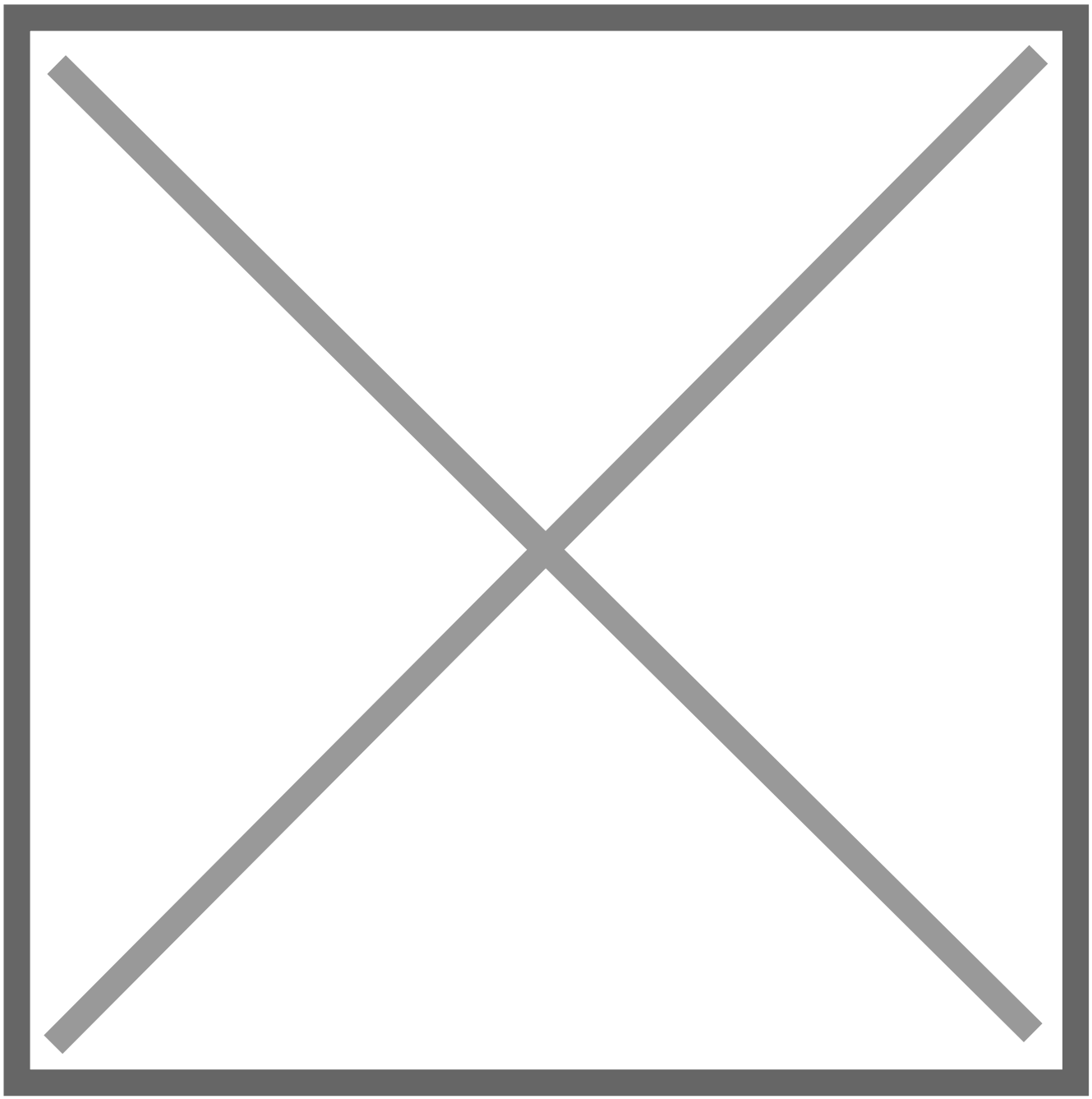
News



Fr. Christopher Walsh, pastor of St. Cecilia Parish in Philadelphia, is seen May 18, 2026, contemplating a memorial to clergy abuse survivors he recently dedicated. Walsh told OSV News he was inspired to create the display after learning the history of the parish, which featured in a 2005 Philadelphia grand jury report, and after burying one of the victims of a now-deceased former priest who once was assigned to the parish. (OSV News/Gina Christian)

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When he became pastor of St. Cecilia Parish in Philadelphia some four years ago, Fr. Christopher Walsh discerned "the need for something to bring healing."

The pews were filled with a mix of longtime parishioners and young families; the parish school classrooms were full. The grounds were lovingly tended; an outdoor grotto with a statue of Mary was a beloved spot for private prayer.

But, Walsh told OSV News, deep scars remained, since the parish had seen a number of children abused by priests decades prior.

That abuse had been luridly detailed in the report of a grand jury convened in 2003 by then-District Attorney Lynne Abraham. Within its more than 400 pages, the resulting 2005 report named Fr. James J. Brzyski, assigned to St. Cecilia from 1981 to 1984, as "one of the Archdiocese’s most brutal abusers — emotionally as well as physically."

The report said that Brzyski — later dismissed from the clerical state, and found dead in 2017 in a Texas motel — had, by one estimate, abused some 100 victims during the seven years total he spent in Archdiocese of Philadelphia parishes, including St. Cecilia.

Victims interviewed by the grand jury, many of them altar servers, described being attacked in the parish sacristy.

Writer and director Gerad Argeros recounted his experiences as a survivor of Brzyski's abuse in the 2024 documentary "Fox Chase Boy," the title of which recalls the name of the Philadelphia neighborhood in which St. Cecilia is located.

"The first summer I was here, one of the victims had died," said Walsh. "We were having the funeral, and I made the promise that we would do something."

As he learned more about the "ugly scourge" of abuse that had taken place at the parish, Walsh was reminded of an insight once shared with him "a long time ago," with an individual drawing a parallel between Holocaust remembrance monuments and ways to honor clerical abuse victims.

"The person made the suggestion, 'Wouldn't it be something if churches all did that as a remembrance of this horrible Holocaust of our young people through sexual abuse by clergy and others?'" Walsh explained.

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He shared the idea with several others, and then "kept looking for a way to do it."

As it turned out, a statue of the parish's patron saint played an unwitting role in the project.

The sculpture had been moved from its original place over the church's exterior doors to a ground-level pedestal outside the front entrance until repair work could take place, Walsh explained.

But "once St. Cecilia got moved" back to her rightful spot, the empty pedestal she left behind sparked an inspiration for creating a memorial for the abuse victims, he said.

"The following Sunday, a parishioner said, 'That's the place for you to put it.'"

Walsh told OSV News that "it was important" the memorial "be outside the church, because many victims are not yet able to go inside the church."

"Sadly, at St. Cecilia's, some of the abuse took place in the church, in the altar server sacristy," he said. "And so going inside the church becomes very, very painful" for victims.

He noted that his predecessor as pastor, the now-retired Fr. Charles Bonner, had also performed acts of reparation "as he became aware through the grand jury report" of the abuse.

"He had victims come here, and he allowed them to go to the place (of the attacks) with therapists," said Walsh.

In envisioning the survivor memorial, Walsh — who had informed the Archdiocese of Philadelphia of the project — said he "began working with a variety of victims, parents of victims and parishioners."

"We talked about a statue, and then just decided on something as simple as just a light," he said. "Because the light of Christ is in each person, and that will shine and lead all those who have been abused to healing, and also the Church to healing."

In the end, Walsh and an informal committee of some two dozen opted to convert the pedestal into the monument, with a few donors covering the cost of engraving.

Now, the former pedestal stands as a tribute to abuse victims, its sides engraved with Scripture, prayer, apology, affirmation — and the words of one abuse survivor. Atop the monument sits a votive lantern, ringed with a wreath of flowers.

Topping the front panel of the memorial — which was officially dedicated earlier in May — is a verse from St. John's Gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

Below the verse is an explanation that the votive light "burns to honor all victims of sexual abuse by clergy and others at our parish, throughout the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and throughout the nation.

"May their light burn brightly as we protect our children and all the vulnerable," the monument reads.

Lettering on the right panel states that "truth will always be the truth even if no one believes it."

"You are not alone. Our parish believes you. We are sorry. We stand with you," the panel reads.

On its left side, the memorial contains a quote from a survivor: "I had to forgive a person who wasn't even sorry. That is strength."

St. Cecilia parishioners George and BethAnn Cowden told OSV News they had both attended the school as children, with BethAnn a student while then-Fr. Brzyski was assigned to the parish.

She said that while she wasn't aware if anyone in her eighth-grade class had been a victim, students recollected "the boys were called down during school hours" with classmates "probably thinking they were helping the priests."

Both she and her husband applauded Argeros for his documentary. Of the new memorial, BethAnn Cowden said it brings "light to a situation that needed light to be brought to it."

Kenneth Gavin, chief communications officer for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, told OSV News by email the archdiocese "is supportive of this project undertaken by Fr. Walsh and remains deeply committed to preventing child sexual abuse and all forms of sexual violence while assisting victim/survivors and their loved ones on a pathway toward healing."

Fr. Walsh told OSV News that the memorial is just one part of a robust commitment to keeping children safe at St. Cecilia.

"We're certainly vigilant with background checks, with education, with educating our young people about 'see something, say something,'" he said. "We have to remain vigilant, because evil lurks."

While the number of reported clergy abuse incidents has declined over the past two decades under safe environment protocols, he said, "I don't think it's something we can ever relax and pat ourselves on the back and say, 'We've done good.'"