

Healing Circles: A Personal Journey *By Fr. Ron Lemmert*

Fr. Ron Lemmert is a priest who, like others in the clergy, attempted to remove an abuser from a position where he could continue to harm children. His encounters with the hierarchy and with "passive" lay people eventually led him to forge connections with other Catholic Whistleblowers and with VOTF's collaborative effort to use Restorative Justice Healing Circles to address the harm. Here is his personal journey toward that effort.

I have had a rather interesting journey from being the son of a Baptist minister to becoming a Catholic priest and then a Whistleblower. My conversion occurred when I was working as the organist-choirmaster at the Catholic chapel in the U.S. military at West Point, New York. It was not a gradual conversion, but a sudden jolt, as I became aware of the reality of the Eucharist. Shortly thereafter, I entered the seminary and was ordained in 1979.

Although I loved parish ministry, nothing in my seminary training had prepared me for the sordid saga of being in a parish where children were abused by the pastor. Once it came to my attention, I tried to get the archdiocesan officials to do something about it, but they refused to believe me and left that man in charge for two more years. Even then, they did not remove him from ministry for several more years. Meanwhile, investigative reporters from *The New York Times* and the *New York Daily News* had uncovered a 30-year history of abuse, with at least five of his victims having committed suicide.

As a result of the way this case was handled by diocesan officials and the way my name was slandered by parishioners who would rather believe that I lied than that their beloved pastor could do such things, I was so outraged that I came close to leaving the Church. But I didn't leave because I knew the Church is not just the clergy but the people. At that particular time, the people I served were prisoners in Sing Sing Prison, and there was no way I could abandon them. So I decided to stay in and fight to prevent the bad guys from winning.

However, as outraged as I was by the way Church officials had handled this situation, I was equally appalled by the gullibility and total passivity of so many of the lay people. People who were competent in their own professional lives



The Broken Vessel -- A symbol of the fractured lives that the Healing Circle model of Restorative Justice seeks to help mend.

would kowtow to anyone wearing a Roman collar and put up with the most outrageous conduct from their priests. What they would never accept in their own professions or homes, they somehow ignored when a priest did it.

I remember my father preaching a sermon about the Catholic Church when I was in grade school. Usually, he only had very negative things to say about Catholics. But on this occasion, he talked about a seminary professor who had referred to the Catholic laity as a "sleeping giant." His professor had predicted (in the 1940s) that someday that giant would wake up and become a powerful force of renewal in the world. After my conversion, particularly after my ordination, I thought about that prophecy often.

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But I am convinced that the Church will never be renewed from the top down. People in power never willingly consent to share their power or allow themselves to be held accountable. Renewal has to come from below—from the laity and clergy working together in the parishes to get the job done.

Years ago, at harvest time, farmers in a region would gather together to harvest crops, going from one farm to another until everybody's fields were harvested. This was also a grand social gathering, with women working together to feed

In Healing Circles, everyone has an opportunity to tell his/her story without being interrupted or challenged or corrected.

everybody, and little children too young to help playing together in the barnyard. On one such occasion, when everybody had come in from the fields for dinner, someone noticed that 5-year-old Sara was missing.

They searched the barn and all the surrounding buildings, but there was no sign of her. Then they split up and went through the surrounding fields calling her name—again with no success. After many hours of futile searching, someone suggested they all join hands and walk across the fields like a human chain. Eventually they stumbled upon her, all curled up in a little ball, but it was too late. She was dead. Someone remarked, “If only we had joined hands sooner, maybe we could have saved her!”

Whether we are liberal or conservative, progressive or traditional, all people of conscience, no matter what our pet issues may be, must join hands to work together to hold our bishops accountable for protecting our children. After all, children are the Church, too, and the abuse of children is not just one more issue, it is a horrendous crime! Covering it up and allowing those dastardly deeds to continue is even worse. It is nothing short of diabolical.

Children are a treasure entrusted to us, and our God-given responsibility is to care for them, and also to care for the survivors of all ages so badly betrayed and wounded by the shepherds who were supposed to be caring for them.

For those who were hurt and damaged by sexual abuse as children, some of the members of the Catholic

Whistleblowers have joined forces with members of VOTF to offer Restorative Justice Healing Circles.

The Healing Circles address a huge gap in the Church's support for those harmed by clergy sexual abuse. Aside from a few “Healing Masses” offered in a few dioceses and a few well-staged attempts to dialogue with survivors, very little has been done to listen to the stories of those who have been harmed by wolves in sheep's clothing.

In Healing Circles, everyone has an opportunity to tell his/her own story without being interrupted or challenged or corrected. We just listen and support one another in love.

Many participants have said that they felt far worse by the way they were treated by their bishops and diocesan attorneys than they did when they were raped by sick priests. Just being able to express their feelings about how they were treated without being judged for those feelings is very liberating.

We hope many more groups will join hands to support this effort, reaching out to those who have been alienated from the community by bad shepherds, to show them that we who are the Church really care. 

Report: A Boston Healing Circle

On June 7, 2015, VOTF and the Restorative Justice Committee held its third Healing Circle, the second in Boston, Massachusetts. This Healing Circle took place in a meeting room made available by the Franciscan friars at the St. Anthony Shrine and Ministry Center.

As with previous Healing Circles, the 10 participants all continue to suffer harm in their own unique experiences of the Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal. They included victims/survivors; the parents of and advocates for victims/survivors; lay people who have left the pews and others who have stayed in the pews as they struggled to respond to the harm; and church workers who were caught in the middle of the scandal.

The participants engaged in a “deep process” of speaking, and listening to, the stories each shared. They drew much welcome support from commonalities in their own

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We must exercise our prophetic role, which can mean challenging our leaders



Bishop Thomas Gumbleton has spoken eloquently many times about Church reform. In this homily (edited for space) from Nov. 6, 2014, at St. Anselm Church, Sudbury, Massachusetts, he talks about Church leadership, the clergy sexual abuse scandal, and VOTF's first Healing Circle, which he attended.

And now, my brothers and sisters, this is just the beginning of (Matthew) Chapter 23, and as you can tell, it's a very harsh judgment on the part of Jesus against the religious leaders—the scribes, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians—all of them. And as you go through the chapter, it becomes even more critical and harsh ...

But now Jesus calls them all together, and here is his model for leadership: “You know that the rulers of the nations act as tyrants over them, but it shall not be so among you. Whoever wants to be more important in your community shall make yourself a servant. And if you want to be the first of all, make yourself the servant of all. Be like the son of man”—he’s talking about himself —“who has come not to be served, but to serve, even to give his life for all.”

That’s the model of leadership Jesus is looking for in his church. And, sorry to say, back then, the leadership was failing ... the leadership was already beginning to try to have the first places, places of honor, be recognized by all, wear special kind of clothing that drew attention to themselves, reserved seats to the synagogue ...

In the community of disciples, Jesus has been teaching them [that there] are to be no distinctions among his disciples ... And in the Vatican Council, one of the marvelous teachings that came out of the council about the church, the community of disciples of Jesus, is that in this community, everyone is equal in freedom and dignity—equal in freedom and dignity, and all have responsibility.

... But everyone is called to this prophetic stance, and at times to challenge the leaders of the community. During this weekend itself, I’ve been participating with a Catholic lay group that came into existence at the time the sex abuse scandal broke out into the open in a dramatic way in Boston, and they began to form a group they called Voice of

the Faithful, determined that the people of God would be heard during this crisis ...

This program I participated in yesterday was called “The Healing Circle,” and it was an attempt to help those who had survived the terrible abuse to be healed. It’s always not something confrontational, not something adversarial. It was the people of the church reaching out to other people in the church who have been so traumatically [affected].

We don’t think of it often, but we should remind ourselves, all of us, that we are called to be prophets also ...

And that means sometimes challenging the very leadership. If in our church, bishops are setting themselves above others, becoming domineering instead of being a shepherd of the sheep, being among sheep, listening, bringing healing, we have to challenge that. It seems like a bold thing to do, but Jesus was not a priest. He was not; [he] had no title in the Jewish community. He nevertheless spoke out ...

And finally, if we want to understand what that leadership might be, we can look at our first lesson today and see how Paul describes himself coming among the people of Thessalonica. He says, when he came among them, “We were gentle with you, as a nursing mother who feeds and cuddles her baby. And so great is our concern, that we are ready to give you, as well as the Gospel, even our very lives, for you have become very dear to us.”

See, that’s the kind of leadership—serving as a nursing mother could serve her baby ... And we can look around in our church, and in many ways we see it’s not happening. Groups like Voice of the Faithful have come together to try to challenge our church leaders to bring them to the kind of leadership that Jesus calls them to be.

Perhaps we have to join with that group, or some other groups, and be those who try to speak in a prophetic way and live in a prophetic way, ourselves being servants to one another as Jesus was calling his community to reform ...

... And so often, that reform is brought about because the people of the church have demanded reform in their leadership. Today we need to demand that, pray for it, and try to make it happen. 

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Ongoing VOTF Projects

- Attended Association of U.S. Catholic Priests Assembly in June in St. Louis at AUSCP's request
- Completed initial population of Diocesan Finances Database and began continuous updating
- Collecting responses to Family Synod questionnaire that VOTF President Mark Mullaney will take to Rome to present at the October 2015 Ordinary Synod
- Planning participation and attendance at World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia in September 2015
- Distributing Diocesan Health Check material to evaluate diocesan leadership and ministries—and more ...

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experiences, regarding not only specific instances of abuse, but also hierarchical malfeasance in response to them. They left the nearly eight-hour conversation with a strong sense of validation about their stories, a great relief to have found a safe and nurturing space to hold the pain from their harm, and a renewed hope in their own journeys towards healing.

VOTF and its partners remain convinced that Healing Circles can fill a void that has existed in the life of the people

of God since the sexual abuse scandal broke into public consciousness in Boston in 2002. Two Healing Circles in New York City will have taken place by the time you read this, and plans are underway to hold Healing Circles in Chicago, Seattle, Toronto, and Ireland.

If you know of individuals, perhaps in your own faith communities, for whom a Healing Circle might be a good fit, please ask them to contact Bill Casey (703-568-3438; b13909@comcast.net), or Jayne O'Donnell (860-335-4259; jaynedirish@yahoo.com). 



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Voice of the Faithful® is a worldwide movement of Roman Catholics working to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can participate actively in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church. We support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, support priests of integrity, and work to help shape structural change in the Church.

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