

SALT *and* LIGHT

Protecting Children: Healing Needs Listening, Respect, Justice

by Drew Dillingham

When Pope Francis came to the United States in September 2015, many people followed his trip with excitement. Much attention was paid to the Holy Father's visit to the White House and Capitol Hill and to what His Holiness would say to our president and congressional leaders.

But one of the less visible parts of the pope's trip was his meeting with victims of sexual abuse at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia. During that meeting, Pope Francis apologized for the abuse that many had suffered, for the times when those abused were not heard or believed, and for the times some bishops failed in their responsibility to protect children. He also made a promise to support the continued healing of those abused.

This week at the Pontifical Gregorian University, my class learned how to play our own small part in fulfilling that ongoing promise. First and foremost, it is important to listen to victims or those who have been abused. Listening to the needs of someone who has been abused opens the door to dialogue and support that can begin the healing process. I would also like to note that in some cases, it is better to use the words "those who have been abused" rather than "victim" or "survivor" to reflect an individual's wish to not be defined by their abuse, especially if they have worked to finally overcome the suffering they experienced.

Another crucial part of the healing process for those who have been abused is bringing an offender to justice. Although in some countries there is not a legal obligation under civil law to report abuse to law enforcement, representatives of the Church always have a moral obligation to do so. In the United States, in accordance with civil law, the *Charter for the*



PROMISE TO
PROTECT



PLEDGE TO
HEAL

*"Each of
you is a child
of God."*

Pope Francis

Protection of Children and Young People requires dioceses to report to public authorities an allegation made by a person who is a minor. Dioceses are also to cooperate with public authorities even when the person is no longer a minor. When it comes to abuse, the Church has a zero-tolerance policy, meaning priests who abuse are to be removed from ministry. These requirements are found in Article 4 and 5 of the *Charter*.

Restorative justice was another concept that we discussed in class. Restorative justice is concerned with restoring the relational connections between a victim of crime and his or her family, friends, community, and institutions. Some forms of restorative justice have already been incorporated into the Church's outreach efforts, such as family group conferences, circles of healing, and victim/offender mediation. Again, these forms of healing are focused on active listening as a restorative tool. This is a very simplified explanation of restorative justice and there are many different forms and aspects of this important approach to healing and justice. If you are interested, there are many resources available online to learn more. You may also contact your local "victim assistance coordinator" to discuss available forms of restorative justice in your diocese.

On Wednesday, I had the opportunity to speak with one of my classmates, Fr. Paul Balassa, a priest and professor at the Grand Seminaire de Philosophie Benoit XVI in Togo. Fr. Balassa, who is also a psychologist, explained some of his experiences related to restorative justice and the idea of healing the relationships between victims of crime and their environment.

Fr. Balassa's experience in hospitals made him realize that while much focus is placed on taking care of the medical problems of victims of crime, there can be a major gap in how much time is spent on fixing the problems a victim may have developed in terms of his or her relationship with family, colleagues, and society-at-large. For this reason, Fr. Balassa and a community of social workers, psychologists, clinicians, and family support workers have been working on a new initiative to support victims of abuse of any kind by holistically repairing those bonds that may have been broken. The group, called PsyMed Togo, is one example of the many steps taken by my classmates to support victims in repairing their minds, bodies, and souls. I am interested in speaking to my other classmates over the next few weeks to see what they are doing in their own dioceses as well.

The final words Pope Francis spoke during his meeting with victims in Philadelphia were, "I humbly beg you and all survivors of abuse to stay with us, to stay with the church, and that together, as pilgrims on the journey of faith, we might find our way to the Father." My class and I share in that sentiment as we continue to study at the Gregorian and seek to better assist and support those who have been abused as they follow their path to healing.

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