

My Journey of Healing

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My name is Mike Hoffman. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse by clergy. I am fifty six years old. My wife and I are married for twenty seven years, and we have two beautiful children. I remain an active Catholic, despite the abuse I endured when I was a little boy. My wife Kathy and I are parishioners of St. Mary of the Woods Parish in Chicago. We raise our children Catholic and we send our kids to Catholic schools.

Given the sexual abuse imposed upon me from the ages of twelve to sixteen years old by our Catholic priest at the time, the reader may not understand my decisions. Typically, it is easier for many people to relate when a clergy abuse survivor walks away from the church. My efforts to find healing and hope from underneath devastating pain and sadness involves many people, and is intertwined with the same Church who allowed my abuser to remain in ministry at the time.

My abuser told me what he was doing to my body was a normal way in which adults show love and affection for one another. Obviously, he was the adult and I was the child and that's not a right relationship. Additionally, not

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only was he held up in high regard in our community, he was also a dear friend to my parents, so my parents really trusted him. Against that backdrop, I was unable to process the sexual nature of the relationship, my parent's expectations, the other family and social implications and my own needs. I was twelve years old at the time. My coping mechanism was to keep it all inside.

I kept the secret until 2006. Kathy and I live in the City of Chicago on the Northwest side at St. Mary of the Woods Parish. Many people in the Chicago land area identify where they live by their parish. I am one of them. We love our parish. We attend virtually every social or fundraising event there. Our children graduated from the elementary school, and all of their sacraments were celebrated there. I am a lector. I was previously involved on the Liturgy Planning Committee. Kathy works at the school. Our social circle mostly consists of fellow parishioners who sent their kids to the school too. The parish represents a significant portion of our married lives. Additionally, I've always had a good job. We live in a nice home. Our children are healthy, and our marriage is strong. I felt safe and loved.

My primary act of recovery was telling Kathy my story of childhood sexual abuse. We had been married over twelve years at that time and I never told her or anyone my story. I didn't want to introduce such a sick and depraved story like that into my marriage. Initially I thought she would think differently of me, as her husband, as a provider, as a father to our children. Exhausted from the inner struggle, I decided to finally tell her. With tears streaming down my face, hands shaking and heart pounding, I told her.

Of course, Kathy didn't think differently of me. She responded to me with compassion, love and understanding. To be able to share my story, which I had kept secret for over thirty years, and still feel safe and loved, is such a profound experience. I believe God's grace was amongst us. Soon after that, since we are active parishioners at our parish, I felt I should tell our pastor, Father Greg Sakowicz. As you might imagine, it was difficult to tell my current parish priest that I was sexually abused by my Catholic priest when I was young. I felt Father Greg might think I had a problem with him, or I was questioning his good ministry or his good character. Father Greg listened to me and he heard the depth of my sadness. We continued to talk and because that conversation was so good and went so well, soon after, I felt comfortable reaching out to the Archdiocese of Chicago, and I began the Independent Review Board process.

During this time, I was able to tell my story to officials of the Archdiocese, who responded to me with professionalism, decency and compassion. In short, they believed me, and with that, I was able to begin a therapeutic process of healing. I participated in individual counseling for two and a half years as well as a support group of other survivors of childhood sexual abuse for one and a

half years. Another aspect of my healing process was a meeting with Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago at the time. I had never met a Cardinal, Prince of the Church, before. I was anxious about this meeting. I was conflicted out of a deep respect for his office, but also wanting to tell my story as a way to unburden myself. I told Cardinal George my story of childhood sexual abuse and the impact it has had on me and my family throughout my life. The Cardinal listened. He apologized to me for the abuse imposed upon me when I was a little boy. Also, I brought family photographs of my abuser at many of our family functions to the meeting and shared them with Cardinal George. The Cardinal asked about my parents and my siblings. We had a very nice discussion and because of the time he spent with me, and because that conversation was so good, I feel comfortable continuing practicing my faith.

Another milestone in my healing journey was returning to my former parish, where I grew up and where my abuse occurred when I was young. In the spirit of healing and reconciliation I reached out to Father Michael McGovern, the pastor of Church of St. Mary in Lake Forest, Illinois. Father McGovern responded to my letter welcoming me back to the parish, and willing to meet me. We agreed upon a date. I asked Father Pat Cecil, my current pastor, to go with me. Sitting in the same rectory where much of my abuse occurred, I was visibly uncomfortable. Father McGovern thanked me for coming. Now that the silence was broken, I gathered my thoughts and I began to share. I told Father McGovern how much my parents loved the parish, and how active they were. Dad was a lector and Eucharistic Minister. Mom worked at the library, helped found the Youth Ministry group and sat on the Parish Council. My brother and I were altar servers and my sister was involved in the Youth Ministry group and sports. My parents attended virtually every event sponsored by the parish. I went on to describe how the “head of the altar boys” was the Associate Pastor at the time. My parents considered him a dear friend. They felt any time I spent with him would be quality time spent in a mentoring relationship. I felt no need to describe the acts of abuse themselves to Father McGovern, but I did describe how that abuse affected me and my family. My abuser manipulated my parents and betrayed their genuine affection for him. Beyond the physical and emotional scars I carry, the truth of the abuse drove a wedge into the heart of my family relationships.

Father McGovern thanked me for sharing my story, and he apologized for the abuse I endured. He spoke about how this issue cuts so close to the heart and soul of both the abuse survivor and every good and faithful priest. I agree with him. He went on to connect the active parish life at Church of St. Mary my parents enjoyed with the active parish life my family and I enjoy now at St. Mary of the Woods. Talking about that connection to my parents, and my

upbringing, helped me to realize I should not allow memories of my abuser to cloud the many positive and healthy experiences my parents, siblings and I experienced in our parish life. The three of us concluded our discussion with a prayer for abusers and those who have been abused. I am grateful to Father McGovern and Father Cecil for walking with me on my healing journey.

I continue on with my efforts to heal wounds caused by the sexual abuse imposed upon me and many other children. Many of these efforts are personal and private. I call them “little bites at the apple” each day which helps me cope with on-going heartache and pain from my childhood trauma. My other efforts are public outreach efforts with other victims/survivors of abuse and their families, as a way to heal from the pain. I am a part of a team of abuse survivors, clergy and staff from the Archdiocese of Chicago. I consider this committee the finest example of collaboration with the support and encouragement of Cardinal George and Cardinal Cupich. We have been working together on the annual Hope and Healing Masses and other healing initiatives, like the Healing Garden and Peace Circles for over ten years. I propose this model of abuse survivors working side-by-side with clergy and staff, with the support of leadership, to be a model for healing our Church.

I am grateful to *Praxis* for inviting the voices of clergy abuse survivors.