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Pictured are participants in an Oct. 5, 2022, Georgetown University webinar titled "Neglected Voices in the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis." Top row: Kim Daniels, Deacon Bernie Nojadera and Dr. Deborah Rodriguez. Bottom row: Maka Black Elk, Fr. Bryan Massingale and Elsie Boudreau. (CNS photo/Georgetown University)



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The image of a white victim does not tell the complete story of clergy sexual abuse in the United States, according to a number of panelists during an Oct. 5 online forum titled "Neglected Voices in the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis."

Blacks have suffered from clergy sex abuse, "but it's an invisible trauma. It's an unknown trauma because there are Black victims, survivors, of the sexual abuse crisis," said Fr. Bryan Massingale, author of "Racial Justice in the Catholic Church."

"Yet in the Catholic imagination, we usually see a white face -- a white male face, overwhelmingly."

"We as Alaska Native people, American Indian people," panelist Elsie Boudreau, a Yup'ik Eskimo from Alaska, said, "are statistically number one in all of these different areas of suicide, alcoholism, homelessness, incarceration, childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, and I know historically and through, you know, with our ancestors, that those are not part of who we are. Those are not our culture."

"I believe that clergy sexual abuse has played a role in that," said Boudreau, who herself is a survivor of clergy sexual abuse.

She and others were part of the forum sponsored by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life.

Dr. Deborah Rodriguez, who herself was abused by a priest and now assists other survivors, said Hispanics are "a people of many histories and cultures. Now we are also people of many vulnerabilities. And think it's these vulnerabilities that clergy abuse has impacted so directly."

"Whereas sometimes we Latinos or Hispanics guard family secrets and sins, I believe abusing clerics took advantage of that vulnerability by forcing us to continue in silence to incorporate their sins upon us," she added.

Maka Black Elk, now the executive director for truth and healing at Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, said boarding schools "took children from their families and placed them in these institutions run by federal governments, the Catholic Church and other denominations, (and) really gave predatory priests almost unfettered access to Indigenous children."

Red Cloud is a former boarding school known as Holy Rosary Indian Mission school until 1969.

A process of truth and healing "starts with the truth," Black Elk added. "We are not as an institution healing anyone. And, in fact, we are not capable of really doing that. The only thing that we are capable of doing is providing the things that individuals need in order to journey to their own healing."

He said, "There's no such thing as sort of collective healing in our work that we have seen so far. We can't make whole groups of people heal. But what we can do and

what we are responsible for and accountable to is providing that truth."

"It's going to take every one of us to work on this," said Deacon Bernie Nojadera, executive director of the Secretariat for Child and Youth Protection at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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There is, he added, an "opportunity to again bring back humility, being able to listen, and to listen attentively, actively, to our brothers and sisters who have been crying and yearning and wanting to have their voice heard."

Massingale, who teaches theological and social ethics at Jesuit-run Fordham University, pointed to realities that he said further marginalize Black abuse victims.

"Many of those in diocesan offices who are charged with ministering to the victim survivor community have not been culturally competent to work with Black people," he said, also citing "the abandonment of the church in many ways, the closure of parishes in many urban areas.

Further, "Black people are seen as sexually irresponsible -- more promiscuous and therefore, their stories are less likely to be believed, because, the understanding is that therefore, you must have contributed in some way" to the abuse, Massingale said.

And if "you can't speak proper English, that is seen as a way of demonstrating your lack of credibility," he added. "And so the inability to speak standard English already casts your testimony into some kind of doubt."

Rodriguez said that not only is she a survivor of abuse by a priest in the Catholic elementary school her parents had scrimped and saved to afford, but "I am a survivor of reporting that very abuse as an adult to proper church authorities, which I consider a singular traumatic event as an adult."

Hispanic victims of abuse can be traumatized when "we can't speak the language, we don't understand the legal system or, maybe perhaps our own legal status is at risk and that's been used against us. But there's also evil (in) taking advantage of those vulnerabilities."

Boudreau said during the forum that she was 10 "when the abuse began."

"And I came forward when my daughter turned 10 and I looked at her and I was like, 'How is it that someone could take advantage of such innocence?'" she said. "And I couldn't shield the truth from my consciousness anymore at that point."

She added, "There are so many other survivors who have not spoken their truth."

"We have to say this was an injustice, this was wrong, this was a crime," Rodriguez said. "Admit it. Apologize for it. Be sorry and name it. What Pope Francis started in Canada was only the beginning: that every clergy, every religious leader needs to do: 'I am sorry.'"

"If anything, with Pope Francis' encouragement that we indeed be a field hospital and that we indeed smell like the sheep, it's going to require much work," Deacon Nojadera said. "This is just the beginning."