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Hard work awaits pope and abuse survivors

by Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea

Perspective

In less than a month, we saw Pope Francis alter a dizzying array of traditional papal accessories: his home, his shoes, what he sits on, what he wears, how he travels and more. In addition, he has generated hope with gestures that are possible harbingers of change. His Holy Thursday visit to a prison included unprecedented acts of humility, inclusiveness and unconditional love: He washed the feet of women, a Muslim and an atheist. Vice President Joe Biden received Communion at the Vatican. It all is destabilizing in the best sense of that experience.

As Francis embarks on a papacy seemingly beautifully rooted in Gospel values, however, a dangerous cloud envelops the Vatican. Composed of the precipitates of grotesque abuse of power, and suffering that rivals that of Good Friday, the cloud of unresolved and inadequately addressed ecclesiastical cover-up of the sexual abuse of tens of thousands of innocents across the world threatens the ultimate legitimacy of even this new pope. Two truths are rumbling within that cloud.

The first truth is that Francis must once and for all embody justice and mercy for sexual abuse victims. This soul-searing crisis never has been about the priests who abuse and always has been about the ecclesiastics who protected them while lying to the people of God, including victims. Bishops and cardinals who protected abusive priests at the expense of children and then spent millions defending the indefensible and who remain still in office must be called to account in some meaningful way.

Francis needs to be clear that shielding a sexually victimizing member of the clergy will never again be tolerated. When it happens -- and it does still and will again -- his administration of justice must be swift and decisive.

At the same time, this apparently deeply heart-full man must extend compassion and healing to survivors

in a way that is believable. I suspect that he may be much more capable of figuring out how to do that than either his most recent predecessors or those of us who have been immersed in this unholy sewage for more than a decade may be. But it has to be done or the cloud over St. Peter's Square will continue to thicken, eventually smothering the life out of what seemingly could be a papacy of *kairos*.

The second truth, standing in paradoxical relationship with the first, is that Francis can never do enough to heal those who have been victims of attempted soul murder by abusive priests and the hierarchs who sacrificed them to those priests. A stolen childhood can never be restored; it can only be mourned and healed from. No apologies, no settlement checks, no release of documents can bring ultimate healing, although each of those can add threads to tapestries of healing and are essential components of a social justice response.

The tragedy of sexual abuse is that healing is usually a long journey, hopefully taken in the skilled and compassionate company of another, often a therapist. It is often an arduous trek through a dark tunnel and the light at the end can be elusive for what seems like forever. I have been working clinically with sexual abuse survivors for 30 years. The good news is that healing can and does happen and lives once shattered can become full and rich and laced with love.

I have seen miracles take place in my consultation room. But healing cannot be bestowed; it can only be earned. Perhaps that seems unfair, but it is a hard truth that I have learned from years of working with survivors. In the end, true healing frees the survivor from bondage to those who wounded her or him.

Thus, two truths confront the new pope and clergy sexual abuse survivors around the world.

Francis must bring humility, honesty, justice, mercy and crystal-clear transparency to his engagement with clergy sexual abuse and ecclesiastical abuse of power past, present and future.

At the same time, sexual abuse survivors must be clear-eyed that no matter what this pope (or anyone else) does, a childhood was desecrated and nothing will make that right. There is no going back and what it takes to go forward is hard work, deep mourning and an insistence on growing into the light of healing.

[Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea is author of *Perversion of Power: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* and a psychologist who has been working with sexual abuse survivors for 25 years.]

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