

Childhood Sexual Abuse: The Faith Community's Response By Sherry Niermann, Executive Director Mary's Hope Workshops

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Boston, Cincinnati, New York... in communities across the country, the dark and ugly evil of child sexual abuse is making headlines. At water coolers, in restaurants, and wherever folks are gathered... the world seems to be asking the question, "What's going on in the Roman Church? What's that about?"

All sexual abuse is about secrecy, power, and patriarchy. These three behaviors create an atmosphere in institutions and society - giving sexual predators free reign. Childhood sexual abuse is not confined to the Roman Catholic Church... it affects every faith community, every denomination, every gathering of faithful people. These are not random incidents reported in someone else's community. Childhood sexual abuse is a dark, ugly and well-kept secret in every community of this land! It isn't confined to churches or schools; children are the victims of sexual abuse at home, at grandpa's house, in your neighbor's basement, in all sorts of places. The sexual abuse of children happens wherever children feel powerless, have no voice, and are expected to be invisible.

Today we hear of these evils, and we are aghast. And we should be! The National Center for Victims of Crime estimate that one in three girls and one in 5 boys will be molested, raped, or sexually assaulted in some way before the age of 18. We should be horrified that these evils are so prevalent in our communities.

There are questions the faith community needs to address. First, how are we preventing this from happening in our churches today? In all faith communities, there are adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse – silent and shamed by what happened to them as children. So it is equally important for us as faith communities, to examine how can we serve those adults whose souls were shattered by their sexual abuse as children?

Healing from the trauma of sexual abuse begins with professional therapy. Wholeness, however, comes with the healing of body, mind and spirit. When the soul of an innocent child is touched by evil, the wounds left behind are deep and profound, and they are invisible to the untrained. Victim-service providers recognize the deep spiritual wounds that survivors feel and therefore are now seeking training and education on ways to honor the depth and breadth of these wounds.

Survivors report that the faith community, as a whole, seems to overlook their unique spiritual needs. They hear messages from the pulpit such as - "You have to forgive your abuser." or "You must honor your father and mother." or "It was God's Will!" or "God protects the faithful." When a person who was raped by "the Father" hears such words, they are interpreted as statements of rejection, shame and abandonment. Aspects of

the same secrecy, power and patriarchy which created the initial crucible for the abuse, still exist in many faith communities and when present serve to re-victimize these survivors. Without spiritual healing, these survivors feel unloved by God, unloved by their faith community, destined for abuse and rejected by their creator.

The question then is not "What is happening in the Roman Catholic Church?" Rather, the questions which beg to be answered is - "How can we as people of faith respond to the survivors of abuse?" And "What can we do as people of faith and caring to facilitate re-connecting survivors of childhood abuse with their creator?"