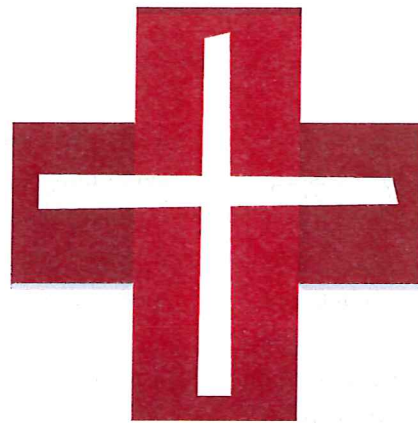
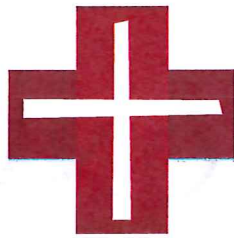


RESPONDING
to the SEXUAL
ABUSE CRISIS



A supplement to
THE PARISH EMERGENCY KIT



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RESPONDING TO THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS

THIS IS AN EMERGENCY WE KEEP RELIVING.

Many Catholics became aware of the clergy sexual abuse crisis in the 1980s; it rose to prominence by 1992. We were assured by our bishops that, terrible as it was, it had been handled. Then came reports from Boston in 2002, and then from Ireland, and then an avalanche from other countries in the decade following that. We've recently watched as stories of clergy sexual abuse in Latin America proliferated. Each time we were told that the matter was being dealt with effectively; and in any case, the church assured us over and over that the number of abusers was small—until the 2018 Pennsylvania grand jury report showed us that the abuse was far more widespread and repulsive, and the coverup by bishops far more heinous,

and even criminal, than most of us had dared imagine.

An anonymous child molester once penned a poem called "Slayer of the Soul." One of the verses says:

I am the end of innocence
The planting of the fear
That eats away inside your mind
And kills you year by year.

What the poem describes happening to victims is now, in some ways, happening to all of us (though it is *always far worse* for the victims and their families than for us: we must never forget that!). In some ways, the church is facing the end of its own sense of innocence about these

things. This whole terrible situation eats away at people's faith and replaces it with feelings of anger, betrayal, fear, and weariness and frustration that we are facing this yet again. And it slays the human soul of the church year by year.

So, with our own hearts broken, with our own anger and grief and weariness, how do we respond in our parishes. Here are a few ideas. (Each section of *The Parish Emergency Kit* will also have helpful suggestions.)

TAKING ACTION

Acknowledge your own feelings about all this. Talk with someone. Before you can help another, you'll need to deal with your own feelings here.

Talk about it as a pastoral team. Let everyone give voice to their anger, anxiety, and grief.

Have listening sessions with parishioners. Give them a safe, and sacred, space to express their emotions about this. Have various members of the pastoral team meet with small Christian communities and parish committees and other parish groups, and let all, who wish to, speak. But make sure parishioners who are not part of such groups also have opportunities to speak to parish leadership. Make sure, too, that any parishioner feels welcome to come and talk to the pastor or any member of the team about this.

When you speak, at these meetings or in your homily, be honest about your own feelings. Let your people know you are hurting as much as they are.

Begin and end listening sessions with prayer. In between, listen, listen, listen.

Do not argue or defend. Let people give voice to their emotions and reactions. Let them know you care about what they are saying and feeling.

Do not pretend that you have all the answers, or any answers at all. Avoid searching for easy scapegoats or offering simplistic explanations for a complex matrix of evil. Efforts to deal effectively with such systemic injustice will be long and difficult.

Avoid using the "But what about..." tactic to compare and thereby deflect/diminish the magnitude of this reality. Yes, many institutions, from universities to the Olympics to some evangelical churches, have their own sexual abuse scandals. And despite the scope of the crisis shown by the grand jury report, a child has always had a much better chance of being abused by a family member than a priest: sexual abuse is endemic in human society. And the number of new cases of Catholic clergy sexual abuse in the US really seems to have dropped significantly in the last decades. All this is true and important, but right now people feel shocked and betrayed. And they need a chance to process those feelings without a reactive "course adjustment," even if well-intended.

Do not push people too quickly toward forgiveness. Forgiveness is important, but right now the shock and anger are fresh, and most people are nowhere near the forgiveness stage of this emergency. All this will take time, both for the individual and for the church.

Encourage prayer for all victims of sexual abuse. Acknowledge that, in Catholic clergy sexual abuse, when victims came forward in many parishes, parishioners often defended the priest and refused to believe the victims. As the body of Christ, we need to acknowledge and express our sorrow for the way victims were often treated, whether we personally were involved or not.

PRAYERS, REFLECTIONS, AND LITURGICAL IDEAS

There are many Scripture passages that express anger at betrayal, some of them in the strongest of terms. For example, Isaiah 24:16–23. Or Hosea 6:7—7:2. Or Jeremiah 12:10–13. Do not shy away from Jesus’ words in Matthew 23, which were always meant more for Christ’s disciples than for the scribes and Pharisees. If ever there were a time to speak of “whitewashed tombs,” this is it.

Expressing anger and grief are vitally important, but always help the people to whom you minister begin the process of moving on to healing. Psalm 44:24–27; Psalm 74:1–2; Psalm 85:8–14; Psalm 142:2–8 are a few of the passages that help people move through their anger and toward healing and being present to others. Pray with John 10, Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Talk about what God’s will is for his children, and how easily humans can distort that.

Provide a quiet space for parishioners to reflect and pray about all this. A silent vigil to mourn all that has happened and to pray for the victims and their families might help people move toward healing and toward joining in the efforts to find solutions.

THE NEXT STEPS

All this is only the beginning, of course. These are responses to an emergency situation, an attempt to address the shock and anger and bandage a deep and raw wound so that healing may begin.

Pope Francis has said that the whole church needs to face this crisis and move toward solutions. If the people of God, the people in the pew, are really going to take up the call to be involved, it is so important that they begin to feel some greater sense of ownership in the church, and that means, for a start, being able to express their thoughts and feelings and know they are being heard.

They will also see you, as representatives of the church, the parish’s leaders, angry and suffering and grieving with them, really listening to them, and inviting them to work with you to help find the answers.

This is the best way to open the door for the Spirit so that healing can begin; so that people can keep their faith alive; and so that they will see that the personal and systemic evil in the church so vividly on display in this crisis is not God’s will—and is not all there is to the people of God, who have striven in all ages, in their Spirit-driven but still frail, human way, to bring Jesus’ redeeming life and the kingdom of God to the world.

Through you and your ministry to the people of God, your people can hold onto hope that change is possible—and to work for it, trusting that God can bring new life out of the worst kinds of death, and believing, as St. Paul put it: “where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more.”

PRAYER *for a* **COMMUNITY** *in* **LIGHT** *of the*
CURRENT CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS

God of Mercy,

*We stand together in shared shock,
anger, grief, pain, and weariness,
not sure where to turn, not sure what to say,
not sure what to do to make things right.*

*We pray for all victims of sexual abuse,
and in a special way for all the victims whose lives and faith
were shattered,
first by a priest abuser,
and then again by the willful actions of our bishops,
our shepherds.*

*Let your healing flow into them;
help us find ways to reach out to them and to their families,
to help in their healing,
and to express our sorrow for what they endured.*

May their healing lead to our own.

*And may your Holy Spirit show us a way forward
out of this dark valley into the light of your love.*

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