

Painful issue requires forthright action

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

I had the privilege last week of giving the keynote address to the 45th annual meeting of the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Other Drug Related Issues. Their theme was "Dare We Hear The Pain."

Although the meeting's primary emphasis was on the sexual abuse of children by clergy, the council's request of me was that I reflect on the experience I have had of listening to people in two specific areas: the concerns of women in the church and the work of our diocesan Synod.

As is so often the case with such invitations, the request of the NCCA provided an occasion to revisit some significant moments in my life and ministry, to understand them more deeply, to make some connections with other realities, to articulate my thoughts with the hope that they might stimulate the group as they gathered for their program.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have spoken to the group, but more so for the chance I had to remain for a substantial portion of the program. It was not an easy experience because their primary subject was a painful one. But it was helpful to remain, in that people who have done considerable work in the field shared their experience and insight with us. Among them was Father Canice Connors, a Franciscan priest who is director of St. Luke's Institute, a treatment center for priests suffering from addiction.

Canice's presentation was based in part on research being done at the institute. I found it very helpful — and hopeful — because it enabled me to understand better than I have before some of the complexities of the issue. That's because the experience Canice and his colleagues have had in this field, and the research they have done, provide help in dealing with the question in a more objective, long-range fashion.

I think of two areas in which we have learned a great deal and in which we need to continue to learn. One of these areas is the profound and long-range impact the sexual abuse of children by clergy has on those abused. The violation is



A LONG THE WAY

not confined to an act of abuse or to a series of acts of abuse. That kind of harm would be harm enough. What may be even worse is the damage it does to the capacity of the abused person to form future relationships based on trust. Further, evidence suggests that abused people can become abusers.

A second area about which we are learning more is the nature and origins of sexually abusive behavior. Research suggests that such behavior can be rooted in personality disorders that give rise to addictive behavior.

If that is the case, then we need to look seriously at the treatment of persons who behave in this way. At least we should be willing to look at the questions raised by the research. If addiction is involved in such behavior, how much freedom does the perpetrator enjoy? And if there is little freedom, can there be any reasonable hope for reconciliation and rehabilitation?

There has been remarkable progress made in recognizing the addictive nature of alcoholism. Thank God, many individuals who suffer from that disease now enjoy a healthy sobriety. Can we

hope for similar progress in sexual addictions?

It would be unfair to the people at St. Luke's to try to summarize their work here. But what I would like to do is invite your thought and reflection on the following list of notes I jotted down on the way home from the meeting:

a.) We can not deal honestly with this painful issue unless we make our top priority the safety and well-being of our children. There is no excuse for exposing them to harm, no excuse for failing to support their healing and recovery if they are harmed.

b.) Clergy must take responsibility for their behavior whenever that behavior causes damage to another person, and especially when it harms children. But when such behavior is rooted in personality disorder and/or addiction, we must commit ourselves to rehabilitation of the individual.

c.) Research indicates that sexually abusive conduct arises often from personality disorders that give rise to addictive behavior. We need to pursue that. Ultimately, it is the best road to safety and good health for all concerned.

d.) It does not serve truth to imply that such behavior is rampant among our clergy. It is not. The vast majority of our clergy cherish, nurture and support the children they serve. Nor does it serve the truth to imply that the abuse of children happens primarily at the hands of clergy. The vast majority of instances of the sexual abuse of children take place in the home at the hands of male relatives. Even so, one case of abuse by clergy is one too many.

e.) We all need to deal with the truth of this issue, even when doing so causes pain. But we also need to deal with it fairly, avoiding courses of action that are short-sighted.

As we all know, this is an enormously painful issue for a great number of people. We need to recognize that and deal with it as honestly and as forthrightly as we can. That is not easy, but to the degree that we conduct ourselves in that way, we are traveling a path to healing and good health.

Peace to all.

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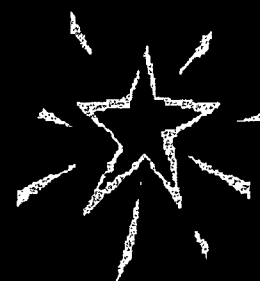
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