

*These are responses to four of the questions that were asked at our parish Listening Sessions on September 21 & 22. Many of the questions do not have simple answers. However, we hope that the answers do provide some basic information about a very sad and sometimes complicated situation. The writer is attributed at the bottom of the response.*

### **What can we – the Catholics in the pews – do to solve this?**

No one can turn back time and change what happened or take away the pain of the people who were hurt by this. Recognizing this fact brings up a whole other level of pain, since it means we have to live with the broken, sick and sad way we all feel about this. One thing we can do with this is not let the chance for a personal lesson be lost. Around 50 years ago, the Church declared that the time of thinking that priests, nuns and monks were the “holy ones” and lay people were just “worldly” and “secular” was over. For the people alive at the time, this was mind blowing. Who could believe that moms, dads and kids were just as holy and called to grow in holiness as the people who gave their *whole lives* to God and to the Church? But that is the truth – there is one Gospel, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism. We’re all called to live up to our potential, which is to become saints. I can count people right now in Ravenna and Cocksackie who are my “living saints,” people I look up to as everyday spiritual masters. And I can think of some priests, nuns and monks in that same category. But not all my role models in faith are clergy and religious – my list is at least half filled with lay people. Which means each of us is called not to let this defeat us, but to use it as a chance to say with conviction: “Not on my watch.” Each of us can live with integrity and virtue and have the courage to lovingly call out those whose relational habits and behaviors are harmful to the community. We should also instruct survivors and their allies to call local law enforcement as a first course of action and then to call the Diocesan Victims Assistance coordinator (a layperson) at 518-453-6646.

Christ was a victim of abuse and murder – by religious and civil authorities. When we look at the cross, we see a horror that is meant to remind us of what human beings on a misguided path can do, even in the name of the greater good. Let’s make a personal and community commitment to never let this happen. Last year our parishes opened to all our Safe Environment training, meant to make all of us “rogue reporters” of dangers and abuse. It is mandatory for all priests, religious and anyone who works with kids or vulnerable adults in our parish. But all can take part in it for free. Bob Desrosiers is a certified trainer for both parishes and beyond – if you wish to have training, call him at 518-731-9268 we will offer and promote another session soon.

*Fr. Scott, with input from Teresa Pitt Green, survivor of clergy sexual abuse*

### **Are the sacraments celebrated by those that are later found guilty still valid sacraments? Is my marriage valid? Are my kids' confirmations valid?**

This is a question the Church has dealt with for centuries. The validity of the sacrament is not dependent on the state of grace of the priest. For a sacrament to be valid, the proper form (words and actions) and matter (elements and symbols) must be present for that sacrament. All sacraments are presumed valid as long as the proper form and matter are used. For a sacrament to be declared invalid or non-existent, it must be challenged and proven to be null. Generally, the only sacrament that is challenged is marriage—a sacrament whose ministers are the bride and the groom—and this is usually due to some preexisting, unavoidable issue in the individuals, the relationship or in the consent they give for a lifetime sacramental commitment, which would invalidate the proper form or matter of the sacrament.

For sacraments requiring an ordained minister, such as Eucharist or Confirmation, even if the presiding priest or bishop is found guilty of sexual abuse or other crime, the sacrament is presumed valid, because the form and matter are unaffected by the holiness (or lack thereof) of the priest or bishop. Your sacraments and the sacraments of your children are valid.

*Michael Ritty, Canon Lawyer [expert in Church law] & Trustee of St. Patrick's, Ravena*

**Why don't we ever see evidence that is being provided by the accusers (such as dates, places, etc.) but only hear general accusations? Will we ever see the full extent of the accusations so we can make a decision for ourselves?**

We all can relate to the discomfort we feel from not being sure if we can fully trust the process that's being used when the stakes are so high. Lives are at stake. The lawyer ads that come on TV that show images of the Church on the screen with a message that can seem to cast the Church as a sinister force can feel unwholesome and hurtful.

It's understandable, but not realistic to think that we will all get to see the bare evidence. Our justice system never gives all the evidence of a case to the public. (You've seen artist sketches of plaintiffs on the news when cameras are not allowed inside.) And all of us have a sense of how much effort goes into selecting jurors for trials. The NYS Attorney General is expected to release a report about the findings of these cases, but we will need to wait months for that to be published.

In the meantime, it's important for us to get familiar with our Diocesan Review Board (which was formed in 1992, 10 years before the national Bishops' Conference mandated it) and learn how it works and appreciate why it's needed. Our review board is founded with a mission of truth, reconciliation and restorative justice, which give it great potential to be a resource for justice and fairness for both the survivor and the accused (if found guilty). Check out the Diocesan resource page at <https://www.rcda.org/cva>

*Fr. Scott, with input from Teresa Pitt Green, survivor of clergy sexual abuse*

**If the Diocese of Albany declares bankruptcy, what will happen to our parish?**

The Church has both a spiritual and an earthly mission. In order to fulfill that mission, the Church needs sufficient money to do so. However, there are times—such as a deluge of lawsuits – when the Church needs the protections offered by state law and a diocese may declare bankruptcy in order to restructure the earthly finances needed to provide for the Church's spiritual mission. This may or may not possibly temporarily limit some services and eliminate staff positions at the diocesan level.

A diocese and a parish are considered separate juridic entities in both canon law and in the civil law of New York State. As such, it is possible for a diocese to declare bankruptcy while a parish maintains its own funding. Services from a diocese may be reduced or eliminated, but a parish can continue to operate much as it has prior to a diocesan bankruptcy in order to meet the spiritual and earthly mission of the Church. **In other words, there would be little effect on the services offered by a parish and there would be little direct effect on the parishioners.**

*Michael Ritty, Canon Lawyer [expert in Church law] & Trustee of St. Patrick's, Ravena*