

of Gethsemani

One of The Voice of the Faithful's goals was to meet with priests in the Archdiocese of Louisville to explain our mission of supporting victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

At one of our meetings everyone introduced themselves and low and behold the priest sitting next to me was Abbot Damien Thompson of the Abbey of Gethsemani. It is rare that an Abbot leaves the Abbey for a lay meeting.

He became an avid supporter of victims/survivors and their families. A wonderful man and priest. He extended an invitation for us to visit, we did.

Monks offer haven to victims

Monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani are sending word to victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests that they're welcome there any time for visits and quiet retreats.

The offer follows two meetings earlier this year between monks and the survivors, who told about the trauma of being abused by trusted religious leaders.



The abbey, located in a rural area of Nelson County, has long offered its retreat house to visitors, whether Catholic or not. Its offer to victims is mainly to let them know that this is available to them as well.

No one is required to attend any of the Masses or the seven daily prayer sessions, said Abbot Damien Thompson. Participants can simply roam the quiet grounds and nearby woods if they choose.

"Because of their experience, they're wary of the church," Thompson said. "The only thing we were trying to get across was, look, we have a retreat house available, if you'd like to come to the retreat house you can come. We're not here to counsel, we're here just as listening ears. If you'd like to, come and have a silent retreat."

"We have people of all denominations come to the retreat house," Thompson added. "I think it's just to let them know our door was open and if they wanted to talk to a priest or a brother, they could talk to them."

Cal Pfeiffer, a member of the Louisville chapter of the lay Catholic group Voice of the Faithful, said that as a survivor of sexual abuse by a priest, he was deeply moved by the opportunity. He recalls older relatives going on more regimented retreats at the monastery and didn't know until recently that participants could just relax in a "place that's peaceful and quiet."

He's taking word of the offer to an upcoming national gathering of advocates for abuse victims in Washington, D.C.

"Hopefully through the peace and the quiet and the serenity, they can use that as some healing to maybe revive their spirituality," Pfeiffer said.

He described Gethsemani as "a very non-threatening atmosphere" even as it's a well-known Catholic landmark because it was home to the famed 20th century author-monk Thomas Merton.

"It's a very respected part of the church but kind of off on the side," he said.

Abbey of Gethsemani
Trappist, Kentucky

"This monastery is a school of the Lord's service, a school of brotherly love"

To all those who have been injured, directly or indirectly, by the sex abuse crisis in our Church; the monks of Gethsemani and I want to personally invite each of you to our monastery and assure you that you are welcome. Our tradition is based on St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries where the guest represents Christ and has a claim on the welcome and care of the community.

We don't claim to have the answers as to why and how this crisis happened but we do offer a place of peace and prayer. A place you may be able to find answers through quiet prayer and reflection. We believe a pathway to healing may be found here.

Several of our monks have volunteered to listen, pray and assist our special guests who are searching for their path of healing.

We call visits to our monastery *retreats*. They are unstructured, meaning that you come and go as you please with no schedule to follow. You are welcome to attend any or all of the monk's prayer services, can wander the grounds, visit the library or meet with a monk. For those that would like some direction in planning their retreat a monk will gladly assist.

We provide room and board for men and women, Catholic and non-catholic. Offerings are on a free will basis according to means.

Enclosed is a pamphlet that contains additional information.

"Pupils in such a school as this come to know themselves, their God, and His great mercy".

We hope you accept our invitation, we are praying for you.

Abbot Damien Thompson
Abbey of Gethsemani

When fear goes, good things happen

"Every once in a while," writes Vince Grenough, coordinator of the Louisville Area Voice of the Faithful, "something very special happens." The special thing that Grenough and others experienced Jan. 23 was what Grenough described in a phone conversation as a remarkable day for a number of sex abuse victims during a brief time at Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky.

The Trappist monks there invited a group of people, all of whom have been affected by the clergy sex abuse crisis, including two spouses and two adult children of survivors, to spend some time at the abbey. The monks wanted to hear their stories.

Because time was limited and there were many stories to tell, visitors were invited to write their stories and send them to the monks ahead of time.

In his e-mail to members and supporters of Voice of the Faithful after the visit, Grenough said Abbot Damien Thompson was uncertain how many monks would accept his invitation to participate. The visitors were hoping for up to a dozen; all 50 or so monks showed up.

When they met, they sat in a large circle and one by one the visitors explained who they were and how their lives had been affected by what had been done to them as children.

Those stories, and how victims were treated by bishops and others when they finally came forward, are always difficult to hear. But the monks listened, and they heard, too, from a survivor who "spoke highly of several priests and one deacon who responded as Jesus would have responded."

When the stories ended, the group went to the abbey church for vespers, after which Abbot Damien "stood before the assembly and invited all to pray for intentions of healing, forgiveness and conversion."

After Vespers, they ate dinner together, returned to the church for compline and then it was time to leave.

It is a shame that in some dioceses Voice of the Faithful is not allowed to meet on church property. It is, somehow, viewed as the enemy. Mostly it wants an honest and healthy church.

It is good, however, that the church is big and broad enough and can be so extravagantly welcoming that all can find a place to come in and get warm.

"During the drive back to Louisville," Grenough wrote in his e-mail, "some of the survivors who normally cannot stand to go near a Catholic church said that they want to go back to the abbey — soon and often."

When fear is banished, something special indeed can happen.

A Beacon of Hope

As I drift through the sea of life,
having my hull smashed and gushing,
as I ponder my peril,
I see a Beacon of Hope.

Shining in the distance,
through the darkness of night,
I don't know if I will make it to safe harbor.
And as I hang on to what's left of my vessel,
I see a Beacon of Hope.

As the sea begins to swell and
the unknown is all about,
I long for the time when I was sure of safe passage.

As pedophile reefs, hidden from sight,
ripped out my aft; I thought I would drown.
I looked to the builders for solace and assurance,
but found malice and malaise.

Then out of nowhere, came God's gentle voice.
He said He loved me and invited me to a special place.
The monks of Gethsemani offered their home
to share their peace and quiet and holy site.
I came to the Beacon of Hope.

For the first time, in a long time,
I felt welcome in God's home.
Stripped of pomp and ceremony,
gone was the hypocrisy and arrogance.
Through silence ... I could hear.

The Rules of Saint Benedict are still followed to this day,
that all guests represent Christ and have a claim
on the welcome and care of the community.
The Beacon shines far and wide
and is powered by the Light of the World.