

Gratitude from an Active Catholic and a Survivor

By Michael Hoffman

Editor's Note:

The VIRTUS Programs recognizes the great importance of listening to survivors of sexual abuse. Because people who have been abused have courageously come forward to share their stories, we now have a better understanding of how to help prevent sexual abuse from occurring as well as how to address it appropriately. We offer our sincere appreciation for all survivors who have come forward to share their stories and recognize their role in helping to foster healing and prevention in our church. This article was written by a survivor about his own experience and how caring adults can work together to prevent abuse.

Article:

My name is Michael Hoffman. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse by a member of the clergy. I am 55 years old and I remain an active Catholic, despite the abuse I endured when I was a young boy. My wife and I are active within our parish. We raised our children Catholic and we sent our kids to Catholic schools.

Given the sexual abuse imposed upon me from the ages of 12-16 years old by a Catholic priest at the time, it is possible you may not understand my decisions. Typically, it is easier for many people to understand or expect a clergy abuse survivor to walk away from the Church. My efforts to find healing and hope from underneath devastating pain and sadness involves many people. It is also intertwined with the same Church who allowed my abuser to remain in ministry at the time.

A brief background:

When I was a young boy, I was sexually abused by my parish priest, who was a dear friend to my parents. He was also held in high regard within our community. Because my parents really trusted him, I didn't think my parents would believe me if I told them what he was doing to my body. I also felt they would think I was a "bad boy" for saying "bad things" about their friend. My abuser told me that what he was doing to my body was a normal way for two people to show love and affection for one another. Against that backdrop, I was unable to process the sexual nature of the relationship, my parent's expectations, or the family and social implications along with my own emotions and safety—an impossible task for any young child. I was 12 years old at the time. My coping mechanism was to keep it all inside.

I kept the secret until 2006, when I told my wife my story of childhood sexual abuse. I consider this moment to be my primary act of recovery. We had been married over 12 years at that time and I had never told her or anyone my story. I didn't want to introduce, verbally, what I viewed as a sick and depraved history into our 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.

Yet, 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 30 years, and still feel safe and loved, was such a profound experience. I believe God's grace was among us. Soon after that, I told my parish pastor and with his encouragement and support, I felt comfortable reaching out to the Archdiocese of Chicago, where I began the Independent Review Board process.¹

Sharing my story has gone a long way to bring personal, heartfelt healing to me and my family over time. Healing our church community overall—and remaining focused on protecting all children from any kind of harm—requires all adults to give permission to children to tell a trusted adult if something happens to them, and it is imperative for the adults to actually believe the child. When I was young, I did not have this kind of permission to tell my parents what was happening to me, and I certainly did not trust their response. As an adult, I've since asked my parents if, given how our family was at the time, would they believe me if I told them? With tears in their eyes, they said no, they wouldn't have believed me. They said they just didn't think their friend, especially being a priest, would do such things to their little boy.

My VIRTUS experience:

My wife and I believe strongly in Catholic education, which is why we sent our kids to Catholic schools. Like so many parents, I supported my children and school by volunteering on campus. I served on the school Athletic Board. To be eligible to volunteer, I attended, along with my fellow parishioners, the mandatory training program, which was *Protecting God's Children*. To be truthful, being a childhood sexual abuse survivor, who was groomed by my abuser priest, and who was intimidated and frightened by his elevated stature within the parish community, I initially felt I had so much terrible experience that I could be the one leading the workshop. I was wrong. The workshop was bigger than me and my personal experiences.

I discovered the goal of the workshop is to change the parish culture from silence to open discussion. I totally support this. My abuser had been able to take advantage and hurt me and other children because parents, staff, employees and other fellow priests were unable, or unwilling, to talk about it. Knowing my abuser thrived in the silence, I support an open dialogue that can help protect children from harm. Additionally, anyone who is thinking of abusing a child, to be sure, will have to consider the openness and willingness of our parish community to speak up and take action. Educating all adults

¹ Article 2 of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* <https://www.usccb.org/offices/child-and-youth-protection/charter-protection-children-and-young-people>

who have contact with children in the best practices of child safety is paramount to preventing the abuse or neglect of children.

One volunteer, who happened to be a friend of mine, chose not to attend VIRTUS. He said he was unwilling to go and yet, still he expected to be welcome to coach—but, we would not waive our policy's training requirement and did not allow him to coach. It is truly unfortunate that my friend placed his personal pride over the well-being of children. However, I remain grateful that the program lives on in all of us, even without his attendance—for providing the foundation and structure to support an ongoing culture of safe environments for each and every one of us who do embrace the concepts of safe environments.

Healing

Although [1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men](#)² report having been sexually abused as a child, we know many, many victims don't report due to shame or fear, so the actual numbers are far higher. Given the truth of the abuse within our own church, we should be the leaders in hope and healing for all victims/survivors of childhood abuse—no matter who the perpetrator was. Healing came to me when my story was believed by my family, friends and my parish. Listening, hearing and believing when any person trusts you enough to tell you their painful story—that's the start of the healing journey.

The healing journey continues with prayer. At the annual [Child Abuse Prevention Prayer Service](#)³ held within the Archdiocese of Chicago, adults and children alike gather in prayer and song for the dignity, safety, protection and love all children deserve as children of God. The pinwheel is used as a symbol of the innocence, joy, and fun of great childhoods. Parents, teachers, principals, priests and other caring adults pray together, with the children, for continued vigilance against anyone who would harm children.

As an adult survivor of child sexual abuse, part of my mission is to also help other survivors on their healing journey. As a co-founder of [the Healing Voices](#)⁴ online magazine, I encourage anyone who has been abused to check out this resource. Know there is help. There is hope. There is healing.

I want to express deep heartfelt gratitude for the VIRTUS Programs and the daily dedication required from each of us to keep children safe in our Catholic school and parish programs. It is great to see people coming together fostering a culture of speaking up within the Church and in all communities—raising awareness that child abuse affects everyone, allowing permission for children to tell a trusted adult if

² <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/sexual-violence/index.html>

³ <https://protect.archchicago.org/healing-garden/pinwheel-prayer-service>

⁴ <https://thehealingvoices.org/>

something happened to them, and educating parents about grooming behaviors. It is real progress from when I was a young boy and I am grateful for that progress. I am blessed to be in a parish community that supports and celebrates a safe environment for children so that no child will have to endure what I experienced.