

Reflections on Grief to Grace A Letter From Rev. John

In my deacon year, 2003, word of the Boston priest sexual abuse scandal spread across the country and the world. The seminary I attended, talked about this, taught about this, gave conferences and seminars about this ad nauseam. I had never revealed my own abuse at the hands of a priest that started with the "grooming" process in 1980 and culminated with the first physical, sexual contact in August 1982. (We were on a co-ed parish youth group camping trip when he put his hand down my sleeping bag and down my underwear. I think that he thought that I was asleep.) At that point I was paralyzed with fear and confusion. And of course, which is typical, I blamed myself.

Because of all the 'educational' activity that was being offered/forced on us at the seminary I became very, very depressed, barely able to function. For the first time since the molestation happened I told someone about it. The therapist on staff, was the first person I ever told about my experience. It was not a relief to finally say it. My depression and apathy because of the depression cost me ordination to the priesthood in 2003.

Even though I had finally taken the very first, tentative step needed for healing I was not ready to deal with the abuse yet. There was a period in my life that going to mass was so difficult because I hated the men representing Christ on the altar. (This is part of a longer story that involved being a seminarian and turning in a priest for inappropriate behavior toward me then being treated like a pariah by the seminary priests on the formation board. The priest I turned in was later defrocked for abusing a teenage boy.)

In 2004 I was ordained. In 2005 there was a District Attorney Grand Jury Report on sexual abuse by priests in my home diocese. I did not feel relief or vindication that my abuser and the priest I turned in to the seminary were named. It made me more angry. Both have since been liaised by Rome. I started to deal with my abuse in earnest.

The abuse I experienced made me an angry person for a very long time. The abuse I experienced made me fearful person for a very long time. The abuse I experienced made me paranoid and untrusting person for a very long time. I made great strides, if painful ones, in therapy and spiritual direction.

Grief to Grace really helped me to focus and bring all the strides I made in therapy together. (My eloquence in expressing this is lacking.) The fear that I lived with for so long was gone. And I have come to the point in my healing that I don't feel shame any longer. That coming into my own and not accepting manipulation from others has given me a freedom that I don't ever remember having. I can establish boundaries with others and say and follow through when I need to say NO.

Uniquely, I think, I never blamed God for my abuse. I never hated God. I have witnessed people on this retreat who did blame God and hate God. Because of the retreat, the way it is designed and executed, I have witnessed these same people understand and welcome that God still, and has always loved them. The answer that God let this happen is seen not as an uncaring God but someone else's free will choice. That makes a huge difference in the lives of the faithful.

Personally I still go to therapy. Things sometimes pop up unexpectedly that surprise me and catch me off guard. But I am well enough to know I need to deal with these things and can't do it on my own. I attribute that to my *Grief to Grace* experience.