

Cardinal leads prayer service with survivors

By GEORGE P. MATYSEK JR.

Staff correspondent

In a day designed to bring healing and promote understanding, Cardinal William H. Keeler prayed with the victims of clerical sexual abuse during a March 7 Day of Atonement, asking the survivors to forgive the church for the "sins" it had committed against them.

While the event was closed to the media, several abuse victims who spoke with The Catholic Review following the service said one of the most moving moments came when Cardinal Keeler asked some 15-20 priests and deacons to kneel with him at the altar of St. Joseph in Sykesville to pray the Confiteor, a traditional prayer of confession and atonement for sins.

The Day of Atonement was organized by Healing Voices, a local group of clergy sexual abuse survivors of all denominations. Mary Liz Austin, president of Healing Voices, said the service grew out of a yearlong dialogue between survivors, clergy, archdiocesan representatives and concerned lay Catholics.

In an interview with The Catholic Review, Cardinal Keeler said he saw a need for the Day of Atonement because it was a spiritual event that victims had said would do much to foster healing.

"These were people who suffered enormous emotional pain, and they have told me that part of the healing process is an approach on the part of the church to them and on behalf

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of our faith community and on behalf especially of ministers in the church that have injured them," he said.

The cardinal noted that after he prayed for forgiveness, the survivors responded with a prayer for God's strength and guidance for himself and other members of the clergy. During the 40-minute service attended by about 100 people, a tape recording was played that shared the voices of victims.

Following the service, Cardinal Keeler said he was able to meet personally with many of the survivors.

"Some were very emphatic and very enthusiastic about how helpful it was that we had had this service," he said.

Ms. Austin said she hopes the Day of Atonement will inspire others to begin a dialogue about the needs of survivors. She hopes the service will be the first of many efforts the faith community will make as it grows in understanding the needs of survivors.

"We cannot restore the body of Christ without listening to survivors and responding to their needs," she said.

Survivors respond

A day after they participated

in the atonement service, several survivors said they believed the event had a deep-reaching impact on victims.

"I thought it was really just a profound thing to have people gather like they did and have survivors speak the truth of their experience and have the church people respond with a real heartfelt act of saying they were sorry," said Alice McCormick, noting that she had been abused by a priest more than 30 years ago in the Archdiocese of Hartford.

Ms. McCormick praised Cardinal Keeler for being a "real leader" in reaching out to victims and amending past wrongs. She was particularly pleased that Baltimore's archbishop published in *The Catholic Review* a list of the names of clergy who had been credibly accused of sexual abuse, a step not taken by many other U.S. dioceses.

"It took incredible courage to step forward to do that," she said, calling on other dioceses to follow Baltimore's lead.

"It's important to survivors," she said. "They need to have their experience of abuse validated as abuse. That's the most important thing the church can do."

Ms. McCormick said there was "something healing about hearing the survivor experience being spoken in a very clear

and powerful way."

"It's making a clear statement that this church wounded us by their lack of response," she said.

David Lorenz, a parishioner of St. Pius X, Bowie, said the Day of Atonement was a "very hopeful" sign. Mr. Lorenz said a priest guidance counselor had abused him when he was attending a Catholic school in the Diocese of Covington. Mr. Lorenz called it "incompetence bordering on evil" that even though the priest had a long history of abuse, he still received an assignment at the all-boys' school. The priest is now serving time in jail for his crimes, Mr. Lorenz said.

"I think we have to say we're sorry over and over again," said Mr. Lorenz. "The church needs to personally apologize to each victim."

Bridget Lyons said she was pleased that Cardinal Keeler made the Day of Atonement a priority and was willing to hear what the survivor experience is like. She and her brother were abused by a priest in New York City, she said.

She suffered so much by the abuse that she tried to kill herself when she was 16, Ms. Lyons said.

"My faith in God had been destroyed," said Ms. Lyons, The District of Columbia/Maryland

director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"It took a long time to come to the point when I want to be religious," she said.

Ms. Lyons said the church still has much work to do reaching out to victims and "admitting that there's been a problem and even if people aren't directly involved themselves they need to apologize."

Father Michael J. Callaghan, administrator of the Church of the Holy Apostles, Gambrills, said he has been working with Healing Voices for about 14 months to bring survi-

vors, those who work with survivors and archdiocesan representatives together for "circles of dialogue."

"I'm amazed at the strength and spiritual depth that survivors have," said Father Callaghan. "This is something we cannot turn away from. It's something we absolutely have to address. The church needs to be a place of sanctuary."

Healing involves risk, Father Callaghan asserted.

"The church needs to take the risk," he said.

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