

Most victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse report that without justice, there is no healing. Yet society's traditional justice systems typically pass over the healing needs of victims, focusing instead on the term of punishment for the offender. Restorative Justice differs from these traditional justice models in that it is victim-centered and enables all those affected by a harm to seek ways to repair the harm and restore relationships, including accountability for those responsible for harm.

Healing Circles are one form of Restorative Justice, and Voice of the Faithful® is applying this form as an option for addressing the ongoing wounds of clergy sexual abuse.

What Is a Healing Circle?

A Healing Circle is one model (there are others) that can enable healing in the Catholic Church from the harm caused by the sexual abuse of children and adults as well as by malfeasant hierarchical responses to the abuse.

The Healing Circle typically focuses on harm experienced by the participants in their own unique circumstances rather than the harm caused by a specific shared incident of abuse and malfeasance.

The Circle includes:

- A facilitated conversation among those deeply affected by clergy sexual abuse and/or by the behavior of the hierarchy regarding the abuse. The conversation invites participants to share their own stories of suffering, broken trust, or the like, as well as the ripple effects on their lives and in their faith communities.
- Participants include a professional Circle facilitator and, to the degree possible, an individual from each of the following groups:
 - Victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse
 - Family members or friends of those sexually abused
 - Current or past members of faith communities who are deeply affected by the revelations of abuse and malfeasance

- Clergy who have sexually abused children or adults
- Hierarchical officials from dioceses or religious congregations where abuse occurred
- Clergy who care about sexually abused children or adults but who have not abused them

The Healing Circle Process

The facilitated conversation is based on Restorative Justice principles and practices that include:

- Participants ready, willing, and able to participate *without causing or experiencing further harm*
- A safe and respectful space in which participants can express honest and candid truth as each understands it
- A level of confidentiality that the participants mutually agree on regarding what is said in the conversation

The facilitator guides the conversation by:

- Utilizing a “talking piece” to ensure that participants enjoy equal value and opportunity in the conversation, and can speak in sequence without interruption or commentary on what they say
- Posing questions that invite participants to share their stories of harm and to express their healing needs
- Closing the conversation with a question about any next steps desired by individuals or the group.

As the conversation proceeds, these are some of the questions the facilitator might pose for the participants to consider:

- How have you experienced harm from the sexual abuse of children or adults by clergy and/or from the malfeasant responses of hierarchical officials to the abuse?
- How has your experience affected your faith life or participation in the Catholic Church?

- What needs do you have at this time in order to move to a deeper place of healing within the Catholic Church?
- What can you do to support the needs of victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse?
- What reforms are needed in the life of the Church in order to overcome the effects of abuse and malfeasance and restore trust in the Catholic Church?

How Can the Healing Circle Fit the Needs of Potential Participants?

The Circle provides an opportunity for those who have been deeply affected by their experience to:

- Speak in a safe space about their suffering and their needs
- To listen to and hold the suffering and needs of others with similar or different experiences
- To identify and find support for ways in which healing can continue

However, the model is **not** appropriate for those who:

- Have not been harmed in some clear way by the reality of abuse and malfeasance
- Do not take responsibility for any harm they have caused
- Insist on expectations that are counter to Restorative Justice principles and practices

Variations on a Healing Circle

When participants want a more open-ended conversation, the facilitator might suspend the use of the talking piece and invite participants to speak outside of a sequence and allow cross-talk and commentary on others' sharings, as appropriate.

When it would be useful to the circle process, the facilitator might invite observers to sit around the circle. Typically, they would not speak, but sometimes a fish-bowl arrangement is useful (some participants move to the observer chairs and some observers move to participant chairs).