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Albany, N.Y. — September 14, 2018

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A pastor from the Albany Diocese said the reaction from local Catholics to the clergy abuse scandal is a combination of concern for the church and its future along with anger and confusion about the church that they love.

The priest, Fr. Robert Longobucco, pastor of St. Kateri Tekakwitha Parish in Schenectady and diocesan vicar for Catholic faith formation and education, has heard individual comments from parishioners, but he planned to hear from them as a group during a Sept. 13 listening session.

Since Albany Bishop Edward Scharfenberger is "anxious to have" feedback from diocesan Catholics on moving through the crisis, the priest said the goal for the session at St. Kateri's was "to have people voice their feelings and give input to the bishop."

On the same evening, St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Albany was hosting its own conversation on the abuse crisis, facilitated by Melissa Martinez, a clinical psychologist with a focus on mental wellness. The parish held two previous sessions earlier in the month.

"These conversations will offer a safe place in which to express your feelings, hear some of what other people may know or have experienced and possibly learn something of the behaviors that have contributed to this scandal," the parish announcement said.

Parish life director Elizabeth Simcoe said the idea came up at the first meeting of St. Vincent's newly-formed pastoral council. The August council meeting coincided with the release of a Pennsylvania grand jury report documenting more than 1,000 allegations of sexual abuse by priests and other church workers over a period of 70 years.

Pastoral council members were "very concerned about people's feelings," Simcoe told The Evangelist, newspaper of the Albany Diocese. "There was a sense of hurt, betrayal, concern for the church, concern for people leaving the church because they feel it isn't a safe place."

St. Edward the Confessor parish in Clifton Park already had two listening sessions Aug. 28 which drew about 180 people. "People need to be heard," the pastor, Fr. Patrick Butler, said about the meetings.

Although many pastors are speaking about the abuse crisis in homilies, he said priests can only say so much: "It's tough to talk about this in church; there are too many kids" present."

Participants at St. Edward's listening sessions could say anything they wished, but they also were given four questions to reflect on: "What are you feeling? How does the current situation impact your identity as a Catholic? What would you like to say to the hierarchy (national or local) and what do you need to hear them say/see them do? What can we as leadership in the parish assure that we're doing best we can to make this a safe environment?"

"There was a lot of raw emotion, but it was very respectful," Butler said. "People listened to one another and really supported one another. They're faithful people, but there are all those feelings of betrayal, sadness, anger, frustration (with), 'Here we go again.' A number of them recognized that this is a societal issue also, but we need to worry about cleaning our house."

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Even amid the high emotions, the pastor noted that parishioners' "faith in God hasn't wavered in the least. Church-wise, some of them feel shaken, but in terms of their relationship with Christ, that hasn't changed."

In upcoming weeks, the parish hopes to hold a follow-up meeting, getting input from parishioners on the list of questions they took home. Butler will compile the responses and send them to the diocese.

One piece of feedback has already become clear: Catholics want to know more about the procedures the diocese already has in place for addressing allegations of abuse. A number of parishioners at the listening sessions said they were surprised to learn that anyone wishing to report an instance of sexual abuse by diocesan clergy, employees or volunteers can contact the diocesan assistance coordinator who reports all allegations of abuse of minors to the appropriate district attorney and to the bishop, the diocesan attorney and diocesan review board members.

Holy Trinity Parish in Cohoes is planning to hold an evening of prayer for abuse victims Oct. 30.

"I have referenced the recent sexual abuse scandal in several of my homilies, but please know that I am always available to talk further in person," wrote Fr. Brian Slezak, pastor, in the parish bulletin. "Please continue to pray for the victims and offer sacrifices for the purification of our church and those who lead and govern her."

Scharfenberger has said he was "saddened and sickened" to learn about "spiritual fathers" who wounded the people in their care. He told Catholics in the diocese: "Your voices, your vision, your experiences — and your prayers — are not only wanted by me and by your pastors but are indispensable."

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Blain is editor of The Evangelist, newspaper of the Diocese of Albany.