

Driven from the Flock

by Janet Patterson

Within the sociological listing of family groups, one group is never mentioned, a family created by tragic bonds. Our new family is not linked through blood, but through anguish and betrayal. What we all have in common is that family members were sexually abused by Catholic priests. This abuse has turned our worlds upside down, made us question our basic beliefs, and inflicted agonizing mental, spiritual, and physical anguish.

We have reunions, of sorts, via e-mail, letters, and telephone. Collectively, we try to support each other, cry with each other, and somehow struggle to keep on going. We are the families driven from the flock. Our loved ones had the misfortune of being harmed by abusive priests. We ask ourselves daily, "How could this happen?" Some of us have lost our children to suicide by various means: gunshot, drug overdose, hanging, alcohol poisoning, car fumes, unexplainable one-car accidents. Others watch their children (many of them now adults) struggle with the after-effects of sexual abuse. Their constant fear is that someday their children too may share the same fate.

As we share our stories, many common threads emerge. The priest was charismatic, dynamic, and loved by the parish. Upon his removal, even when he would plead guilty, many parishioners and fellow priests would rally around him by denying his guilt, sending cards and letters of support, and failing to give moral support to the victim and his/her family. Their minds cannot reconcile the public view of the priest with the private view of his abusive behavior.

Few of us are able to set foot in a Catholic church, or any church for that matter, since we became members of this club—victims and families affected by sexual abuse. We are told such things as "Forgive" and "Go on with life." "Get over it." "Remember that he did a lot of good during his ministry." "That was so long ago; why bring it up now?"

Welcome to our world, just a few insights into what clergy sexual abuse does to families. One mother wrote to a bishop seeking help for her son who was exhibiting classic signs of sexual abuse. After hearing rumors that their former priest had been removed for sexual abuse, she wanted to know if the rumors were true. She was not seeking damages or revenge, but truth. Her reply from the bishop was basically that he was sorry for the family's troubles but that they encourage all their priests to interact with young people. He had completely avoided her question. Five years later, her son committed suicide by gas fumes from his car. A boy who started life wanting to be a priest died at 21 as an atheist. The ugly truth is that the priest in question had abused many times over his thirty years in the diocese and had finally been removed from ministry two years before the mother wrote her letter. Imagine her feelings of grief, rage, and betrayal.

Another family struggles daily with fear for their son's mental and physical well-being. He was courageous enough to file charges against his abuser. The priest pleaded guilty, yet the parish stood behind the priest. Instead of this teenager being praised for his courage, he was removed from his parish youth position and his parents removed from their parish positions. Not one priest stepped forward to minister to the family. After two years of being shunned by the church community, the family moved to another state. After their son's subsequent attempt at suicide by hanging, the father held his son in his arms for hours, loving and soothing him, and inside raging and weeping. The young man's mother constantly wonders how this happened to their family—after years of attending daily Mass, she feels the void, the emptiness of losing her spiritual compass. Her family no longer attends the Catholic Church. Her husband grieves the loss of his son's sense of security, the need to relocate from a parish his ancestors helped develop, and his anger at the callousness of the Church.

Another mother tells her son's story whenever she can. He, too, at 16, was brave enough to press charges against his priest for abuse. Although the priest pled guilty, both he and his family were abandoned by their church community and treated cruelly by the diocesan attorneys. Her son received a small settlement, but what he really needed was emotional support from the church community. At 20, he died by hanging. His mother still hasn't cashed her settlement check from the diocese—after all, how far can ten dollars go?