of the Faithful,

Every once in a while something very special happens. That is what occurred this past week on Saturday, January 23.

The Trappist monks at the abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky invited a group of people to come to the abbey. These people are all affected by the clergy sex abuse scandal in the Archdiocese of Louisville. They are also members of the Louisville area Voice of the Faithful. Five of them are victims/survivors of childhood sexual abuse by priests - four men and one woman. Also in the group were two spouses and two young adult children of the survivors. The group also included two leaders of the VOTF affiliate.

The monks said they wanted to listen to all of their stories. The time set aside for our meeting with the monks was somewhat short for this many speakers, therefore everyone in the group was invited to send, ahead of time, their own personal story of the abuse they endured when they were children. These stories were all made available to the monks to see in the days before the visit.

Trappist monks place a very high value on silence and on contemplative solitude. Why would they do something as unusual as this? The answer became very clear as the day progressed: Because they care that much about the healing of those in pain. In planning for the event Abbot Damien Thompson said he could not predict how many of the monks might accept his invitation to participate in something like this. The visiting group hoped that at least 10 or 12 monks would be there during the listening and dialogue session in the Chapter Room. Any more than that would be beyond expectations.

As it turned out almost every one of the 50 or so monks came! Everyone sat in a large circle in the spartan Chapter room. After brief opening remarks each person stated his/her name. Then, one by one, the visitors told how their lives are impacted every day as a result of what was done to them when they were very young.

The first speaker, a survivor who was abused at Holy Spirit church, displayed a large map of the Louisville area that contained numerous colored dots to indicate all of the parishes (more than 50!) where abuse is known to have occurred. Other colored dots indicate where known or credibly accused abusers (over 30!) were stationed at one time or another. Two parishes had five different known or credibly accused priests stationed at them: St. Elizabeth in Louisville and St. Joseph proto-Cathedral in Bardstown. The map also shows that many of the abusers were stationed, at some time, in the "Holy Land of Kentucky", the three-county area of Marion, Nelson and Washington counties. The abbey of Gethsemani is in Nelson county.

One must wonder how many people in that area live with the terrible effects of childhood abuse. He and the other survivors told how they have been treated as a result of talking publicly about what happened to them; especially how their accusations were responded to by the bishop and by other diocesan personnel. These were difficult stories to hear. The monks listened with obvious dismay, but also with great compassion and concern. Some had questions, to which the group members responded.

One survivor spoke highly of several priests and one deacon who responded as Jesus would have responded. From the Chapter room everyone went directly to the abbey church for the chanting of Vespers. At the end of the service Abbot Damien stood before the assembly and invited all to pray for intentions of healing, forgiveness and conversion.

After Vespers the group of visitors, Abbot Damien and the monks who are the counselors of the abbey walked across the road to the abbey guesthouse to eat dinner together. The various conversations that took place were animated and were punctuated with expressions of deep concern, but also occasionally by good, relaxed humor. The group returned to the abbey church for Compline, the evening prayer of the monks. Then it was time to leave.

During the drive back to Louisville some of the survivors who normally cannot stand to go near a Catholic church said that they want to go back to the abbey - soon and often.

Author's comments: I began this description by saying that every once in a while something very special happens. I wish I had the words to adequately express my gratitude, and that of our group, to the monks of Gethsemani for doing this remarkable thing. I am hopeful that the healing that happened that day will encourage others to plan similar healing events in our local church. It is not only the victims/survivors who need healing. It is all of us.

Vince Grenough, Coordinator, Louisville area Voice of the Faithful