

**REPORT – LISTENING SESSION ON CLERGY SEX ABUSE CRISIS  
OCTOBER 22, 2018  
ST. BARTHOLOMEW PARISH, EAST BRUNSWICK, NJ**

The evening began with a welcome by Fr. Thomas Walsh, pastor, and prayer led by Mary Ellen Firestone. A short history of the abuse crisis was offered by JoLynn Krempecki. Sister Peggy Conlon, SC, a teacher and licensed clinical counselor, shared about the root causes of the crisis. In the process, she debunked commonly held myths. She spoke of the myth that homosexuality is a root cause for pedophilia. Rather, pedophilia is a pathology, a psychiatric disorder with neurological origins. It has little to do with homosexual orientation and everything to do with power. She discussed denial as a deep-seated psychological phenomenon that allowed predator priests to continue to ignore the damage they had done. Lastly, she spoke about the clericalism that was really at the heart of the ensuing coverup. Clericalism - attitudes of power, privilege and protection - resulted in the protection of leaders from appropriate consequences of their misconduct. This in turn also promoted an attitude of entitlement and of being above the law, allowing some Bishops to move predator priests from parish to parish, diocese to diocese, rather than cooperate with law enforcement in prosecuting them.

After this introductory piece, Sister Peggy led the attendees through small group discussions based on four questions. The evening ended with a large group wrap up session and prayer.

**WHAT FOLLOWS IS A SUMMARY OF THE SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS:**

**What feelings surfaced in you as this summer's news about clergy abuse broke?**

The participants said they have felt anger, sadness, frustration and embarrassment over this past summer's news – about the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report, coverups by the bishops and the accusations brought against former cardinal Theodore McCarrick. The anger, in some cases was described as outrage, disgust and even despair. They spoke of heart-wrenching sadness and disappointment at the betrayal and misuse of trust that has been exhibited by all involved – priests and bishops. The concern about coverups and lack of transparency in dealing with pedophiles angered and confused many. Predominantly devout Catholics, the participants expressed deep concern about the impact this continuing problem has had on the next generation of believers and on any who might otherwise have discerned a vocation to the priesthood.

Feeling blindsided at the great amount of abuse that was uncovered, they are also embarrassed at having to defend a church that they feel has betrayed them. They expressed often feeling fearful that the topic will come up in conversation and dreading conversations most especially with young people about the crisis.

There were differences of opinion about initial feelings about this summer's news. Some said they were not surprised that 2002 did not end the abuse crisis, but others expressed surprise that it has gone on so long, wondering "How much more?" Some said their faith wasn't impacted, but others asked "Why do I stay? How can I encourage people to join the church now?" One person expressed a sense of relief that the church is now forced to deal with a situation that has too long been hidden while bubbling under the surface. This person sees the present time as an opportunity to witness real change in the church.

**Talk about conversations you've had with your children, family, neighbors, co-workers about the abuse crisis.**

For the most part, conversations about this topic have either been awkward or have been avoided. The participants expressed a lack of vocabulary around the issue and felt inadequate in answering others' questions. Family conversations (mostly with children and grandchildren) included "I told you so" messages from the younger generations, elders asking children if they had been abused, and instructions to grandchildren about improper touch. Participants said that many young parents are now considering not allowing their children to become involved in church activities – or even not baptizing

them in the first place. Other conversations also seemed to be laden with tension – confronting a priest who indicated in a homily that “these things happen” (referring to abuse), speaking with a neighbor about the clergy abuse just brought to light in her family, conversations about the donation money that has been given to survivors. These are all difficult conversations to have.

The participants said that their conversations since this summer often brought up the topics of a married clergy, homophobia, and hypocrisy among the hierarchy.

**How has this crisis affected your faith, your prayer, your feelings about the institution of the Church?**

There seemed to be a clearly defined difference between the faith of the participants and their belief in the institutional church. Some said their faith was shaken by the recent revelations, but others indicated they still attend Mass, noting they do so for God – not for humans. They still want to serve and to set an example of faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

However, several people said that - for a while after the news of the PA Grand Jury report- it was difficult, if not impossible, for them to pray. Others described a change in their prayer life – they became more focused on praying for clergy, victims, seminarians... even on simply praying more.

Regarding the institution, there was hope that this crisis will bring the church to much needed change in structure and operation. To renew trust and address the uncertainty that prevails, there needs to be absolute transparency going forward on the part of the hierarchy. The participants hope the hierarchy will learn from past errors, give up denial and break down the church’s clerical culture.

**What do you want to say to Bishop Checchio? What do you want the Bishop to do?**

About laity/women: The bishop should take advantage of the talents of the people. It is important that he give the laity power at all levels of the diocese, that laity provide advice to the bishop regularly and that they serve as a lay board of professionals supervising the handling of allegations. The laity wish to serve and to help bring the church to a new place. To that end, they require that the diocese provide ministerial formation to lay leaders. Looking long, they hope the bishop will support the creation of new roles for women in the church – based on church history as read in the Acts of the Apostles (deacons, parish life coordinators – even priests).

About priests and seminarians: Seminarian formation should be changed to include extensive training in interpersonal relationships. Discernment and screening of seminarians should be reviewed and revised. The participants want to see the bishop conduct periodic checks of all priests – a kind of recertification of their faculties. Further, there should be significant ongoing formation for all priests. Pastors should receive in-depth reports on the entire history of each parochial vicar sent to the parish before the priest can begin ministry. In the not-distant future priests should be allowed to marry and the participants hope the bishop will support this change in the tradition of the church.

About Bishop/s: Concrete action must be taken against all bishops who are accused of coverups. This must be handled by civil authority and the Metuchen diocese must cooperate in these efforts.

There was a great deal of conversation about the image of the bishop, which, the participants felt, must change in order to heal the division between bishops and people. The people want and need a humble shepherd and suggest that the bishop work visibly with the poor, homeless and marginalized. Further, they felt that symbols of the hierarchy (for instance, wearing the miter) be downplayed in public and in the diocesan newspaper/publications. Hence, they hope that the image of bishop will change and that walls will come down. The participants expressed the desire to work with the bishop to rebuild the church.

Finances: The participants believe the success of the Bishop’s Appeal will be in jeopardy this year. They ask for an accounting of how much money has been paid from diocesan coffers in settlements and they

feel this information needs to be made public. Also, they request an explanation as to why all who were involved in the finances of the coverups (such as accountants) did not speak up.

Civil authorities: The participants want assurance that the diocese is cooperating fully with civil authorities, turning over all appropriate records and being committed to full disclosure.

Future: Finally, the participants want assurance that there is a plan to ensure the abuse of children will never happen again – and that even if there is a rogue occurrence, there will be total transparency. The participants want to assure the bishop that they are ready and willing to help move the diocese into the future, but it must be a different institution – a humbler and more honest one, with inclusion for all and with full co-responsibility between clergy and laity.

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This report will be shared with Bishop Checchio and with all the participants; it will be put on the parish website with other resources and pertinent information. There will be follow-up meetings going forward. The parish of St. Bartholomew is committed to serving God in Jesus' name through serving the weakest among us.