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St. Paul, Minn. — March 28, 2019

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Fr. Kevin Finnegan said he didn't know what to expect when he arrived at St. Peter in Mendota.

The pastor of Our Lady of Grace in Edina was responding to an invitation Archbishop Bernard Hebda had extended to priests of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis: to join him for an evening to reflect on the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

But Finnegan was grateful he went.

With about 80 other priests, he listened to presentations from a clergy abuse survivor and his mother. Both shared how the experience affected their Catholic faith and suggested ways priests can better help other survivors.

Finnegan said the two-hour event Feb. 22 provided a sense of hope and encouragement, and that other priests he knew who attended felt the same.

Ben Hoffman, a survivor of abuse by former priest Curtis Wehmeyer, shared via video his testimony of finding hope in the Catholic Church. His mother, Joy Hoffman,

spoke to the priests in person.

"As she shared, I felt like I was in the presence of an exceptionally holy woman," Finnegan said in a Feb. 24 homily about the mother's presentation. Her story also filled him with anger, frustration and sadness, he said, as she described the impact abuse has had on her family.

Hearing the Hoffmans' story "takes the breath away," Finnegan said Feb. 26 in an interview with The Catholic Spirit, the archdiocesan newspaper. "I appreciated that both Joy and Ben were very real about ... the ongoing grief and pain."

In addition to the Hoffmans' presentations, the event included comments from Paul Ruff, staff psychologist at St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul, and an hour of eucharistic adoration followed by fellowship. It helped priests identify and be honest about their own grief, sadness and weariness from the scandal, Finnegan said.

"We get healing when we are more whole, which is more holy, and we can be a source of healing for others," he said.

Fr. Joseph Johnson, pastor of Holy Family in St. Louis Park, said the impetus for an event aimed at priests grew out of the pain many in the church experienced last summer in the wake of credible abuse allegations against former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was recently laicized. It also was prompted by the August release of a Pennsylvania grand jury report, which detailed allegations of sexual abuse by clergy and other church workers that occurred in six dioceses in that state over a 70-year period starting in 1947.

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For Catholics in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Johnson said, those revelations felt like "a scab being ripped off" from a wound suffered during the 2002 abuse crisis that broke first in Boston, and that was already aggravated by the local abuse scandal that compelled the archdiocese to file for bankruptcy reorganization in 2015.

As the bankruptcy's December 2018 end approached, archdiocesan leaders held a public holy hour for reparation at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul last September. But the "hurt and frustration" that priests expressed during a meeting with Hebda immediately before the prayer service indicated that priests needed particular

attention, Johnson said.

"It was apparent that we need to find ways to go forward together and be part of the solution, part of the healing," Johnson said, "but we ourselves (priests) need some healing because this has been traumatic to the priests as well as everybody else."

He said focusing on priests shouldn't detract from efforts underway to help survivors, whom he said experience "the primary hurt," but it acknowledges that others in the church are looking for resources and support.

At Hebda's request, Johnson has helped form a committee composed of priests and laypeople, including clergy abuse survivors, who are now working to shape healing initiatives in the local church. The Feb. 22 gathering for priests developed from that group's discussions, he said.

Fr. Don DeGrood, pastor of St. John the Baptist in Savage, also is part of that committee. He said priests, like laypeople, are wrestling with a range of emotions related to clergy sexual abuse. He saw the event as "an evening to listen, to learn and to pray for action and healing," and said it seemed to make an impact on those who attended.

The evening emphasized "there is hope," he added. "God can help us (and) we need resources in our lives to help us, people in our lives — priests and others — who can support us through these types of things."

DeGrood and Johnson emphasized that each survivor's story and path of healing is unique, and that's also true for priests and laypeople affected by the crisis. Their committee recognizes that no single approach will help everyone in the local church find healing and hope, they said, and it's discerning what steps are next for the local church.

Meanwhile, Finnegan said he was among several priests who preached at Mass about the event for priests.

"Every priest I've spoken to who was at the gathering was really moved," he said, calling the Hoffmans' presentation a "grace for the (arch)diocese."

"We listened to what they had to say," he said, "and that has been good for all of us."

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