

Priests hear victims' pain

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Choking back tears - and provoking tears among some of the hundreds of priests in the audience - local victims of clergy sexual abuse yesterday recounted the rapes and seductions that made havoc of their lives, and called on the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to do more for victims.

"I hope... you will take a glimpse at the torture and pain some of your brothers have inflicted on these innocent children," the mother of two abused sons told a gathering of about 500 priests, bishops and seminarians at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood.

"The fallout is indescribable," said the woman, who gave her name only as Grace. Her sons, now adults, became suicidal and alcoholic, and were deeply compromised as husbands and fathers, she said. One son is in prison.

The second speaker, Victoria Cubberley, 56, told in gruesome detail how, when she was a teenager, three archdiocesan priests exploited the chaos brought about by her abusive parents by forcing her to have sex after she sought their help.

"This speech is but a whisper of the horrific screams that reverberate through my being to this very day," Cubberley said.

The final speaker, 44-year-old Ed Morris - who said he was too upset by the memories of his abuse to write a detailed script for remarks - was powerful nonetheless.

"It's as if the priest has sucked the soul out of the person and replaced it with just a vacuum, a deadness," Morris said.

Yesterday's event at the seminary, called "Witness to the Sorrow," was unprecedented in the history of the archdiocese.

Mary Achilles, the archdiocese's victims' assistance coordinator, said it was timed in part to mark the first anniversary of a scathing Philadelphia grand jury report on sex abuse in the archdiocese.

The grand jury's 40-month investigation, coordinated by the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office, found that as many as 169 archdiocesan priests had assaulted hundreds of minors over five decades.

The grand jury report also accused the late Cardinal John Krol and Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of an "immoral coverup" of the abuse.

Cardinal Justin Rigali, the current archbishop, chose the feast day of Our Mother of Sorrows for the gathering, and urged all priests in the archdiocese to attend.

"During this past year we have read victims' stories, but it is extremely important that we as priests hear the victims' stories firsthand," Rigali told the assembled clergy. "Now we will see the human face and hear the human voice, rather than read words on the printed page."

The gathering was private and public. The only news agency allowed inside was the Associated Press, but the service was shown live on a streaming video on the archdiocese's Web site.

The archdiocese has said it plans to archive the video on its site, www.archdiocese-phl.org/index.php.

Some criticized the archdiocese's effort at reconciliation as being little more than public relations.

John Salvesson, former president of Philadelphia chapter of the Survivors' Network of Those Abused by Priests, said he was not impressed by the display of contrition.

He likened it to the former president of Enron Corp. "calling a meeting of all the employees whose pensions he stole, and hearing their pain, and then doing nothing to help them."

"They could have used their time much better in Harrisburg, promoting legislative reform" on child sex abuse, and explaining the whereabouts of 64 unnamed priests identified by the grand jury report as possible abusers, he said.

He said he tried to attend the meeting but was turned down.

If he had been inside, he would have heard Morris liken the sexual abuse inflicted by priests to the bandages on putrefied flesh.

"You gentlemen have to smell the bandages that were caused by your brother priests," he said.

A clean-smelling bandage is a sign of health and improvement, he said, but then turned to Rigali, who sat on the stage nearby.

"Your Eminence, with all due respect, it still smells bad," Morris said. "The wounds that have been caused have been superficially wrapped."

Rigali did not respond verbally to the speakers, who spoke for about one hour.

Afterward, the clergy members filed into the seminary chapel for a prayer service, where they sang familiar hymns and recited prayers and a litany.

The prayer service made no direct mention of the previous event, but included three brief references to victims of sex abuse in the litany.

After the prayer service, some of the priests and seminarians talked with reporters outside the chapel.

"I'm personally shocked and saddened and offended by the stories," said the Rev. Joseph McLoone of St. Katharine Drexel parish in Chester. "You know the people in these places and you feel sorry for them. I was really touched.

"I thank the cardinal for inviting us," he said. "I just think it's important for us to be more conscious of the pain and suffering that's still out there."

The Rev. George Majoros, of Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Bustleton, a priest for 27 years, described the event as a "very profound experience" that would "propel me to be a bridge to any victim or families who have been hurt. I have a better sense of who I need to be."

"We need to be compassionate, better listeners. We need to protect the most vulnerable at all times. We need to listen more to the victims like we did tonight," Majoros said. "My hope is that their tears will help show us how to make things better - that this never happens again."

Keith Chylinski, last-year seminarian and a deacon at St. Denis in Havertown, described himself as "deeply moved by the whole thing... . It's one thing to read about it, but when you see them face to face, the reality hits you."

The seminary has addressed the issue of clergy abuse, he said, adding that "it's given me greater resolve for us to be holy priests. That's going to be the only solution to all of this."

Msgr. Timothy Senior, vicar for clergy for the archdiocese and host of yesterday's gathering, said: "You're just struck by the pain. When you hear it spoken, it commands silence. The courage of those individuals to share so openly, so honestly, in that setting was incredibly powerful."