

Sometimes we think sin is private, and that no one will find out about it. We can say it's just one time, or no big deal. Other times we know about sin and instead choose to do nothing. We've seen though what the results of that can be.

Susan Pavlak is a lifelong resident of Saint Paul. Starting in 1970, she was abused by her high school religion teacher, a former nun. Today, she works with Gilbert Gustafson, who is a priest now outside of public ministry who abused minors from 1978 to 1982. Together they work on "Uncommon Conversation" which seeks healing and reconciliation among survivors, perpetrators and others involved in the abuse scandals that engulfed our Church.

Susan's family's life was centered on faith. Her grandfather and father were police officers. They were involved in parish life, and her parents chaired the parish capital campaign. She attended Catholic grade school and high school. Her experience was good, until her junior year.

In her junior year, the student council leaders were asked to arrive a week or two before school started and give a speech for the incoming faculty. Afterward, a teacher came up to her and introduced herself as a religion teacher and student council liaison. She learned from her that she recently left a religious order and was living in a community with two former sisters and one on leave. This was her first introduction to her perpetrator. Susan was 16; her teacher was 25.

She began seeking Susan out, asking her to lunch with her, staying after school, giving her a ride home every so often. Susan recognizes now, in her 60s, that she was being groomed, cut out of the herd. Her teacher told her inappropriate details about her personal life and she didn't understand what she was saying.

On a junior retreat, she asked Susan to go for walks with her. She showed her where her father used to have a restaurant. During one of the quiet periods, she laid next to Susan in a quiet room. Susan was uncomfortable but flattered as she was entertaining the idea of becoming a nun.

Susan ended up agreeing to have dinner with her, where her teacher talked about poetry. Susan too was crazy about poetry. The teacher talked about God, and Susan was crazy about God too. So the teacher brought her a book.

After supper at a restaurant they got into the teacher's car, and Susan was asked if they were friends by the teacher. She said then well can a friend do anything to a friend. Susan said, yes, I think so. And then the abuse began, and continued back at the woman's home, and the teacher dropped her off at her parent's home the next morning, telling her parents she needed counseling. Now she set herself up as the good person, the hero. Susan felt trapped; she could not tell her parents. She also did not want her teacher to get in trouble. She then got a bus ticket and ran away to Omaha. When she told a friend back home, the friend informed the perpetrator, who picked her up in Omaha and brought her home where abuse continued. Susan ended up in the psych

word at Saint Joseph's in Saint Paul, and missed 61 days of school that year. When she returned, the abuser visited the family home and said she was leaving the school. That teacher ended up at another Catholic school. The abuser found her several more times though. Even contacted her when she was at college. But by the time she was 21, Susan finally was able to say "no" and talk to a counselor at the school about what happened. Through therapy thereafter, she realized that the abuser erased her face and was only interested in getting what she wanted out of the victim. It was a painful road to recovery - it involved an attempt on her life, and alcoholism. In her own words: "The abuse has long-lasting effects, but so do a lot of other things: poverty, physical abuse, rape, neglect, all kinds of things. I don't privilege my suffering. My family suffered. My church community suffered. In the church I believe these tremendous secrets that run below the tectonic plates are now coming up to be healed. I have a wonderful life. I am filled with joy. I have scars, but so do you. Perpetrators have scars. Everyone does. I don't privilege mine. I expect there will be more healing. I am good at it now, right?"

She also engaged her abuser. The former vicar general, Fr. Kevin McDonough, helped her set up a meeting with the abuser. She told her story, and now was silent no more. She was sweating, and shaking, but she did it, and she says "I started making her the right size: a small person who longer had any power over me." She asked for accountability. As she put it, "I'm a Catholic girl. I carry in my body a sacramental sense of being Catholic. I thought "We are Catholic together." We know how to make things right between us. We have what we need. We have confession, and the Gospel instruction: "Go first to the person." Well I was doing it. The woman though only gave a half-heated apology. But Susan remarkably forgave, and said it's process - it kept her from being yoked to her sorrow forever. Susan also refused to be in the shadows. She reached out to her perpetrator's former religious order, hoping for an acknowledgement but they were as she put it "on the skinny side of legal" which is what her church has done too often. They were fearful that acknowledging the perpetrator would put them in legal jeopardy.

Susan though has a belief in reconciliation but also safety, and so became a fighter against abuse. She serves on a review board for a religious community. She recognizes too that even the abuser is still a human who does not fall outside of God's love. In her words: "heal 'em or home 'em." Heal them, or keep them safely at home. We have to find a way to be safe together — that is my responsibility, not only to the kids and vulnerable people but also to the perpetrator. Once you let go of that hundredth sheep, there's gonna be a 99th at risk. We cannot let go of that hundredth sheep, even if it is a perpetrator! We have to find a way to stay in community, safely, with appropriate and respectful boundaries and necessary sanctions." She's also argued that the Church needed to do more, not to pretend, deny, deflect and lawyer up. In the years since, she's worked on speaking with sex offenders, and helped set up a restorative justice practice with the offender and the victim, meeting directly with people who were sexual offenders.

She is currently with Uncommon Conversation, a program where the perpetrator and victim meet. Some have said "you can't do this" and her response was "So in other

words, there is only one way to do this, and that is to shoot em all and never trust any of them.” Through her program, she sees people able to live in empathy and peace. But she also says as a victim, she does not need pity, but engagement with her as an adult from priests, victims, families and the Church.

She is a victim who is not remaining in the shadows. As she puts it:

We are not part of the solution if we shame and throw people away and make them carry our shame. What will keep them from wanting to go toward the dark side of their compulsions? If I put someone in the dark and treat them badly, how does it help keep people safe?

If you behave well, you belong in community. If you need certain adaptations, like a ramp, or sign language, I accommodate it. If you need appropriate boundaries for other things, like childcare, I take care of it. The acceptance of these perpetrators is another challenge to the inclusivity of the Gospel. It is either that, or buy a bunch of bells. Then we'll all ring our bells; we'll all be lepers. I refuse to do that.

Her story shows one what can happen when you replace fear with hope, when you refuse to be silent, when you stand up and make a difference and look ahead to the future as a person of hope. Hers is one of the most courageous stories I've ever read; for as we are all aware scars of what has been done, or in some cases not done, keep coming up. And people like Susan show us what can happen when we do what she says must be done, and try to heal those scars.

Of course, as a victim, she is not alone. This past week, we were all made aware of ugliness of from Pennsylvania, namely that over a period of 70 years about 300 clergy across the state had engaged in abuse of a minor, with an estimated 1000 victims over that span.

The response was predictable. Shock. Anger. Outrage. And all justifiable. But while the reports of what happened were horrible, The question of what does one do moving forward. How does one respond - both as a Church, but also as individuals? Susan's story, and what I have seen over the course of my priesthood, actually gives me hope and a blueprint I hope we follow - of being like her, being a person who is willing to take action.

In this week's Gospel, we are told "Many of Jesus' disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Jesus you remember was talking about how He gives us flesh for us to eat. It's His sacrificial love for us. The Eucharist is what also binds us together. And as the Holy Father pointed out in his powerful letter to all of the faithful this past week, when we speak about the abuse of a child we, as the People of God, "take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and spirit...we want solidarity in the deepest and most challenging sense to become our way of forging present and future history." Abuse requires a response from you and me, from our bishops and our universal Church. Yes, it is hard to follow Christ and to make sure the

Eucharist is something that brings us closer together. So what are we to do to tear down the walls of pain, shame and silence?

I wrote a lengthy letter on this, too long for the bulletin that you are welcome to take as you leave Mass today or read online. It is just "one guys opinion" as a priest. But I felt this was important to preach about as well. I certainly do not have all of the answers; these are just my thoughts as a priest and a Catholic. But I think there are some things we can do help ourselves and one another.

The first part is to confront the reality of abuse when it happens. As we are painfully aware of, silence and not doing this was a big reason our archdiocese went through bankruptcy and suffering was prolonged. But the reality too is that abuse is far more common in the family unit than the Church, and here too, silence is a big problem. The perpetrator wanting to justify his actions. Those in the know being concerned about what the neighbors would think from some bishops to people in families. And what happens when things are shoved under the rug is a sin continues to occur. When we are aware of abuse, of when we suspect it, we need to report it, no exceptions. If a person is an abuser, they need to have the courage to acknowledge it as well by getting help and getting out of a situation where they can harm again.

I think with that, we can take a page from the Church. It's important to be aware of what the Church has done. So many have been failed. But steps have been taken. When you hear a report like Pennsylvania, there is the obvious shock and anger. But it's also important to remember nearly all of the cases there date from many years ago; the number of new cases is far less, and that is true in our own diocese as well. And that's because there has been a response. Unless one works in a parish, they might not be aware of all that has changed. In our own archdiocese, all clergy, parish and school employees along with all volunteers and anyone who has contact with minors undergo a background check that is regularly done. They go through a program called VIRTUS, which is a training program to equip adults to protect kids and know boundaries and red flags. It makes them aware of what is inappropriate and criminal behavior, makes them aware of when to suspect something, when to report, and what to do anytime there is a suspicion. The training is also ongoing. There is also a code of conduct for clergy and church personnel. There's a whistleblower policy to ensure people are comfortable to report suspicions of wrongdoing. There's protocol in place when a person is accused of something, such as among the clergy a priest, when there's a credible accusation, immediately removes himself from a parish. The seminaries are also vigilant. As part of our formation, we go through training on working with minors and reviews on conduct; there is psychological screening prior to entry, and ongoing evaluations throughout seminary as well. If a guy has issues or is deemed a risk, he's removed from seminary. The archdiocese also has a full time director of Ministerial Standards/Safe Environment, Mr. Tim O'Malley, a former judge and Hennepin County prosecutor who went after victims of abuse. Thanks to all of these efforts, so much has been done to create a safe environment and hold people accountable. Similar safeguards are in place in other dioceses too. And this is important to remember when we hear reports from what occurred in the past, to remember that the Church is not just talk, but action.

Of course with that, there must be ongoing action too. The appointment of Judge O'Malley was a huge step because he is given a lot of authority, and rightfully so as an expert. There are so many great people in laity who are leaders in the church; our own local parish is an example of that as we work with commissions, committees and volunteers. Bishops need to follow this example. I think our diocese did a great job with the appointment of Judge O'Malley, but I think we need to see people like him throughout the Church. Bishop Alexander Sample, the bishop of Portland, stated in a letter last week his suggestions. Among them, they were:

While only the Pope has the authority to discipline or remove bishops, we must ensure that bishops be held to the same standards as priests and religious in matters of impropriety and abuse; An outside investigation process, with the substantial involvement of lay people who are independent experts in their respective fields, needs to be available for these situations; Investigations should also cover those who knew of reprehensible behavior and yet said little, did nothing, or aided and abetted a perpetrator's activities. All those responsible must be held accountable; and finally All reports of misbehavior or abuse must be properly investigated. They must never be summarily dismissed, ignored, or hidden. They must be dealt with, expeditiously and transparently.

I couldn't agree more. And I think it's clear that the bishops as a whole are moving in this direction, and more forceful action is being taken by Pope Francis.

This goes for our families too. All of these actions to protect and hold people accountable in the Church are good, but what about our own families? Be vigilant. In cases of suspected abuse, report it. Know who your kids talk to, who their friends are, who the neighbors are, what's on their cell phone. (And you are not a bad parent if you say no to cell phones all together). Create an environment where your children can seek you out and won't feel shamed if they are dealing with something or giving into temptations themselves and help them. And if you were impacted by abuse yourself, get out of the situation if it's imminent, and if it was years ago break the silence by speaking about it and remind others that you are there for them too if they are suffering in silence.

We also need to take action in our own lives as well. Last week I was sent a video a coworker from Fr. Michael Schmitz, a priest I knew in seminary who was a few years ahead of me, who now does campus ministry in the diocese of Duluth. In his words, "don't leave the Church when things get tough, lead the Church." The best way we lead is to become a saint. Policies, protocols and protections aren't enough. We lead by looking at ourselves and saying where in my life is there infidelity? Where do I compromise? Where is there corruption in my life? Where am I silent or cowardly and not speak up in the face of injustice or sin? Do soul searching too. Sins of the flesh are common temptations and areas where we fall, so what is on your computer or your phone or your cable/satellite channels? If you are struggling in this area, turn off the computer, seek counseling if needed, make use of confession. Because pretending it's not a problem is not going to make it go away. It will just get worse, and odds are impact

how you see others and impact children as well who can learn about the problem a sibling or parent thinks is secret.

Through it all, I'd just repeat the words of Fr. Michael not to leave the Church, but lead the Church. It's understandable why someone would get angry or disillusioned. But if one thinks that there is no abuse in other faiths, or if they quit religion altogether they will be free from threats of abuse they are sorely mistaken. The devil is very real, and he is our enemy and the enemy of the Church. He seduces, he tempts, he deceives. He wants people to give up, to leave their faith, and to lose hope. He uses temptation, suggestion, insinuation - but he requires our cooperation. Some cooperate with evil and do evil actions. But the actions of the few are not the Church as a whole. Believing that most in the Church are abusers or that the Church doesn't care is a lie. The Church is filled with the power of good, because people do care, laity and clergy alike, and they work to bring good, not evil into the world. This is the Church given to us by Jesus, and through Her we are brought closer to Him. Working together as the people of God, clergy and laity have the power to create so many saints, but only if we do not give up the fight.

I've been ordained 11 years now, and I've been blessed to have had a lot of support in my priesthood. But I've also seen and dealt with challenging things. Certainly there are things in the confessional that come up and you try to help people. But as an associate, I became an unexpected interim pastor when the pastor phoned me one day on my off day to say he was resigning as he had been arrested. It was not an offense with a minor thankfully or in the parish, but it was a poor moral decision that was scandalous. Thankfully he got help and treatment and was able to return to ministry. Not too long after that when I became pastor at another parish, I replaced a man who left the parish in a police car and was convicted for a sexual offense at his prior parish, placed back in ministry when he shouldn't have been put there. That parish also had offending priests from decades ago, and I read the files and allegations and it was ugly stuff. There's so much pain that people go through because of abuse, both within our Church and the other abuse that makes less headlines within the family. It's easy to want to throw in the towel at times. That's what the devil wants you to do. But through all of this, I also see such hope. I see the resilience of people who serve the Church and lead the Church. I see people who care about others and help them. I even see people like the people here at our parish who do prison ministry who see the potential for goodness in even the criminal who is still someone created in God's image whom they try to help, seeing a human being, not an animal. The devil will win battles in individuals, but we will ultimately win the war because Christ gave His life for us. In the face of evil, Christ's choice was not to abandon us, but to lay down His life for us. He journeys with us still, and His Church is not weak, but strong. It's up to you and me to lead. To pray for those who are victims, those who have not yet come forward, for all who still suffer and for all who are impacted by abuse. We can never be silent, we can never let abuse go on, we can never let those who allow it to happen to be given a pass no matter where it occurs. Inside all of us is the power for such good to help people see the love of God. To quote Pope Francis, "Let's put a bet on hope, on hope for peace, and peace will be possible." Peace and love are possible because you and I take seriously the words of our first

reading: "We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God." Serving the Lord means coming to Mass, it means praying, but it also means action and recognizing that the devil is at work against our Church, our families, and our world. So let's do something about it by making sure that he never has the last word, but that faith does by never being silent, by building up our Church and one another rather than tearing it down, by opening our eyes when we see someone being hurt or impacted by abuse or sin in any form, and remembering that that gates of hell will never prevail against our Church - but we do not hide behind the gates, but go forth into the world as Christian soldiers going into battle, led always by the Good Shepherd who walks beside us. Yes, it's hard being a Christian which is why some walked away. But when we refuse to give up and engage in the world, truly hope and love will triumph in the face of evil.