

Faith sustains Merzbacher abuse survivor

When Elizabeth Ann Murphy was growing up in South Baltimore, she loved sneaking into the choir loft at St. Mary, Star of the Sea. Hiding away in the quiet church, the youngster would sit still and stare at the tabernacle.

"I always really had a strong sense of the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist," remembered Murphy, one of nine children whose family home was directly across the street from the parish. "I loved the Church and I loved God."

John A. Merzbacher nearly shattered that deep-held faith.

Soon after Murphy began middle school at the Catholic Community School in 1972, Merzbacher raped her repeatedly. The popular English teacher, who kept a revolver in his Locust Point classroom, forced Murphy and other students to have sex with each other. He threatened to kill them and their parents if they told.

Murphy's physical torment ended when she graduated three years later. The psychological and spiritual pain would last much longer.

"For so long, I felt such shame," said Murphy, a slender 49-year-old woman with closely cropped hair and steel-blue eyes. "How could a person like me - how could I go to Mass and love Jesus with this horrible secret? I felt like I couldn't approach the altar anymore."

In 1995, Baltimore Circuit Court Judge Robert I. H. Hammerman sentenced Merzbacher to four consecutive life terms for his crimes against Murphy. Prosecutors decided not to proceed with other cases against him, dropping more than 100 additional charges from 13 alleged victims.

Merzbacher clung to his innocence throughout the hearings, but the former teacher is now on the verge of admitting guilt.

Federal Appeals Court Judge Andre M. Davis issued a July 30 order stating that the

Baltimore Circuit Court must give Merzbacher, 69, the opportunity to accept a 10-year plea deal that Davis said should have been offered in 1994. Merzbacher's defense attorneys had purportedly failed to inform their client of the deal at his trial.

If Merzbacher accepts, he will be released since he has already served 15 years in prison. The Maryland Attorney General is appealing the ruling and Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien has joined abuse survivors in urging the courts to keep Merzbacher behind bars.

The renewed publicity has reopened old wounds for Murphy. Media calls to her home make her relive painful memories. It's her Catholic faith that gives her strength and calls her to forgiveness.

"Without the relationship I have with God," Murphy said, "there is no way I would be alive today."

Daughter of Mary and Joseph

Murphy's parents - Mary and Joseph - were among the most protective and tender caregivers imaginable. In the summer, Murphy's mother draped a blanket over a clothesline to prevent her children from getting sunburned as they played in a small backyard pool. In the winter, she plopped handfuls of snow on newspaper laid out in her three-bedroom row house.

"Honest to God," Murphy remembered. "We'd have to build little, tiny snowmen really quick because she didn't want us going out and getting hurt."

There wasn't a day that went by when Murphy and her siblings didn't kiss their dad, a Baltimore City policeman, on the cheek. Mary and Joseph devoted their lives to their children, sacrificing vacations along the way.

Family albums and films are filled with happy images of May processions and liturgical celebrations. Priests were frequent visitors to the Murphy home, and, on her first Communion, Murphy distinctly remembers feeling called to the religious life.

Surrounded by goodness at home, Murphy faced unspeakable evil at school. She

didn't know how to handle it and was transformed into a melancholy girl who perplexed her parents.

Over and over, family members asked a question Murphy was afraid and ashamed to answer: "What is wrong with you?"

"I felt so marred and so damaged that I didn't want anything to do with love," Murphy said. "The more loving my family was, the more I just wanted them away from me."

Murphy graduated from Catholic Community School, but was kicked out of Archbishop Keough High School after getting caught with pills. She spent a year in public school before transferring to Seton High School.

Once out of school, Murphy still felt lost and got caught up in drugs and booze. She has been in recovery for 17 years.

"What I finally realized was that there were not enough drugs or alcohol to numb the pain," Murphy said. "It was affecting my relationship with God. I couldn't even pray. I couldn't get on my knees and try to pray because my knees shook too bad."

As an adult, Murphy was deeply pained not only by what she calls the "obvious lack of oversight" at Catholic Community School, but by what she believes was the lack of a pastoral response from the Archdiocese of Baltimore once the abuse became known. At Merzbacher's trial, she didn't feel like the church was on her side.

"When you put the power and prestige and possessions of the church above the lives of children who are entrusted in its care, then, to me, the church ceases to do its mission," said Murphy, whose father died without ever learning of her abuse.

At a time when some Catholics accused Murphy of making up the charges against Merzbacher in a ploy for money, Murphy's mother stood by her daughter. She prayed for her daughter relentlessly throughout the trial, often touching a relic of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton that she attached to her clothes with a safety pin. Elizabeth Ann was named for the Emmitsburg saint.

"I noticed that her relic was broken," said Murphy, her voice choking with emotion

and her eyes filling with tears. “I asked Mom what happened. She put her thumb through it praying for me.”

Murphy’s mother constantly encouraged her daughter and told her how proud she was for speaking out against her abuser.

When Merzbacher was finally convicted, Murphy went straight from the courthouse to the chapel at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. Following her mother’s example, she prayed.

‘Choose life’

Murphy long ago forgave Merzbacher. Even though she warns that he is a serial child rapist who should never be released, Murphy prays for her tormentor daily.

Extending forgiveness to the church has been more of a challenge.

A turning point came in 2007. The day after Archbishop O’Brien was installed in Baltimore, he visited Murphy. He also wrote her a note, which Murphy keeps on her desk.

“You will never know how much that meant to me,” Murphy said. “When the archbishop looked me in the eye and said, ‘This is never going to happen again on my watch,’ I believed him.”

Offering therapy has been the greatest way the archdiocese has helped survivors of sexual abuse, Murphy said. She has found it to be a source of healing.

“It helped me realize that Merzbacher could never touch my soul because that belongs to God,” she said. “Despite how ugly my life looked on paper, I was loved by God and God’s grace transcends and transforms all of that pain. God writes straight with crooked lines.”

Murphy believes the archdiocese’s Office of Child and Youth Protection is “working diligently” to prevent other children from enduring what she went through.

Since 2002, approximately 65,000 archdiocesan employees and volunteers have been screened and undergone safe environment training. Murphy shared her story

in a video used by the archdiocese to educate employees and volunteers on child protection.

“I long for the day when the entire Catholic community stands up together and says, ‘no more,’ ” Murphy said. “I personally need to hear these words – not just from the pope or archbishop, but also from the Catholic community as a whole.”

Everyone is aware of the “dark sin” of the church, Murphy said. That awareness makes each Catholic morally responsible, she said.

“There is no way of knowing whether the new policies of today will be effective,” she said. “Only when this generation’s children become adults will we really know the truth. When that day comes – and God help us if we fail – it will no longer be the church hierarchy’s sin, it will be our sin.”

Murphy has become willing to put aside past feelings of bitterness and anger toward her church. Cynicism is poison, she said, and does nothing to promote healing.

“It doesn’t mean people don’t have a right to feel angry and bitter,” she said, “but they just can’t stay stuck there.”

As she approaches her 50th birthday, Murphy feels like her life is just getting on track. She earned a bachelor’s degree in religious studies from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland and dreams of pursuing graduate work in theology or pastoral counseling.

In her Towson apartment, decorated with Marian images including Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Murphy glanced wistfully at a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Had she never met Merzbacher, she said, she would probably have become a religious sister – devoting her life to helping the poor.

“That’s all I had ever wanted to be,” said Murphy, who spent a year as a postulant with the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1990.

Murphy insisted her story is not one of rape and betrayal. It’s about the “awesome healing power of a gracious God,” she said.

One of Murphy's favorite Bible passages comes from Deuteronomy: "I set before you life and death. I beg you to choose life."

"The God of my understanding begs me to choose life," Murphy said. "I choose life."

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