

Teens speak out on abuse

For nearly three months, adults representing all facets of church life have been discussing their concerns about the yet-unfolding national scandal of priests accused of sexually abusing minors. Media outlets have sought the opinions of a range of adult observers in the hierarchy and the pews.

Ironically, however, few have solicited the feelings and views of Catholic teenagers.

On May 19 Our Mother of Sorrows Parish in Greece changed all that by offering a listening session designed especially for teens. Although the session was open to people of all ages, the focus on teens pleased Kate Gigliotti, 15, and Matt Prugel, 17, both youth-group members at Mother of Sorrows.

"I thought it was very informative. I think it's very important for youth to know what's going on in the church, and that they're not being shut out," Kate said.

"I definitely feel better, just talking openly. It had a healing effect," Matt added.

Serving as presenter was Sue Versluys, a program specialist in the diocesan Office of Youth Ministry. She was invited to speak by Rob Layer, youth minister at Our Mother of Sorrows. Also sitting in on the meeting were some adults, including Father Winfried Kellner, the parish's sacramental minister.

Participants said they had experienced such emotions as anger, shock, fear and hurt upon hearing the May 2 announcement that Bishop Matthew H. Clark had removed six diocesan priests — including three active pastors — from all ministry as a result of what the diocese termed "credible" allegations that they had sexually abused minors in the past.

In the wake of that diocesan announcement, some parents began asking their children if they'd ever been abused by these priests, two adult participants noted.

"What a day and age (it is) when we have to ask these questions," Versluys remarked.

Among the many other questions discussed during the session were:

Was the punishment of these priests fair, considering that the abuse allegations stemmed from incidents many years ago and that the diocese had not received allegations of more recent incidents?

Did the mass media dwell excessively on this news?

What will become of the priests who were removed? (They are entitled to receive counseling and benefits from the diocese, although they can no longer perform priestly duties.)

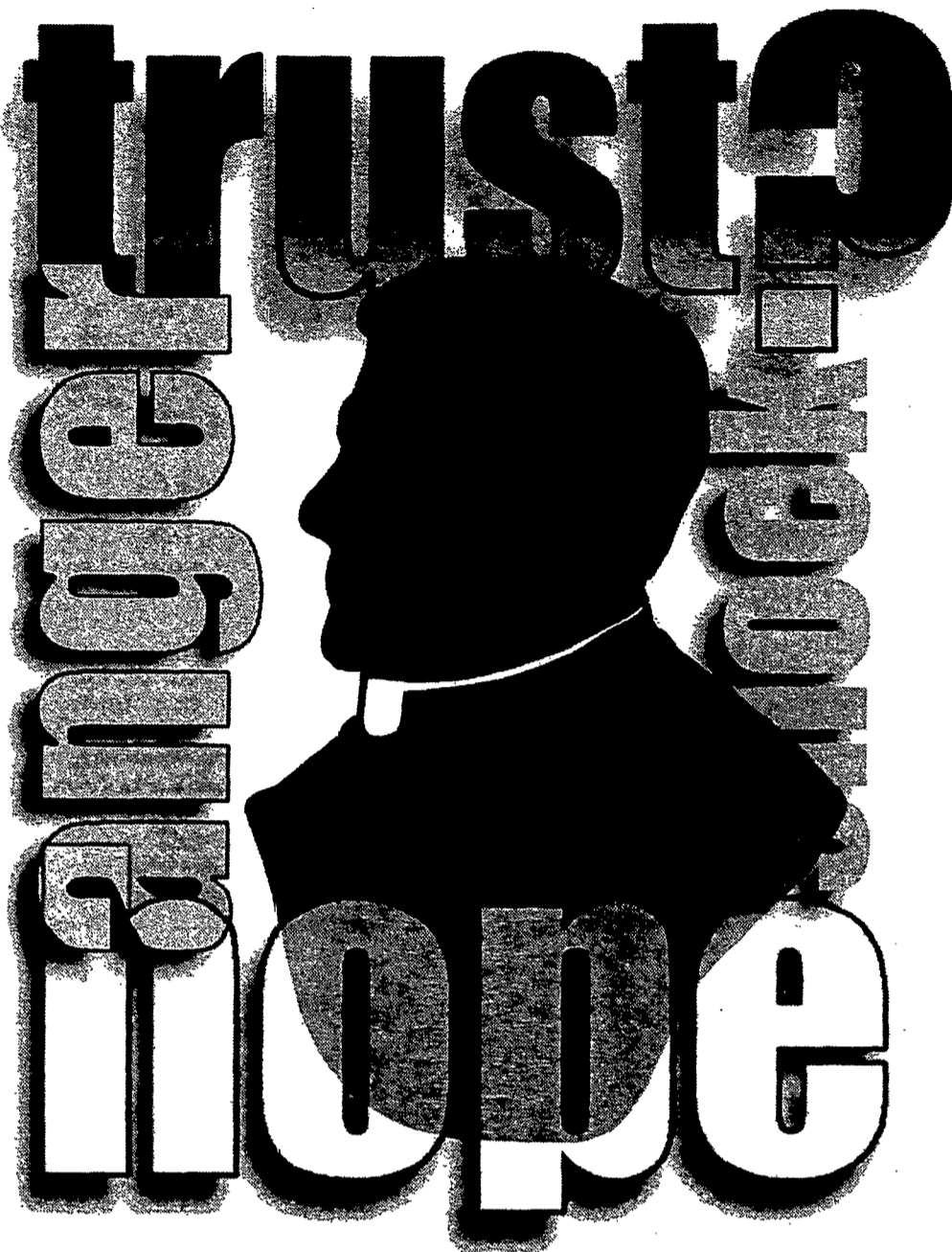
Do people still feel positive about the Catholic Church, or is there now less chance that people will either stay in the faith or convert?

If one of the teens present were a victim of abuse, would he or she feel comfortable reporting it?

One teen participant said she would hesitate to come forward, because she would be intimidated by the fact it was a priest who committed the abuse. She also said she'd be more likely to tell a friend rather than her parents. Other teens were split on whether they felt they could tell their parents. Versluys emphasized that a new policy by Bishop Clark will prevent any priest who has credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor made against him from engaging in active ministry. This stance, Father Kellner said, should make it easier for people to now come forward.

Versluys encouraged the teens to make sure they report any kind of abuse — sexual or otherwise, by a priest or non-priest — to a trusted person, preferably an adult.

Also at issue was whether priests can still be trusted, and how we should feel toward the priests who were recently removed from their ministry.



"The strange thing is, the priest is the one up there who preaches forgiveness. And now you're having to be in the position of having to forgive him," Matt said.

Fewer than 15 people attended the meeting. Versluys ventured that the lower-than-expected turnout may reflect a desire to avoid discussing this subject openly.

"A lot of people are uncomfortable," Versluys said. "Maybe there is something in their past and they can't deal with it."

Following the program, Kate, Matt and two other Mother of Sorrows youth-group members shared their reflections with the *Catholic Courier*.

Kate said that priests "on the whole are good people — they believe in their faith and they believe in God." But she also said the recent crisis has spurred her to have some doubts about her faith.

Frank Guidice, on the other hand, said there was "never a doubt" about his remaining Catholic.

"In my mind this is right, and no matter what happens it's going to be right — because this is my faith," stated Frank, 16. He added that he's upset that some people have made jokes about the priest-abuse scandal, and others have asked him if he plans to remain Catholic.

If he were sexually abused by a priest, would his faith remain as firm?

"I probably would question it, but I wouldn't go so far as to leave it," Frank replied. "It's not the faith, it's the person (that commits the abuse.)"

Yet Matt wasn't so sure he would react the same way. "It could be very hard to separate" the faith and the abuser, he said.

Patricia Shulenburg, 18, pointed out that it's important to not begin labeling all priests as potential abusers. "I would be more open-minded," she said. "A lot of people would look for reasons to be suspicious, but I want to give the priests a chance before my suspicions turn into misconceptions."

Patricia is Protestant and has attended the Mother of Sorrows youth group in recent years. She said she is considering becoming Catholic, and that she's even more intrigued by the faith because she has seen so many Catholics persevering through these troubling times.

"Looking at all the people who still believe has made me look into it more," she said. "You would think that a scandal would taint a vision. But people have such strong faith and believe so much. There are so many good things."

on the MOTHER

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