



Diocese of Helena

A Healing Journey

Bishop George Leo Thomas

Bishop of Helena

Homily at Vespers Sep. 30 - Oct 8, 2015

On May 31, 2012, I was invited by a group called Concerned Catholics of Missoula to engage in a listening session regarding important issues affecting the life of the Church. The topics of the evening were many and varied, the content substantial, salient, and sensitive. Fifteen people made brief and moving presentations, and the tone of their testimony was respectful, prayerful, and sincere.

During that evening, over three years ago, a diminutive and courageous woman rose to the microphone. With a tremulous voice, she spoke directly from the heart on the topic of clerical sexual abuse. Her words were difficult and carefully thought out. This is, in part, what she said:

"It is with trepidation and respect for your office along with my personal respect for you as a human being that I share my thoughts and experiences."

She then proceeded to describe the life of a particular person she knew who had been abused at the hands of a priest. She described in detail this woman's downward spiral of shame and blame, of continued betrayal, with subsequent hospitalization and financial ruin.

"This victim," she said, "left the church, her faith in God skewed, her trust in humankind shredded, and left with an inability to share or respond to any type of human intimacy. She finally returned to the church some 35 years later because of an overwhelming desire to receive the Eucharist. From the time of the abuse by the priest she remained silent for nearly 45 years."

Then this woman spoke the four unforgettable words that remain deeply etched in my

memory: *"I am that survivor."*

During the remaining portion of her presentation, she described the damage inflicted upon the Church and community by the years of denial and obfuscation by bishops and Church officials. She decried the culture of clericalism that inflicted enormous harm on the survivors of abuse through its secrecy, cover-ups, locked files, and destroyed documents. She concluded her remarks with these words:

"Bishop, I ask that you hear my words in your heart and conscience and meditate on them. Choose where and how you can most honestly address my pleas with your fellow bishops. As a survivor of clerical abuse, I sincerely hope that you will listen and that I will not conclude, once again, that I am simply beating my head against the stone wall of clericalism. I am joined by many more worldwide, including clergy. Therein I find hope in solidarity as I hear pebbles falling from this stone wall."

It was that night, May 31, 2012, that helped place the Diocese of Helena upon "the road less traveled." It was a courageous woman's words that helped to galvanize a profoundly important reality—that human suffering has a face and a heart.

When talking about sexual abuse, we are not talking about statistics, or cases, or claims. We are talking about real people, real lives, broken trust, wounded hearts, and wounded individuals longing for healing and hope.

That night I publicly pledged that in the Diocese of Helena, victim survivors will be respected, beloved, and believed. In the Diocese of Helena, we will reject years of acrimonious litigation, and seek a path of mediation, conciliation, and pastoral care of our people.

Tonight we embark on a healing journey together, a journey marked by solidarity with one another, and especially with victim survivors. We are walking in the company of the Lord Jesus, who mends shattered lives, and sets hearts free through his own amazing grace.

I must tell you, in the weeks leading up to these healing liturgies, I have experienced a deep sense of inadequacy as I searched to find words to express the sadness and sorrow I feel toward those who have suffered, so often in silence, for years if not decades.

In the name of the Church, I say, "I'm sorry, we are sorry, for all you have experienced because of the criminal behavior of those you trusted. It was not your fault."

In a word, sexual abuse must be recognized for what it is—not only a soul-searing betrayal of the innocent, but also a crime, where perpetrators must and will face consequences imposed by civil society and the rule of law.

In recent months, I have heard time and again survivors express righteous anger and frustration toward bishops and church officials for decisions that were sometimes ill-advised and self-serving, decisions which favored church image over pastoral care, and protection of resources over the safety of children.

For that I too am profoundly sorry, and am encouraged by the recent pledge of Pope Francis to hold officials accountable when their failed leadership re-victimized victims anew, and placed others in harm's way.

I am aware that all of you have carried a burden of shame and embarrassment as revelations of child abuse came to light. I am further pained by the reality that faithful clergy have lived and labored under a cloud of suspicion and harsh judgment due to the criminal actions of our brothers. However, your integrity, your good works and tender care of our people are the best ways to give witness to the presence of

Jesus Christ in our midst, and this is the truth that sets us free.

In preparing for tonight's liturgy, I was prompted in prayer to turn to victim survivors themselves, to seek their counsel, and draw from their experience, wisdom and prayerful support.

I want this time of prayer to be a way to raise up *their* voices, draw from their experience, validate their stories, and share their faith with the whole faith community as a precious gift from God.

Four victim survivors have stepped forward and opened a window to their souls. Their words are marked by candor and courage, compassion and conviction. This is what they have written:

The first victim survivor has written this:

"To those who are still struggling with hopelessness brought on by sexual abuse, I say this to you: "Healing is a process and a journey. It cannot be ignored or coerced. I had to choose to step out of hopelessness, anger, and deep sorrow. I've not ever been abandoned or orphaned by God, who loves me deeply and walks each step of this journey with me. It's only been in facing who I had allowed myself to become that I have been able to regain hope. Bad things happen to good people every second of the day. I could allow the abuse to consume and poison me, or I could choose to rebuke the darkness in my life with the light of Christ. To start to heal from the past I had to first accept that the past was over. No matter how many times I revisited it, analyzed, hated it, or agonized over it, it was over. The past could not hurt me any longer. Without my faith, without the sacraments, and without my loving family and friends, I'd truly be lost and hopeless. I'm taking the antidote to the poison I've lived with for so long, and I am healing."

A second victim survivor has offered these words to all of us.

“There is no storm that God will not carry you through. No bridge that God will not help to cross. No battle that God will not help you win. No heartache that God will not help you to let go of. He is so much bigger than anything you are facing today or will ever face in life. By faith, leave everything in his hands and embrace this day confidently knowing he will take care of you. Remember our Father is listening and loves us just the way we are....”

A third victim survivor has offered these prayerful reflections drawn from the heart:

“The egregious act of sexual abuse by a priest is so powerful that it can separate the body and spirit, and thus torment the soul. I have lived for so many years in my head. Meditation has been a God-given gift for my spirit. My body and spirit are still separated, but through meditation with Scripture, meditation and creation, and a Eucharistic celebration, I have glimpses of wholeness again”.

A fourth survivor has written powerful and prophetic words:

“This is a scandal divided into two parts: one, the criminal act of the predator, and the second, the criminal and immoral strategy of mishandling these situations by many members of the hierarchy. This group created more problems than they solved, not only for the survivors, but for priest, bishops, and laity who wanted to support victims and families. The secrecy involved led to an explosion of civil suits and some false allegations against the innocent.

All members of the church, lay and ordained, need to educate themselves, weed out the alibis and denials, and embrace the truth of this twofold scandal to help heal the abused child now living as a wounded adult. Our wounds are still open. We need to believe we are valued human

beings and know that our lives are no longer defined by the egregious acts perpetrated so long ago. With our now watery eyes and wrinkled skin, we say in one voice, “Let justice come, but the truth be heard.”

Please leave this house of prayer and carry deep within yourselves these petitions for healing and do God’s work to bring them to fruition. May each and every person, reborn in the waters of baptism, search within their hearts where the responsibility lies for bringing justice, peace, and healing to the wounded in our own wounded church. May survivors find this journey filled with light from that support. May we survivors reclaim the wonder, enthusiasm, courage, and the light promised at our birth. And most of all, may we recapture the love that brought us into this world.”

As we embark on a healing journey together, we do so in deep solidarity with those who have suffered.

In the name of the Diocese of Helena, we thank victim survivors for the courage they have shown in stepping forward and assisting the Church to remove this deadly cancer. You have helped to shed light and truth on one of the darkest chapters in the Church’s history.

Because we have chosen to walk in the company of the Lord, in the words of Paul, “We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

Our victim survivors are living testimony to the power of God’s amazing grace. We ask God to bless them and their families, and to help us all keep the eyes of our hearts fixed upon the Divine Physician, who heals souls and imparts inner peace.

Jesus, accompany us on each and every step of this Healing Journey, the Journey which we have begun today. To You be glory and praise, forever and ever! Amen.