News



Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, chairman of the board of the National Eucharistic Congress Inc., kneels in prayer before the monstrance during eucharistic adoration at the opening revival night of the 10th National Eucharistic Congress, July 17 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Some clergy sex abuse survivors attend Mass. Others, yearning to be close to the Eucharist, remain connected to the Catholic Church in some way, even if their trauma prevents them from being in church spaces.

"The Eucharist saved my life," said Teresa Pitt Green, a clergy sex abuse survivor who is a practicing Catholic and advocates for survivors through a restorative justice nonprofit she co-founded in 2003.

However, other survivors want nothing to do with the church, or the Eucharist.

"'I feel like nothing can bring me back to the church," said Aimee Torres, a California resident who told National Catholic Reporter that her parish priest abused her when she was a child.

"I just don't feel safe with the church," Torres said. "And you can't be part of an organization where you don't feel safe."

More than 20 years since The Boston Globe uncovered the depth and scope of clergy sex abuse and its cover-up by the hierarchy, Torres' comments speak to a difficult reality that still vexes the Catholic Church even as the U.S. bishops try to revitalize it with a renewed focus on the Eucharist.

Aimee Torres, pictured in 1999, reads during a Mass celebrated by Fr. Honesto Bayranta Bism

Aimee Torres, pictured in 1999, reads during a Mass celebrated by Fr. Honesto Bayranta Bismonte in her family's home. In 2002, Bismonte was arrested and charged with sexually molesting two young girls, including Torres. He pleaded guilty to misdemeanor battery and was sentenced to two years of informal probation in Los Angeles and was removed from active ministry. (Courtesy of Aimee Torres)

Prompted in part by an oft-criticized 2019 Pew Research Center survey that indicated only about one-third of Catholics believe in the real presence, the U.S.

Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2022 launched an ambitious three-year National Eucharistic Revival aimed at renewing the church through traditional eucharistic piety.

The bishops believe that emphasizing the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist will reawaken a missionary spirit and strike a chord with fallen-away Catholics, in turn motivating them to return to weekly Mass.

But among clergy abuse survivors, the reasons that keep them away from church go beyond beliefs or understandings about the real presence. Those factors are complex, interwoven with feelings of betrayal, disillusionment, broken trust and personal trauma.

"I left the church when I turned 18 and have no interest or intention to ever return," said Tom Emens, a clergy sex abuse survivor from California who told NCR that a senior priest abused him for two years, starting when he was 10 years old.

Describing his relationship with the church as "complicated," Emens compared the church to "a large ship that has been off course for decades due to the sexual abuse crisis." He and other survivors, including those who still attend Mass, said the church needs to do better in listening to survivors and accepting accountability for its role in facilitating abuse before bishops can talk about renewal.



Tom Emens, survivor of sexual abuse, speaks alongside attorneys Mike Reck, left, and Jeff Anderson, during a press conference April 29, 2019, in Burbank, California. (Screenshot from livestream)

"I think the church needs the Eucharist to heal as much as survivors do," said Green, who added that the church "must fearlessly come to grips" with the legacy of sexual abuse. Green said her own encounters with the church "have not always been great."

"It can be devastatingly hurtful," she said.

Some survivors said they were offended, though not surprised, that the recent National Eucharistic Congress, the climactic event of the bishops' eucharistic revival, did not have any keynote speeches or breakout presentations dedicated to clergy sexual abuse. During the July 17-21 event in Indianapolis, attendees had the option of attending dozens of talks on topics that included evangelization, abortion, gender dysphoria, polarization, synodality, and post-Christian influences in modern society, among other offerings.

"I personally find it very disheartening to see a lack of introspection in this regard by the Roman Catholic Church at this eucharistic revival," Emens said. "It's a massive oversight, but one that I have sadly come to expect from the church."

"Why wasn't there a single breakout session that addressed the topic of child protection?" asked Chris O'Leary, a clergy sex abuse survivor from St. Louis who also found the lack of survivor programming at the congress to be "very concerning and very troubling."



Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, chairman of the board of the National Eucharistic Congress Inc., speaks July 21, the final day of the National

Eucharistic Congress at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

"It raises the question of whether there is actual contrition there and if there's any actual understanding of the magnitude of the damage that has been done," O'Leary said.

Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, the board chairman of National Eucharistic Congress Inc., the bishops' nonprofit organization that organized the congress, told NCR that he empathizes with survivors.

"I completely understand if a survivor of sexual abuse feels estranged from the church," Cozzens said. "I totally understand though that every survivor is in a different place. That is part of the struggle that survivors go through. It is a long difficult journey and it takes place at different places and in different ways with each survivor.

"So I can completely understand that some survivors might have found even the congress itself to be difficult," said Cozzens, who described the criticisms about the lack of programming for survivors at the congress to be "a healthy critique."

Cozzens said he had wanted the congress to feature testimony from a clerical abuse survivor, but that "in the end, it didn't happen."

"Although it's something I'd love to keep in mind for the future," said Cozzens, who added that three clergy sex abuse survivors reached out to him after the congress and described it to him as "a moment of healing." One attended the congress in person.

"The other two participated virtually, because they can't be in big crowds like that because of their trauma," Cozzens said. "But both of them experienced significant healing as well, and talked about it as a moment of gratitude and joy, to see the love that was expressed there."



Abuse survivor Teresa Pitt Green of Spirit Fire speaks to U.S. bishops Nov. 12, 2018, at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/CNS file, Bob Roller)

Those reactions illustrate how varied the responses can be from clergy sexual abuse survivors to Catholic settings. While some survivors were angered by the lack of programming at the congress, Green said she watched as much as she could of the event on a live feed.

"The Eucharist is untouched by human evil," Green said. "Because the Eucharist represents and is the victory over the evil that the church still struggles to contend with. That evil has already been beaten by our Lord."

Green's devotion to the Eucharist is shared by many, though not all, clergy abuse survivors, said Sara Larson, the executive director of Awake, a Milwaukee-based survivor support and advocacy organization.



Sara Larson, pictured in an undated photo, is executive director of the nonprofit Awake. (OSV News/Awake)

"Many of the survivors I accompany who are away from the church tell me that the Eucharist is one of the things they miss the most," Larson said. "But many of them face a lot of barriers to attending Mass, especially if they were abused by a priest. There can be so many triggers and so much painful trauma associated with the Mass that it's really difficult for them to walk into a church."

Asked whether it would be helpful for survivors if the bishops' eucharistic revival acknowledged the issue of clergy sexual abuse, Larson said she would love to see the issue of abuse and care for survivors to be present in every aspect of the church's life.

"I would like to see every conference that is offered, every discussion, every meeting to include this reality because it is a deep unhealed wound in the body of Christ," Larson said. "I think we have a lot of work to do to really face this reality, and become a safer, more accountable, and more compassionate church."

But the church's willingness to acknowledge the gravity of abuse and its lasting effects have so far been uneven at best, said Terence McKiernan, co-founder and president of BishopAccountability.org, an organization that documents clergy sex abuse in the Catholic Church.

"It strikes me as a very strange phenomenon that something that I feel is very valuable in the life of the church is being celebrated and promoted without any real attempt, as far as I can see, to address the reasons for its decline," said McKiernan, who attributed the sex abuse crisis as a major factor for why Catholics have lost interest in attending Mass and receiving the sacraments.



The Eucharist rests on a paten at the altar in the Cathedral of St. Peter in Wilmington, Delaware, on May 27, 2021. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

McKiernan said the research into documented sex abuse cases reveals how in many cases, priests abused their power to consecrate the Eucharist by incorporating it into their abuse of children and vulnerable adults. He found it disappointing that that dynamic has not been a point of emphasis for the bishops' eucharistic revival.

Said McKiernan, "What's the implication? Is it that we have no problems anymore, that we have no history we have to confront, or is it just that we'll confront that at some other time but we want to keep it positive for now? That's a not very honest way to approach a complicated situation."

Speaking to that complicated picture is how different survivors react to the eucharistic revival. O'Leary, the survivor from St. Louis, said the priest who molested him did so while consecrating the Eucharist. At the time, O'Leary was an altar server.

"The whole eucharistic revival thing is very difficult for me because of that," said O'Leary, who found the lack of programming for survivors at the eucharistic congress to be particularly disturbing.

"That's really scary from the standpoint of a survivor," he said. "It feels like a minimization of abuse and if you are minimizing abuse, then doesn't that suggest that you're doing so because you don't think abuse is that big of a deal, in which case doesn't that poke a hole in the whole prevention message?"

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Mike McDonnell, the communications director for the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, told NCR that it was a "huge mistake" for the eucharistic congress not to have had programming for survivors given the history of abuse in the church.

"I think it's really important for young individuals who were there to celebrate what the Eucharist does in their lives and in their own churches and parishes," McDonnell said. "But in order to do that, cleaning up the wreckage of the past is paramount."

Green said she respects the perspectives of survivors who struggle with the church, especially when they believe the institution is trying to turn the page without fully dealing with the crisis.

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Said Green, "I really hear and appreciate fellow survivors who are struggling when the church seems to have moved beyond listening, because the church can still be, for a lot of survivors, a very hurtful place. I see survivors hurting, I don't question if they would like to have a panel and be heard."

Meanwhile, for Green and some other survivors, the Eucharist not only represents but embodies healing and justice.

"It doesn't mean that the work is done," Green said. "And it doesn't mean that the people still aren't messing up. It's not a rosy picture at all. But when we fix our eyes on Jesus, everything else fits into a different order."

Related: Catholic Church's response to abuse victims of color deficient, advocates say