

## Our Journey Since 2002...A Story that's Not in the SPOTLIGHT

Coming this month to a theater near you is an award winning drama, "Spotlight." The movie tells the story of the spotlight team – the team of investigative reporters at the Boston Globe, who wrote about the sexual abuse of children by clergy in the Roman Catholic Church. The movie tells the story of a dark point in history, prior to 2002. What is not in the spotlight, is the story of our journey since 2002.

In June 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops set forth the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, documenting their shared commitment to the healing of those harmed by abuse and the protection of all children and youth. In February 2003, safe environment guidelines required all clerics, employees, and volunteers who work with children to be trained on how to prevent and report child sexual abuse. By the fall of 2003, the Diocese of Grand Island had prepared all diocesan clergy, staff, and school administrators to provide safe environment training for their staff and volunteers, had appointed five individuals to serve as Victim Assistance Coordinators, and had completed their first Charter Implementation Audit. In 2005, the Diocesan Office of Child Protection was formed by Bishop William Dendinger. Parish Safe Environment Coordinators were appointed in parishes and schools across the diocese, and by the spring of 2006 we were training over 2,000 adults in Safe Environment principles and educating over 5,000 children in personal safety annually. We have continued to provide education and training, offer outreach to victims / survivors, and serve as a resource to parishes, schools and communities for the past 10 years. The efforts of our diocesan programs comprise a small part of what the Church has been doing nation-wide; educating over 4.4 million children and training almost 2 million adults. Allegations of past abuse by clergy in the U.S. Church have decreased dramatically (from 3399 in 2002 to 898 in 2004 to 370 in 2013) as have new allegations of abuse of minors (from 22 in 2004 to 9 in 2013. Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Annual Survey of Allegations and Costs* - compiled from reports 2004-2014).

Our journey includes not only what we have done, but what we have learned. The Spotlight team began covering the story of abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston in January 2002 and published nearly 300 stories about abuse in the Church over the next four months. For many Catholics, the flood of media attention felt like an attack and it was a struggle not to feel defensive. What we have come to recognize in our journey is that this flood of attention had a profound impact; on children and adults who had suffered abuse, on our culture, and on our ability as Church to address the needs of God's children.

In the 35 years from 1950 to 1985 (the first year that a case of abuse by clergy received widespread media attention) only 810 cases of abuse by clergy in the United States were known to the Church (2006 Supplementary Report: The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002. John Jay College of Criminal Justice, March 2006, USCCB Publishing). By 1998 the number of individuals who had reported abuse to dioceses had climbed to more than 3700, though they were still known only as isolated cases scattered across the country. When the Boston Globe's stories of abuse by clergy hit the national press in 2002, thousands of people were empowered to share their story of abuse. We are now aware that more than 17,000 individuals were hurting (Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Annual Survey of Allegations and Costs* - compiled from reports 2004-2014). Prior to 2002 many of these individuals believed they were the only one who

had experienced such abuse....they were alone in their suffering. Our faith teaches us that God does not desire for us to be alone in our suffering. He created us for community with others and communion with Him. Since 2002 we have had the opportunity to reach out to those who we didn't know were suffering; to pray for healing; to be the face of Christ.

Since 2002 we have been called to action, educating ourselves in the signs of abuse; and in the process learning more about what makes relationships right. We have had the opportunity to be deliberately different in relationships, modeling the kind of loving relationships that God intended for us and for our children. In our efforts to prevent abuse within our Church we have increased the likelihood that our own children will experience right relationships throughout their life span. We have made an impact in our communities, by sharing what we have learned and by contributing our perspective that views relationships through a new lens.

In 2002, it was a struggle for many of us to come to terms with how members of our clergy could commit such crimes. It was difficult to fathom how such evil could be present in our Church – our faith community – our spiritual family. It was tempting to either enter into denial or to let go of our faith. We were challenged to recognize the human nature of the people of God as distinct from the message of God and his Church. We emerged from the journey with greater compassion and greater awareness of our need for God's guidance.

This month, with the release of the Spotlight movie I am concerned for all individuals who suffered abuse, that they will have to re-live the pain of abuse as many did each time a news story aired in 2002. I am concerned for a whole new generation of Catholic Christians who were too young to journey with us the past 13 years, and who will likely grapple with the same questions and struggle with the same temptations we faced when we heard the news in 2002. Yet, I trust that God, who created us, knows what we need, long before we recognize it; and I am grateful that our journey has led us to a place where they will not struggle alone.

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