

Hurt, angered by abuse scandal, Catholics gather to seek healing

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Catholics burdened by how their church leaders tucked decades of sexual abuse by priests into shadows left a North Naples mass Wednesday feeling lighter.

Nearly 500 attendees packed pews at the spacious St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church for the noon mass pulled together by the Southwest Florida chapter of Voice of the Faithful.

The group with 40,000 members nationwide was formed by lay people to respond to unraveling scandals and to support sexual abuse victims and innocent priests.

Devout Catholics compared the church response's to sexual abuse to familial deception.

"It was just like being viscerally hurt by your family. There was a lot of anger," said Peg Clark of East Naples, president of the local chapter.

Of Wednesday's mass, Clark said: "I could feel the embrace. Everything today clicked . . . There was definitely community there."

The Rev. Thomas Glackin, pastor of St. John the Evangelist in North Naples, led the Voice of the Faithful healing mass that attracted the largest turnout in its third year. He urged the people to persist.

"The bishops and priests are human beings. They, like you, fear change," he said. "Keep voicing your ideas to the Catholic Church. You may be scorned as trying to take over the Catholic Church but don't give up."

He likened the people's roles to rodeo clowns but not in a disparaging way, he assured.

"Who do they call in to save the bucking rider?"

The clowns, people softly responded, waiting to see if it was the right answer.

"You are the clowns," he said, eliciting chuckles from the group. "The Church is hurting, the Church is healing, the Church needs help. Bring in the clowns. We are counting on you."

Most clapped when Glackin ended.

"Now we're going to give those who want to boo a chance," he retorted, but no one did.

Some sang #454 in the blue hymnals a bit louder, even if they were off-key.

"Longing for light, we wait in the darkness. Longing for truth, we turn to you. Make us your own, your holy people, light for the world to see," sang the crowd, made up mostly of retirees who came wearing khaki shorts, loafers and lime-colored golf shirts.

Four priests from Chicago, San Marco Catholic Church in Marco Island, St. Leo's Catholic Church in Bonita Springs and another from St. John the Evangelist stood alongside Glackin.

After the mass, about half filtered out while many stayed to listen to Clark. She urged attendees to personalize victims and to use their time to spur needed change within the church hierarchy.

Phyllis Owen, a retired New York City grade school teacher and Island Walk resident, felt hopeful about her religion's future after the mass.

"Nothing should be hidden because it might create scandal. Now we're in a culture where that can't exist anymore," said Owen, adding: "It's going to take us 50 years to be healed."