



Listening & Learning: Stories of Survivors

Hope and Healing in the Diocese of Albany

A Conversation with Charles Bailey

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When I accepted the job as Communications Director for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, my neighbors gave me a book written by a friend. His name is Charles Bailey. The book is entitled, "In the Shadow of the Cross." Charles is a survivor of priest sexual abuse, abused as a young boy in the Diocese of Syracuse, New York. It was a difficult read. The truth of the abuse is not easy to take in, but I took this job to be part of the healing, so it was important for me to understand as much as possible, the extent and impact of the abuse.

I've heard well intentioned and caring Catholics say, "why can't they just get over it." This abuse is not something anyone just "gets over." It leaves life-long scars, and while I may not have been an abuser, I do feel a responsibility as a Catholic to be part of the healing, but how?

I have been on a mission to listen to any survivor willing to share their story, willing to share their thoughts on if and how the Catholic Church can help them to heal. After reading Charles Bailey's book, I asked my neighbors if he would talk to me. He agreed and along with Frederick Jones, Assistance Coordinator for the diocese, we sat down for a Zoom chat with Charles on September 13, 2022.

My first question - will survivors accept help from the Catholic Church? His answer was an immediate yes. My second question was how can the Church help? Charles went on to list more than a dozen thoughts.

1. APOLOGIZE: Do it often and mean it. He said that breaks the ice. He's seen many breathe a sigh of relief when they hear it. In his words, this is a powerful first step and he feels it has not happened enough.

2. BELIEVE THEM: It is difficult for survivors to admit they were abused. Many are not believed when they open-up, causing them to retreat into a painful solitude once again. Being believed opens a door to healing.

3. BE PATIENT TO EARN TRUST: Trust is paramount and scarce for survivors. They went to church as children, taught to trust the church and they were violated, forever scarred. He believes trust can be earned back, but it will take time. He said the circle of folks they feel they can trust is small. The more we do #1 & #2 the more we will earn back trust.



4. BE TRANSPARENT: The church should be more forthcoming and truthful.

5. DON'T PUT REQUIREMENTS ON SURVIVORS: He mentioned at one point his diocese required victim/survivors to sign a release form before they could get any counseling. The form asked for a great deal of personal information. He said that can reopen scars. To victims, it feels like a violation, the church already invaded their personal space and that's why healing is needed.

6. ROLE PLAYING MAY HELP: A bishop allowed Charles to imagine that the bishop was the offending priest, allowing him to yell at him, say all the things that he could not say as a little boy, no holding back. Charles said he took him up on the offer and it did help a bit.

7. DON'T TELL OR EVEN SUGGEST TO THE SURVIVOR THAT THEY HAVE TO FORGIVE THEIR ABUSER.: Someone told Charles he should at least try to forgive his abuser to some extent. He said there is no way. To him his abuser is pure evil. This suggestion will hurt, not help.

8. WATCH YOUR TERMINOLOGY: Don't say the abuser made a mistake. One bishop told Charles he had to take responsibility for his role in the abuse, making him feel as if he is responsible.

9. CHOOSING A THERAPIST: Therapy is important but it's best to allow the victim to choose their own therapist. All therapists are not the same. He also recommends utilizing therapists who are trained in PTSD and EMDR. And he prefers psychologists who focus more on healing without medication. He said psychiatrists prescribe meds then often refer you to a psychologist anyway.

10. SPIRITUAL HEALING: On the spiritual side, abuse by clergy does take God from you. Teach survivors how to separate what this person did to them from God. They may never again have a relationship with the Catholic Church but may be able to have a relationship with God. If someone is abused outside of the church, they can turn to God to find support and healing. For clergy abuse survivors, the abuse is rooted in God, some cannot look at a collar because that's a trigger. They don't see the priest. They just see the collar. Charles was abused as he was forced to recite the Our Father so to hear that prayer is also a trigger. For many, he said they were abused in the church so just being in the church is difficult. Again, they see the abuser, not God. He said he does have a relationship with God but does not go into a church. It's a personal relationship.

11. TRIGGERS ARE DIFFERENT AND VARIED. For example, it may be as simple as a scent. One man he knows flashes back every time he smells a certain plant because that plant was outside the rectory door. Triggers can differ greatly for survivors.

12. HEALING MASSES: Healing Masses may help some, but not all. Charles tried one once, but there were so many triggers for him – priest collars, the prayers. It hurt. It did not help.

13. RETREATS: They can be helpful. Charles did attend one and benefited from it. He recommends a rural, peaceful setting, rather than a church. He suggests having psychologists and/or therapists on hand and setting up a “Safe Room” in case anyone experiences a trigger or has issues. They can go to that Safe Room and find a therapist/psychologist and get the help they need. The retreat he went on had workshops dealing with self-blame, self-doubt, self-worth, teaching how to allow yourself to heal.

14. SUPPORT GROUPS: These have been very helpful for Charles. He suggested if we have a resource page on our website, maybe we include an outreach icon, people click on it and find support groups that are available.

15. MAKE EYE CONTACT: It gives victim/survivors reassurance.

A few final points Charles asked us to share:

Guilt: We suffer from misplaced guilt. It is not guilt at all. What it is is regret. We regret what happened TO us not BY us. We have no guilt and must place all guilt on our abuser.

Shame: We also have no shame as it too belongs to the abuser. Even though they are great at trying to Shame us, it is just more of the abuser’s act of control. We must let go of any shame as it is not ours.

Healing: It is not a destination rather it is a lifelong journey that has bumps in the road, but you can feel better. Due to the severity of what happened it is impossible to un-remember it.