

AWAKE MILWAUKEE SYNOD REPORT

*“A body is one though it has many parts... If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it.”
- 1 Corinthians 12:12,26*

Awake Milwaukee is a growing grassroots Catholic nonprofit organization addressing the issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and supporting survivors of that abuse. In researching the synod initiatives of various dioceses and organizations throughout the United States, Awake’s leaders were troubled to find few efforts to reach out to abuse survivors and include their voices in this discernment process. We also heard from victim-survivors in the Awake community who said they did not feel comfortable engaging in their parish or diocesan process because of the lack of sensitivity of many Catholic clergy and laity.

In light of this reality, Awake decided to participate in the global synod process to lift up the voices of abuse survivors, as well as all who have been harmed by the ripple effects of sexual abuse and leadership failures in our Church. We believe that women and men who have experienced abuse by Catholic leaders are important prophetic voices in the Church today, speaking hard truths that the entire Body of Christ needs to hear; we see this synod process as an opportunity to bring their wisdom and expertise to the wider Church.

Awake conducted two “Synod Sessions” on Zoom, using small group breakout rooms for listening and sharing. In these small groups, participants described personal experiences of connection and disconnection, as well as their hopes and dreams for the Church. We welcomed 106 people from 38 Catholic dioceses; 46 participants identified themselves as having experienced sexual abuse by a Catholic leader. Among those who provided demographic information, 86% were female and 14% were male; 91% of participants identified themselves as white or Caucasian, 5% identified as Hispanic or Latino, and the remaining 4% identified as Native American, Asian, or of mixed heritage. Most importantly, every person who participated is a beloved child of God, and we were honored to be trusted with their stories. While these stories and perspectives appear here as words on a page, we invite you to remember that **behind these words are real people with names, faces, and stories that are important to our Church - and to our God.**

As committed Catholics, we share these voices in a spirit of love for our Church and in hope of greater compassion throughout the Body of Christ. As you read these key themes and insights from our conversations, we invite you to listen with an open heart, mindful that you are treading on sacred ground.

THEME ONE: ABUSE IS HAPPENING NOW

*“My abuse began in 2018. I just don’t understand why they don’t tell the truth.
It’s now. I need them to acknowledge that it’s now.”*

During one of Awake’s Synod Sessions, we heard from a devout Catholic mother whose heart is breaking after discovering that her two daughters had been molested by a priest she had trusted and welcomed into her home. This abuse took place just two years ago, and the mother is suffering through a dehumanizing and adversarial reporting process with her diocese. We also listened to numerous adult women who had experienced sexual assault at the hands of clergy or lay leaders within the last ten years. One participant shared a story of a visiting priest from Nigeria who raped her in her own home in 2016, an experience she described as “unbearable.” Many of these adult victims explained how painful it is to be treated like their abuse doesn’t “count” because they were over 18 when it took place. Other survivors lamented the fact that their abusers remain in ministry as priests (and one as a bishop) in spite of the survivors’ many attempts to report their abuse and keep others safe. Over and over, we heard abuse survivors and their loved ones speak about the pain that they experience when Catholics talk about sexual abuse in the Church as if it is a problem of the past. While many recognize that rates of abuse have gone down over time, continually citing statistics about the decline in allegations only causes more pain to those who have been harmed - whether their abuse took place decades ago or just last year.

THEME TWO: DEEP AND LONG-LASTING WOUNDS

“I don’t think I have recovered [from my abuse] or ever will.”

Numerous survivors spoke about the extent of the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical harm they experienced following sexual assault at the hands of clergy or lay leaders. One survivor stated, “I will never be able to set foot anywhere near a Catholic church or school without having flashbacks.” In listening to survivors describe present-day feelings of pain, anger, sadness, shame, and post-traumatic stress, it became clear that even when abuse had occurred many years, even decades, in the past, the wounds experienced by survivors often still felt fresh. One survivor described shame in particular as a “heavy burden” that they “carried for so many years.” Many survivors and supporters alike described sexual abuse in the Church as “a grave and deep wounding.” One participant, who is not personally a survivor of abuse noted, “It becomes more and more difficult to say ‘Yes, I’m Catholic’ knowing that there’s a potential to deepen the hurt or add to the trauma of people I care about.”

THEME THREE: CONTINUED MARGINALIZATION AND SILENCING OF SURVIVORS

“So many people in the Church push you away and don’t want to hear you.”

Many survivors who attended Awake’s Synod Sessions described feeling ignored, dismissed, and shunned by their church communities. A woman who had experienced abuse just four years ago lamented, “It was a big scandal for me when I spoke to provincial superiors. It was a mechanical, legal process... They responded to me not as sister, not as body of Christ, but as legal liability.” Another survivor told us, “I feel I can understand the sufferings of Christ, because of my experience of abuse and being shunned.” We heard from one woman who had studied theology and worked in her parish. She related this experience of confronting a priest about inappropriate behavior: “We got a new pastor. At first, I thought he was wonderful. We became very close friends. But he was very troubled... he became very abusive to me. He had so much power. After a few months I had to report him. The Church didn’t protect me. They let him stay for three more months and asked me to ‘stay in the background’... I lost my job. I was treated like a criminal in a community I had worked in for almost twenty-five years... He was given a six month ‘break’ and then placed in another parish.” This woman continued: “I realized that the Church hasn’t learned anything from the abuse crisis. When people know what is going on in the Church, the Church muzzles them and persecutes them.” Another survivor spoke about the way she has been dismissed since her case was resolved: “Once the file is closed, the needs of the victims are obsolete.”

THEME FOUR: BETRAYAL AND VIOLATIONS OF TRUST

“I feel betrayed by the Church. It’s hard to trust the Church.”

A profound loss of trust was a common theme echoed by survivors and supporters alike, and this feeling was often compounded by multiple experiences of betrayal over time. One survivor described being revictimized after speaking out about her abuse: “I feel betrayed and abandoned by God, and then reaching out to the priests at church and that betrayal too.” A female survivor who was abused by a priest as an adult told us, “Even though I can’t embrace Catholicism right now, I know that God is here for me and has been my entire life. I hope I can come to a place where I can trust the Church again, but my experience has made me distrust.” Those who shared experiences of abuse were not the only ones who felt this loss of trust. One Catholic parent told us, “When my oldest child was set to make his First Reconciliation, I could not bring myself to tell him that it was okay to be vulnerable with a priest. It becomes more and more difficult to raise my children in a Church I do not trust, no matter how beautiful I find the theology and many of the teachings.” After listening to the experiences of survivors in their discussion, a faithful Catholic shared her own feelings of betrayal: “Clearly there’s this huge pattern of having more interest in protecting themselves and the Church as opposed to being spiritual fathers... it’s such a deep betrayal.”

THEME FIVE: THE RIPPLE EFFECTS OF ABUSE

“I went from being a devoted Catholic to one feeling betrayed and disillusioned by the abuse and cover-up.”

The impact of sexual abuse in the Church is not limited to the victim, but extends far and wide to the survivor’s family, friends, parish, community, and the Church as a whole. As one survivor succinctly put it: “The issue of sexual abuse in the church affects the *entire* church, everyone; all the more reason for all these voices to be heard. Faithful Catholics are distressed about what’s happening; they are standing up to clericalism; the survivors are speaking out. If our faith isn’t about healing, then what are we doing?” Many Synod Session participants spoke about how the issue of sexual abuse in the Church has affected them, despite not having personally experienced abuse. One contributor, who described herself as being young and newly married, wondered whether she would feel okay sending her children to Sunday School and expressed her worry about children being in vulnerable positions. Another participant described the negative impact the abuse crisis has had on his religious identity: “I have to admit, [the issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church] was not something I wanted to get into... I became deeply, deeply embarrassed to be Catholic.”

THEME SIX: LONGING FOR THE CHURCH TO RETURN TO ITS ROOTS

“I feel most connected to the people of the Church when we are together, serving each other, motivated by love and compassion, and guided by the question: What would Jesus do?”

Many participants commented that the problem of sexual abuse and cover up demonstrates an utter contradiction of the mission of the Church; they noted that the continuing failures to adequately address ongoing issues, initiate effective reforms, and compassionately accompany survivors expose the reality that the Church has become far distant from its Gospel roots. One participant said, “I think of the woman at the well, and I want that Church, where people are heard and known, down to the core of their being.” The story of Jesus’s encounter with that woman stands in stark contrast to a story shared by one participant, an attorney who represented two boys who had been victims of abuse at the hands of a priest. These victims and their family were ostracized by their church community for “exposing the sin of the actor and the sins of their superiors.” Repeatedly, we heard deep desires for a Church that meets its people in the messiness of their lives with a willingness to accompany them and to unite them to one another and to Jesus Christ. Instead, our participants experienced being overlooked, unheard, shut down, or shut out.

THEME SEVEN: DESIRES TO STAY CONNECTED WITH FAITH

“I am separated from the Church but not from my God. But it is so painful to lose everything you believed. I just wish the Church would listen. I wish they would listen!”

The universal human need for connection with God, pathways for spiritual growth, and nurturing communities of faith echoed throughout our listening sessions. It made the stories of abuse at the hands of church leaders, which inevitably ruptured these connections, all the more tragic. Many participants conveyed a deep desire to remain connected with the Church to fulfill these needs, often despite great challenges and barriers. One survivor described these obstacles and stated, “By God’s grace I have stayed in the Church.” Among survivors who have remained Catholic, many expressed the value of their local parish communities and their devotion to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. One participant said, “If I believe what the Church teaches then there is nowhere else to go. I believe in Jesus, and I believe in the Eucharist. But it’s not safe.” Some who have not been able to return to the Church communicated a desire to do so, while others maintain a looser affiliation with the Church: “I still consider myself Catholic. But my prayers are off in my garden, in my flowers...meditating, contemplating.” Other participants did not expect to ever be able to return to the Church and have sought out connection and community elsewhere.

THEME EIGHT: DEMANDS FOR TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

“I want to see change. I need to see change. I don’t see it. I see platitudes and promises.”

Amidst stories of sadness and pain, we also heard strong expressions of frustration and a common refrain that actions speak louder than words. We heard story after story of church leaders reacting to calls for change by referencing the reforms that have been put in place since 2002, without any recognition of the need for increased transparency and accountability today. The reality for many survivors is that these changes have not had the intended impact. Survivors who have reported their abuse to church officials, including in recent years, described experiencing multiple barriers, frustrations, and even further traumatization in this process. One participant who had suffered sexual abuse as a child reported her abuse to a priest after the revelations of 2002. She then experienced abuse at the hands of that priest. When this survivor reported that second instance of abuse to her archbishop, she was told that she was the only one who had reported this priest and that it was “probably a one-time thing.” She later found 12 other victims of abuse by the same priest. Unfortunately, this woman was not alone in sharing stories of abusers and church leaders who have never been held accountable for their actions, and many participants expressed a desire for ongoing reform. One survivor described her experience this way: “I reported the priest who raped me to the Church in 2006... The more time that has passed, the longer I’ve had to suffer without answers and without the Church taking accountability, the more disconnected I’ve felt. I have not been a practicing Catholic in over 12 years, and I will not go back unless there is a dramatic, sustainable change in the way the Church addresses sexual abuse. The Church would need to show me that it is willing to be completely transparent and willing to prioritize the safety and care of those who have been hurt by sexual abuse.”

THEME NINE: CALLS TO EMBRACE THE GIFTS OF THE LAITY

*“I have hope in the lay people of the Church,
people who are willing to listen and show compassion.”*

While we listened to many disheartening stories about mistreatment by the Church, we also heard moving accounts of compassion and care provided by some Catholics. A few survivors described helpful experiences with individual priests, but many participants felt that clericalism created a serious barrier to authentic listening and accompaniment. Most of the positive experiences that were related involved encounters with lay people or lay-led organizations, and many attendees urged a greater openness to the gifts of lay people in responding to the abuse crisis. Participants frequently expressed a desire for the Church to welcome the often-overlooked perspective of women in our Church, using statements like “Women need to have equal dignity in the Church, and we absolutely do not right now.” One attendee even said “In my experience most of the people who run the Church are misogynistic and do not value women’s experiences and opinions.” Another participant celebrated the fact that lay people, and women in particular, are already serving in many leadership roles in the Church; she urged the Catholic hierarchy to acknowledge and embrace this lay leadership.

THEME TEN: APPEALS FOR TRAUMA AWARENESS AND TRAINING IN THE CHURCH

*“It feels like helping survivors like me should be part of the job of the clergy,
but working with [the clergy] has been humiliating and disappointing.”*

Abuse survivors reported numerous instances where church members failed to respond to them compassionately or kindly, inadvertently triggered past trauma through words or actions, and in many cases caused further harm. One survivor shared a painful experience going to confession, where she mentioned her PTSD symptoms only to be told by the priest, “Well, I don’t think that matters.” Another spoke about her experience attending Mass: “Priests don’t realize how their homilies affect abuse survivors. Talking about forgiveness and how we all have to forgive now caused me to have flashbacks of my rapist.” Frequent calls to “move on” also seemed to stem from a lack of understanding of the long-term impacts of trauma, and sadly, some survivors reported a lack of trauma awareness even among diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinators. One survivor expressed that these situations seem to stem from ignorance, not ill intent, and that increased trauma awareness could help make the Catholic Church a safer place for those who have experienced trauma of any kind.

CONCLUSION, GRATITUDE, AND INVITATION

While this report contains stories of great trauma and suffering, we also believe that it is in the midst of this pain that we meet the crucified Christ and together find hope for Resurrection. To echo the words of one of our synod participants, if we truly become a listening Church with a heart for those who are suffering, “we can move from woundedness to healing.”

As part of this listening Church, Awake walks closely with many women and men who have experienced sexual abuse by Catholic leaders, and we have learned that each survivor has a unique perspective to offer. There is no uniform answer to “what survivors want,” no easy solution that will lead to immediate change. However, we offer three simple recommendations that we believe lay the groundwork for a more compassionate and effective response to the ongoing reality of sexual abuse and institutional betrayal in our Church:

1. Listen to and learn from the experiences, wisdom, and expertise of survivors - then take concrete action based on what they recommend
2. Implement widespread training for clergy and lay ministers in trauma-informed care.
3. Encourage and empower lay people and lay-led organizations to be active participants in the Church’s response to the abuse crisis

We believe these three steps will help build a Church of greater compassion and courage.

The Awake Synod Team offers our deepest thanks to all who participated in these Synod Sessions, particularly the victim-survivors of sexual abuse who entrusted us with their stories. We recognize that this sharing often comes at a cost, and we hope that their sacrifice bears fruit in the life of our wounded Church. One survivor expressed her desire in this way: “I am hoping that we’ll be heard. I want some of my faith restored.”

We invite all who read this report - bishops, clergy, and lay people alike - into an ongoing conversation about the full reality of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and the path forward for our community.

We encourage you to reach out to Awake Milwaukee if you would like to join us in the work of transformation and healing in the Body of Christ.