

CONTINUED...

Healing

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a priest, and encourage others to enter the priesthood."

Although he has received nothing but support from parishioners, Father Della Pietra says he has been affected by the fact that credible allegations of sexually abuse of minors have been made against priests, both locally and nationally.

"I'm looking at myself with different eyes," Father Della Pietra said. "I'm wondering what people are thinking sometimes."

Even so, he has tried to minister to his parishioners as normal, which includes receiving hugs from children in the parish when he stands on the back steps of the church after Mass.

"I have not let (the abuse scandal) affect my ministry," Father Della Pietra said. "In some cases, that has been a conscious decision. I'm really still trying to be myself. It's a challenge."

Father John Hayes, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Livonia and St. William Parish in Conesus, has felt that same challenge. And he is angry that a small group of priests here and elsewhere has affected all priests.

"The last thing I would want to do is hurt a child or anyone," said Father Hayes, who just celebrated his 15th anniversary of ordination. "There is no way we can't be affected by this."

Father Hayes also has received support from his parishioners. At Mass recently, he read a letter from Bishop Clark outlining the diocese's tougher policy against priests who sexually abuse minors and the fact that three pastors were forced to resign. After Mass, Father Hayes said, parishioners came up to him, offering words of encouragement and support.

"To receive that, it means a great deal to me," he said.

Yet Father Hayes said he has not felt the same sense of acceptance from those who do not know him.

For example, Father Hayes and two other priests decided to go to lunch together after attending a funeral May 10. The three were dressed in clerical clothing, and Father Hayes said they received curious stares from other restaurant patrons. The looks seemed to question whether they were the three priests who lost their jobs because they abused minors, he said.

"It's difficult," Father Hayes remarked. He added that he is ashamed of priests who have sexually abused children, but he has never been ashamed to be a priest himself.

"I've never regretted it," he said. Likewise, Deacon Jim Fennessy has not regretted his decision to be ordained a priest June 22.

At the time cases of child sexual abuse by priests became public in Rochester,

Deacon Fennessy was residing in Washington, D.C., where he had been studying. When he heard the news, the first thoughts that ran through his head were of what was he getting into, how his ministry might be affected and how people might view him.

During Mass at a Washington parish he served as deacon, he realized that "getting into the priesthood is not all about me," but about the people and nurturing their relationship with God.

"That was brought home to me," Deacon Fennessy said.

He returned home to Rochester May 7, and said he has received support from diocesan priests as his ordination draws near.

"It's going to be an interesting time for me," he said.

In an interview earlier this month, Bishop Clark said many priests have approached him, saying that they have become self-conscious and wonder how they are now perceived by the public, especially when they are around children.

"Children are a joy to our priests, and they love them dearly, and vice versa," the bishop observed.

He said he has encouraged priests to be themselves, but to be careful not to create questionable circumstances, and use reasonable and prudent precaution that is needed in this day and age.

By and large, the bishop said, the priests of the diocese are confident in their priesthood. And if he and the diocesan presbyterate go through this time faithfully and with mutual trust, the result will be a renewed and strengthened priesthood. "(The priests) are dealing with it very beautifully, and will continue to do so," the bishop said.

Parishioner reaction

Parishioners, meanwhile, are struggling with mixed feelings right now as they learn that priests in the diocese have been accused of sexual abuse of minors. Some say they need more information or more efforts at reconciliation on the church's part in order to start the healing process. Others say that the bishop's measures may be a little extreme, but necessary to allow abuse victims to heal. And some are still confused and shocked by the situation and need more time to process what has happened.

Sue Krenzer of Chili, a parishioner at St. Pius Tenth Parish, says she needs more information about the priests accused of abuse in order to feel that her children and the children of others are safe. She said what the bishop has done and said in regard to local priests accused of abusing children is a step in the right direction, but that he has to do more to make people feel safe.

Trish Edd of Chili, also a parishioner at St. Pius Tenth, agreed.

"I feel very disappointed that the bishop didn't recognize the approach of the

Diocese gives money to man abused by priest as a teen

The Diocese of Rochester earlier this month agreed to pay a monetary settlement to a man who as a teenager was sexually abused by Father William Lum. In 1997, the priest pleaded guilty to one misdemeanor count of sexual abuse in the case.

Confidentiality agreements prevent the diocese from discussing the specifics of the settlement, according to diocesan Director of Communications Michael Tedesco, who declined to state the amount of the settlement or the time frame in which it will be paid out.

Tedesco noted that the state appellate court had released the diocese from liability in a civil case that had been brought against Father Lum, so the diocese was not required to pay any settlement to the victim.

"We weren't under legal obligation to do this," Tedesco said. "We felt a moral obligation to help (the victim) continue to receive counseling."

Tedesco also stressed that the settlement will not be paid from funds raised by the diocese's annual Thanks Giving Appeal. The diocese has insurance policies that cover payments such as this, he said.

Catholic Church with this whole problem," she said, adding that she would like to hear the church acknowledge that it has mismanaged past sexual-abuse cases and that it is sorry.

"If we have reconciliation on that level, then we can have healing," she said.

What helps Steve DeLucia of Webster get through this time is the knowledge that we are all sinners and make mistakes, and that we must be punished when we do wrong. DeLucia, a parishioner at St. Rita in Webster, said people need to remember Jesus' words to the people who were going to stone a woman accused of adultery: Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

"Because I've made mistakes, I feel for them and pray for them," DeLucia said of the priests accused of abuse. "They obviously did something wrong, and they need to come clean on it."

The main concern needs to be for the victims who have had ill effects in life as a result of sexual abuse, DeLucia added. Although he feels Bishop Clark might have gone to extremes in his handling of recent sex-abuse cases, he understands that his actions are helping victims heal.

"I think he's done what he had to do. Maybe that's the only way to give victims closure," DeLucia said. "People now know he's not tolerating anything."

DeLucia added that the local sex-abuse situation has not affected his faith or his confidence in the priesthood.

"If there is a bad apple on the tree, you don't cut down the tree and say the whole tree is bad," he said.

In the interview earlier this month, Bishop Clark said he believes most parishioners will still have faith.

"Even in the pain of this they can see the bad acts of some, even though they do wound and damage, are not going to take us away from our faith," he said. "(Parishioners) have a wonderful sense of compassion for one another. Our desire is to forgive even grievous offenses, provided that people are protected."

A victim's viewpoint

Peter Saracino of Phelps believes greater protection for children will be the outcome of national and local response to past cases of sexual abuse of minors by priests. Families with children who have not been abused by priests can feel safer and better protect their children by knowing that there is a potential for abuse, he said.

"I feel first and foremost that communities need to be protected," remarked Saracino, who said he was sexually abused

at the age of 7 by a religious-order priest more than 40 years ago. "The only way to be protected is to know. Public acknowledgement is one of the best things the church can do. It sends a strong message, and it does wonders in the healing process (of victims)."

Saracino said he is also glad that people now know that the actions of certain members of the church hierarchy have been stumbling blocks in the healing of victims. He is upset in particular with Cardinals Bernard Law of Boston and Edward Egan of New York City.

"When (the national scandal) finally broke, I was relieved," said Saracino. "The nation was beginning to hear what I've known for a long time. I was happy that the truth was coming to light."

Saracino said he thanks Bishop Clark for supporting and speaking out on behalf of the victims of sexual abuse by priests, and welcomes his proactive policies, hoping other dioceses around the country will follow suit. He especially appreciates the bishop's decision to report priests against whom credible allegations of sexual abuse are made to the civil authorities.

"It's a crime. These are potential felonies," he said, adding that investigating felonies is not the church's strong suit.

He said he would like to see the bishop go one step further, by appointing an abuse survivor or the parent of a survivor to his advisory board that investigates abuse allegations. This would allow the advisory board to gain credibility in the eyes of abuse survivors, he said.

Saracino said he still sometimes finds it hard to be in a Catholic church or to trust priests, but that he is still a Catholic and sometimes worships at St. Stephen's Parish in Geneva or St. Francis Parish in Phelps. He encourages others not to lose their faith because the church is about people, not the hierarchy or the church building.

"This whole journey for me has been a journey of faith," he said. "It's helping me overcome the sense of shame (abuse victims feel). It's freeing. Also I'm hoping that other people can take heart."

Saracino said he wanted to publicly share his experiences as a sexual-abuse survivor in the hope that coming forward will not only promote healing for himself, but also will help other victims of sexual abuse feel that they are not alone. Even though he has struggled over the years to deal with the effects of his abuse, his faith in God has not wavered.

"The bottom line for me (speaking about my abuse) is for the sake of the children," Saracino said.

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