

The Least We Can Do

The Catholic Review

Last week, I read a newspaper article about a Connecticut man whose wife and two daughters were raped and murdered three years ago. At the killer's recent sentencing hearing, the man, a physician, spoke of the impact such a crime has had on his life: "I seriously considered suicide many times. I have no wife, no children, no home and no interest in life in general...I lost my past and my future..."

It was ironic that on the same day of my reading this article, I met with two individuals who have been wounded by sexual abuse in our Church: ironic, because the impact on their lives has been much the same.

In my three years as Archbishop of Baltimore, I have met with a good number of such victims. I have also met with family members of those victims who may no longer be alive or who are unable or unwilling to come themselves.

Anyone who has been harmed by a representative of our Church should have the opportunity to meet with me and this is our policy and our practice. More than that, though, it is a pastoral gesture that we owe them, and the right thing to do, the least we can do.

Victims and/or their families accept my invitation for many reasons. Some just want to share their story, though it is so painful for them to tell. Others are angry and want current leaders in the Church to understand that anger. Still others want to re-establish a relationship with a Church and a faith they feel was ripped from them by someone they trusted and who was the Church in their youthful eyes. Whatever the reason, my hope is that it offers them some measure of healing or comfort.

One of the two individuals who came to see me last week was a victim of John Merzbacher, the former lay teacher of Catholic Community School in South Baltimore who has been in jail for 15 years, convicted and sentenced to life in jail in 1995 for raping a student. He was also accused of sexually abusing and terrorizing several other students in the school in the 1970s. I listened intently to this person's

gruesome story. All the while I would wish I could somehow go back in time and prevent it from ever occurring.

It takes considerable courage for these individuals to come forward to tell their story and each of them has had my respect and empathy. For many, though they live with the effects of their abuse every day, they have not re-lived the trauma for many years, burying it in the safe confines of their memory.

For my part, I listen intently to their stories, I offer to pray with them and apologize for the abuse they suffered at the hands of someone working on behalf of the Church. Some have left the faith and others remain devoutly in the fold. In either case, I seek to understand what role, if any, they wish the Church to play in their ongoing quest for healing of mind, body and soul.

Recently, a woman abused by a religious order brother many years ago called us and asked how she might reach a priest at her mother's parish. She missed the faith of her childhood, the faith of her family and wanted a way back. The priest immediately called her, spending an hour on the phone listening to her and arranging a face-to-face meeting to continue the process of restoring her trust in our Church, restoring her faith.

These meetings are equally helpful to us. Our resolve to keep our Church safe has never been stronger. And the stories we hear from victims are powerful reminders of what is at stake should we fail in our daily efforts to screen priesthood candidates, train volunteers and employees and appropriately handle any and all suspected cases of abuse.

Such meetings were also the driving force behind my decision to write U.S. District Court Judge Andre Davis in September 2008 on behalf of the victims of John Merzbacher after Merzbacher had petitioned the court for his immediate release, saying he was never informed by his lawyer of a plea deal offered by Baltimore City in 1994 that would have kept him in jail for only 10 years. Judge Davis ruled in Merzbacher's favor this past summer, but the State of Maryland has appealed the ruling. Merzbacher remains in jail.

The sexual abuse of children at the hands of clergy and others is a painful reality. It

is a crime that we can never forget and must work tirelessly to prevent. We owe it to the victims who lost so much. We owe it to the children entrusted to our care today and who will be tomorrow. It is the best we can do to purify our Church, restore the bonds of trust and renew the hope for goodness. It is the least we can do.

At the conclusion of my meeting the other day, the victim with whom I met read a short poem. I share excerpts of it, with the author's permission:

I died a long time ago, though people would have no clue. I breathe, my heart beats, the blood in my veins flow, although I died a long time ago...I pray that one day I can feel whole and take away the emptiness within my soul.