



## Issues and Resources for GLBT Survivors of Sexual Abuse by Roman Catholic Clergy

By Stephen McDonnell, M.Div., M.S.W., CAC-II  
Trauma Specialist, Psychotherapist, Addictions Counselor  
& former Roman Catholic parish priest

This pamphlet is designed to identify issues and resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered survivors who have been sexually abused by Roman Catholic priests, bishops and religious brothers and sisters and to act as a beginning and guide for healing that abuse.

DignityUSA is a nonprofit organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Catholics, their families, friends and supporters, and as such, has been an outspoken advocate of survivors of abuse, especially before the Roman Catholic hierarchy, which has failed in the past to protect and help survivors of abuse.

This pamphlet is funded in part by the Foundation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, which supports the healing that DignityUSA wants to foster by publishing this pamphlet.

### **What is abuse?**

Simply stated, abuse is a *boundary violation* and a *misuse of power*.

Every human being has the right to his or her own person, body, thoughts and feelings. As children this right to our bodies and our boundaries is protected by those who are entrusted with our care, and as adults we are encouraged and supported by our communities to maintain our boundaries.

Sexual abuse is a willful act that violates these boundaries, when we do not or cannot give full consent to sexual advances. An adult, who sexually abuses a minor, takes advantage of his or her power of maturity, position of responsibility and physical strength. Sexual abuse with minors employs manipulation and seduction, if not outright physical coercion. And sexual abuse by clergy is especially wrong, even with a consenting adult, if a priest misuses his pastoral office by approaching one in his care sexually or romantically.

Abuse is a violation of trust, perpetrated by those very individuals who have been charged with our protection and guidance. As a result of this violation, it may be difficult for us in the future to build trusting relationships and to choose appropriate friends and partners.

Sexual abuse interrupts the development of our gender identity and/or our sexual orientation, regardless of the gender and orientation of our abuser. Survivors of sexual abuse may have difficulty forming sexual relationships, or exploring forms of sexual expression.

Abuse is further complicated for Catholic gay men, lesbians, bisexual, transgendered and intersexed persons. Because we have been taught that all sexual expression outside of a heterosexual, sacramental marriage, open to procreation in every act, is prohibited, we may not be able to esteem ourselves, or even feel that we belong as members of the Church.

The effects of abuse are similar to those we experience when our needs have been neglected or when we have suffered a loss of any kind. Survivors of abuse may have experienced the pain of neglect of not having been believed, or of not being protected. Abuse also can be emotional, verbal, physical or spiritual, as for example when we are not told the complete truth, or when Scripture, theology or representations of a vengeful God are used against us.

*Shame and other effects of abuse* - After one has been abused, one experiences many feelings, especially shame, guilt, anger, depression, sadness, fear, anxiety and loneliness. Sometimes one can feel many emotions at once, or just feel numb. Among these emotions, the most difficult and the first to be addressed are shame and isolation. Sometimes bishops or their representatives, or even our parents and families, have fostered attitudes of secrecy and shame about our sexual abuse, or sexuality in general. Shame, by its definition, involves other people—we feel as though we would not be accepted if any one else were to know our secrets. Sometimes we confuse guilt with shame. In fact, as victims of abuse, we share no responsibility whatsoever for our abuse, although at times we may feel that we do. All responsibility for the behavior must be accepted by the adult, authority figure.

To deal with these emotional states, one may abuse of alcohol or other substances or processes, such as food and sex. Also, one may use psychological defenses, such as trying not to think about the abuse, or minimizing its importance.

*Vulnerability to abuse* - “Recovery” from abuse implies that we will restore a former state. Some of us were vulnerable prior to our abuse: we came from homes with absent, neglectful, addicted or abusive parents. We may feel guilty because of our gay or lesbian tendencies, and our healthy sexual development has been interrupted. These developmental issues will need to be addressed in our recovery and healing to restore us to our God-given rights to autonomy and goodness as human beings.

## **Recovery and Healing**

Given the above observations about abuse, here are some of the stages and issues that will need to be addressed in recovery and healing.

*Safety & unconditional regard* - We start our recovery and healing by finding and/or creating safety. This may start with finding safe people whom we can trust: family, friends, peers and therapists. We may need to find people, such as a female or non-Catholic therapist, who do not remind us of our abuse or abuser. We may need to express anger at our abusers, at our Church, or at God for a time, for as long as we need. We may need to stop an addiction or an unhealthy coping mechanism. We may need to attend to our physical and emotional needs, including being screened by a psychiatrist. In all of this, we need to be accepted without blame or judgment; this unconditional regard is the antidote to shame. These are the persons who should support, guide and love us so that eventually we can care for ourselves.

*Finding a good therapist or support group* - In both therapy and support groups—all relationships in fact—we begin by creating safety. Creating safety may be a skill that we have to learn. One of the best ways to test whether a relationship is safe or not is to share about it in the beginning with other people we already trust. In this way, trusting relationships are built one at a time. A support group usually has a tradition of safety: often there are group guidelines that are read at the beginning of a meeting to help create an environment of trust and acceptance. For example, guidelines sometimes include that no member of the

group give feedback to another's sharing unless it is requested, or that members of the group not consider dating other members.

A therapist is a professional, who can help us become conscious about the past and the present, with appropriate timing, often gently. Most therapy is “talk therapy”—when we feel safe, we tell some of our story, make connections from the past to the present, and set goals for the future. Being in a professional and conscious relationship with our therapist helps us in our other relationships. In group therapy, a therapist guides the group, and each of the group members achieves individual healing by participating in the relationships with the others in the group. Other than talk therapy, there are some therapists who utilize body and/or expressive modalities, which we may want at some time during our healing. One modality in particular that has had success with trauma survivors is called EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. When interviewing a potential therapist, ask about his or her experience working with clergy sexual abuse survivors and his or her methods of working, and observe whether you have a beginning sense of safety and trust. Healing has emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual dimensions; one therapist, one modality of therapy, and/or one self-help group may be helpful for one part of our recovery, and only for a certain part of our healing.

*The “work” of our therapy or recovery* - Healing takes time. Recovery is work. Here are some of the tasks.

We will begin to tell our story: perhaps the story of our lives, including our abuse. We may need to learn to identify our feelings and verbalize them. We may need to learn how to care for our bodies. One-on-one or in groups, we will receive feedback about our feelings and our behaviors. We will learn how to protect our boundaries from future violations.

*Anger* - Feeling and expressing anger is part of our healing process, and may be an emotion with which we are unfamiliar. Some of us who grew up in Catholic families were taught that anger was a sin, and consequently, we have difficulty owning and expressing anger. In the beginning we may fear that our anger will get out of control, or we may we may express anger at persons or events that are merely projections of the past. We may even need to express anger at church authorities or with God for a time. Eventually, we will express anger appropriately, at the time when we are angry, and at the person toward whom we feel anger. Healthy persons can hear our feelings and allow us to express them, even when our anger is aimed at them, without taking it personally.

*Grief* - Grieving is another process which happens during our healing. We will have periods of feeling sad, or perhaps even depressed. When we were abused, our trust was violated. Persons whom we and our families had trusted have betrayed us. We may need to grieve our loss of childhood, healthy sexual and spiritual development, and the opportunity to have come to believe earlier in our lives in our blessedness and goodness.

*Unconditional regard* - We will need to feel an unconditional regard of others so that we can begin to feel good about ourselves. We may find this love from a therapist or a supportive fellowship with survivors, families or friends. We may find an understanding of God that helps us, a God to whom we can pray, and on whose benevolence we can meditate. And we eventually find that we can build intimacy with others.

*Spiritual* - Recovery and healing is a spiritual process, which involves our core beliefs, values, feelings, hopes and dreams. Spirituality consists of practices that cultivate our spirit, and can include religion, or parts of religions, but can also be done without religion. It does seem important, though, to find members of a community or a group who can accept us and love us and celebrate us, just as we are.

The process of discovering and accepting our identity, and finding appropriate ways and relationships to express our sexuality, is similar to other GLBTI persons who have not been sexually abused. In our culture

we hear and see many expressions, including physical violence, aimed against our very existence. Church documents have used terms to describe homosexuals and our behavior as “intrinsically evil” and “disordered.” We are shamed, and told that we should not express our sexuality. Finding persons and communities who love us and support us will help us to love and appreciate ourselves and find healthy ways to express our sexuality.

### **Integration, Joy and Healthy Relationships:**

Not only are recovery and healing possible—we can also experience happiness, joy, peace and freedom, and we can celebrate who we are. We can be delighted in being and our giftedness. We can have healthy, loving, supportive relationships, and find ways of appropriate sexual expression in loving and caring, mutual and equal partnerships. We can find God in our personal life and in faith communities. DignityUSA has chapters in cities and towns across the United States, and other national and international members and supporters of DignityUSA connect with us by way of the Internet. Feel free to contact us if we can be of further service to you on your path of healing, integration and joy.

### **Resources:**

Trauma & Recovery, Judith Herman, MD

Facing Codependence, Pia Mellody & Andrea Wells Miller

### **Websites:**

[www.dignityusa.org](http://www.dignityusa.org) DignityUSA web site

[www.snapnetwork.org](http://www.snapnetwork.org) SNAP Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests

[www.thelinkup.org](http://www.thelinkup.org) Survivors of abuse by clergy



1500 Massachusetts Ave NW Suite 8  
Washington DC 20005-1894

800-877-8797  
202-861-0017

Fax: 202-429-9808

Email: [info@dignityusa.org](mailto:info@dignityusa.org)