

**Priest sexual abuse: Where are we now?**

# How do we heal the damage?

Victims struggle with the horrors done to them. Other Catholics feel shame and confusion.

What's the next step? | BY PAUL G. MAST

## EDITOR'S NOTE

I am not a victim of sexual abuse — by a priest or anyone else. I do not pretend to understand the many ways a person's life is shattered by such experiences. The closest I can come to that is by listening to my friend Margaux (not her real name), who as a child, was abused by a priest, a family friend, for many years. She kept the secret well into adulthood, until — filled with rage and chaos — she finally reached out for help.

Margaux has told me

Some months ago, ABC televised a Barbara Walters special, entitled “30 Mistakes in 30 Years.” In her special, Barbara Walters took a look back at some of the more regrettable moments of her television career. At around the same time, my diocesan newspaper included a lengthy letter from the bishop and the disclosure of the names of 20 priests accused of sexually abusing minors. It brought to the forefront events in recent Church history that are far more sobering than any interview faux pas.

The bishop's reason for publishing the names was that he,

pieces of her story on several occasions. Even second-hand I recoil from the horror of it. And I saw her reach out for help in healing to her bishop and diocese time after time — only to be rebuffed time after time. A priest she knew told her to forgive the abuser. “Forgive him?” Margaux would cry. “He destroys my childhood, leaves my life a wreck, and I’m just supposed to say, ‘I forgive you?’”

No victim of sex abuse can offer forgiveness glibly. Jesus, who would die on a Cross, knew the price of forgiveness and knew how closely it is tied to justice, healing, and reconciliation.

And while the victims struggle with the horror of the abuse — and sometimes with the additional pain and anger of a Church not always ready and willing to help — what of the rest of us? What of the anger, shame, and confusion we feel? Doing whatever we can as a Church to keep such horror from happening again is the first step, but what comes next? In this article Father Mast speaks, not to victims, but to the rest of us, and suggests

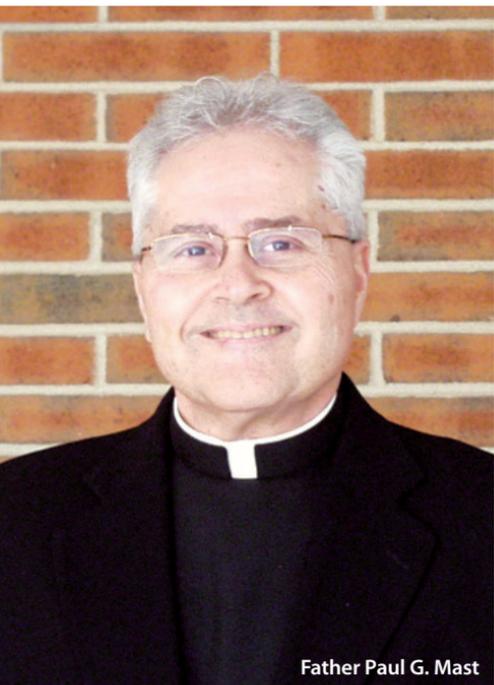
as the chief shepherd of the flock entrusted to his care, wanted to be more transparent. I would like to follow his example and be more transparent about how I have wrestled with the demons unleashed in me by this scandal. My motivation for doing so is to honor the bishop’s words: “The first obligation of the Church is to assist in the healing of victims.” I began doing that when a number of victims approached me for spiritual direction.

Each victim’s revelations burdened my heart in a demoralizing way. Before long, I realized my own spiritual life was in peril. My efforts at pastoral caregiving needed to be recharged by another spiritual caregiver.

When the scandal broke into national news from Boston in January 2002, it triggered in me a dark night of the soul. Within a short time, I needed to see my spiritual director more often. My usually hopeful spiritual DNA was being contaminated by the scandal. My morale plummeted.

PHOTO COURTESY PAUL G. MAST





Father Paul G. Mast

I needed a change of focus in my spiritual and prayer life. My spiritual director caringly guided me to find new solace by focusing on Jesus as a victim.

Like so many of you, when the scandal broke I asked a lot of “why” questions. Why this scandal? Why the cover-up? Why protect so many sick priests at the expense of harming innocent children? Why create more victims out of good, faithful priests? Eventually, my spiritual director helped me see that these questions were keeping me from finding

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that what we need to do for the Church and for ourselves is also the best thing we can do to help the victims.

In another part of this issue we speak of the meaning of the Mass and the need to join ourselves to Christ's redemptive dying and rising. Part of this means struggling with all the elements in the forgiveness equation and learning to walk humbly with people like Margaux on the lifelong road to justice, healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace.

Dan Connors  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

the freedom I desired from the inner darkness. She guided me to a breakthrough by asking a different kind of question: What does the scandal *mean* for me as a priest, a fellow pilgrim with other hurting Catholics, a sojourner with victims, and one who desires to move to a more nurturing place on the spiritual path?

The question forced me out of my head and into my heart. It invited me to look for Jesus standing with me in my hurt and not occupy myself with the questions

swirling around in my head. That kind of analytical focus was only interfering with my healing.

When I began to ask Jesus the victim to be with me, I noticed that my broken heart began to mend. I also noticed that I was able to transcend the horrid details of the victims' stories by seeing the victim Jesus in them. This new experience of incarnational theology was like the divine made visible in a wounded human soul. The sacred became tangible in human tears. I was caught up in beholding the wonder of Jesus the victim redeeming another victim.

I encouraged each victim to befriend Jesus the victim. When I did, He became my hope in gradually transcending the darkness this scandal originally unleashed in me. Gradually, both Jesus Christ and the victims led me to a deeper level of faith where the spiritual question replaced the "why" question, namely: *To whom will I give my heart as this scandal unfolds?* The answer echoed softly in my soul: *Give your heart to the victims.*

These words anointed me with a new sense of hope. My heart became less constricted by unchecked anger and hurt. I became free enough to take new risks with Sunday assemblies, as I apologized to anyone who was abused by a priest. That was a prelude to taking

risks in telling people how I have forgiven the bishops. Finally, I was free enough to say, "I love you as a struggling priest, and as we all struggle through this nightmare, I desperately need you to love me back." We Catholics need to reclaim the power of our religious traditions to love and forgive one another. Only this will give us the

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spiritual antidote to the long-term negative side effects of this scandal and keep us from giving our hearts to the lesser gods of blame and punishment. If we do not invite the Divine Physician to heal the wounded pieces of our souls, they will metastasize into small tumors and eventually become terminal cancer for the inner life. Giving our hearts to those most victimized by this scandal is a grace. Knowing that may be what they need to heal



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their wounded hearts. It may be the first step in helping them return home and rejoin us as communities of wounded healers. So the next time you are confronted by someone's anger about the scandal, be a wounded healer yourself and say, "I'm praying how to give my heart to the victims."

Whenever you do, know that you and they are not alone in this struggle. Remember:

- Esau, the victim of his younger brother Jacob's greed
- Dinah, the victim of rape by Shechem the Hivite
- Uriah, the victim of murder plotted by King David
- Susanna, the victim of a false accusation
- John the Baptist, the victim of jealousy
- Mary Magdalene, the victim of being possessed by seven

## Where is God in all this?

Elie Wiesel is a survivor of the Holocaust and a Nobel Peace Prize-winner. In his book *Night*, he records a poignant story that has meaning for the attitude we should have toward the victims of this scandal. At the Buna Concentration Camp at Auschwitz, three prisoners were sentenced to death for sabotage. Three gallows were erected in the camp. Each victim — two adults and one sad-eyed child — stood on a chair. The SS officer gave an order and the chairs were tipped over. The entire camp was ordered to "bare your heads" and march around the victims. The two adults died instantly, but the young child was still alive.

*"For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed by. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard someone ask: 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is God? He is here, hanging on this gallows..."*

In your journey through the clergy sexual abuse scandal, may you learn to hear the same voice within whenever you meet victims, and may you be bold enough to give them the heart of Jesus the victim in you. He will use it to heal their broken hearts, from which will bud forth new seeds of hope.

demons

- Stephen the martyr, the victim of people with false integrity

**‘They sowed fields  
and planted vineyards,  
brought in an  
abundant harvest...’**

PSALM 107:37

**A**round the world, many face a harvest that is not so easy.

They look upon the land and see fields of change. Centuries-old farming practices are challenged by changing climate, scarce resources, natural disaster and war. For too many, supporting a family off the land has become a nearly impossible burden.

As Catholics, we know we should help, but beyond mere hand-outs. Our faith calls us to help all of our brothers and sisters to make a life for themselves. There is a way to fulfill our faith.

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With your help, we can do even more. Together, we can make a difference.

*Farmer Tengku Tarmizi tends to his crop of sweet potatoes, the seeds for which were provided through a CRS crop diversification project in Aceh, Indonesia.*



PHOTO BY DAVID SNYDER

This is a short list of victims in our Judeo-Christian stories whom we can honor as agents of hope as we suffer with our own victims. We do so because whenever we connect with them, we connect with God, who had the last word in their stories. They, along with all the new victims created by wars, scandals, abortion, abuse of children, and all kinds of cyberspace problems and addictions, awaken us to ask the spiritual question, *To whom will I give my heart?* Always remember that whenever you give it to the

victims, you stand with God, who is always on their side, for God's own son, Jesus, was a victim who became our hope. **GD**

Father Paul G. Mast is a priest of the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware. He is chaplain at St. Gertrude Monastery and the Benedictine School. His "Mass of Victims," dedicated to the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the clergy sex abuse scandal, and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will commence in late spring. The Web site for his retreat ministry, Gospel Soft Retreats, is [www.gospel-softretreats.org](http://www.gospel-softretreats.org).

Silly rabbit! Easter eggs are for kids

## HOW RABBITS BECAME AN EASTER SYMBOL



Rabbits are a sign of new life, a powerful Easter metaphor. Several factors contribute to rabbits being seen as an Easter symbol: They are extremely fertile animals, potent signs of abundant new life; they sometimes represent the moon, which relates to Easter's date being set by the moon; and, rabbits burrow underground, which is likened to Jesus in the tomb.

The connection also has pagan roots. According to pagan history, rabbits were the favorite animal of the goddess of spring, *Eastre*, who was thought to have placed eggs in the tall grass at the start of spring, and to have used rabbits to deliver the eggs to children.

When the German people came to the United States, they brought with them a legend of a poor woman who loved to surprise children. With no money to buy gifts, she colored eggs in rainbow colors and hid them in nests made of grass and sticks. Just as the children approached the nests, a rabbit hopped away. The children then believed that the rabbit had left the eggs as an Easter surprise.

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