

## **Summary of Blessed Sacrament's Live Town Hall on Clergy Abuse**

More than 250 people attended Blessed Sacrament's town hall meeting Sept. 16 to hear fellow parishioners pose questions and air a range of concerns after the latest revelations of sexual abuse by priests, which led to the resignation of former Washington Archbishop McCarrick as a cardinal and drew new scrutiny to current Archbishop Wuerl's past oversight of Pennsylvania clergy abuse cases.

Blessed Sacrament parish priests and a panel of lay experts, with experience counseling sexual abuse victims and perpetrators and working with church procedures, opened the session. Still, the two-hour event was dominated by parishioners who mostly shared their heartfelt struggles with the latest news.

Father Foley apologized for the scandal, likening it to a wound that festers if not thoroughly cleaned and that leaves a scar even after healing. He outlined precautions in effect in the parish to protect children: fingerprinting and a mandatory training course for all employees and volunteers who have contact with children, a policy that priests hear all confessions of children within the church building, and inclusion of a parent in priests' interviews of First Communion and Confirmation candidates.

More than 30 parishioners spoke when the floor was opened to comments, and the Blessed Sacrament Christian Family Movement, an organization of lay parishioners, distributed a statement of its views.

([www.familiesunitedinfaith.blogspot.com](http://www.familiesunitedinfaith.blogspot.com)) The three most common themes expressed were pain and dismay that the church didn't disclose and resolve the full problem after it was exposed in 2002; a belief that lay people should have a stronger voice in church affairs; and a call for greater transparency and accountability from church leaders.

What follows is a summary of the points parishioners made during that discussion:

### **--Lay people need a greater voice.**

A recurring theme was the need for lay people to have both a stronger voice and a clearer channel for making it heard within the church. "We have been blocked from the opportunity to be involved," one parishioner said. "This should be the beginning of a new era for our church. We should take ownership to work with you." Another said: "We as the church want to be heard in forcing change."

One parishioner described "a huge yearning by the laity to offer all they have" to help the church work through the crisis. "I think a lot of people want

more connection.” Yet another said: “We feel powerless and we need change.” Several comments reflected a belief that if church leaders had opened the doors more to lay people after the initial 2002 sexual-abuse scandal, the current crisis might have been avoided.

It was noted that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops created a National Review Board of lay leaders to advise on sexual misconduct, and that a parallel board exists within the archdiocese. Still, one of the lay experts on hand described the gap between the laity and the church’s upper clergy as “vast.” Another suggested one path might be to convene a fourth plenary council of the U.S. church, which would involve the laity. The last such council was held in the 1880s and, among other items, produced the Baltimore catechism.

**--The church needs to open more doors for women.**

In some cases, the calls for greater lay involvement were matched by calls for a greater role for women. Greater involvement by women would bring a welcome change to church culture, some said. “We have to be much more involved,” one said. “It cannot fall just to priests.”

Another said her adult children wouldn’t endorse any organization that didn’t give women a proper role in its affairs. Said one parishioner: “Women need to be ordained without delay. And when I say without delay I mean this month.”

**--The parish and archdiocese have safeguards in place; are they sufficient?**

In the archdiocese of Washington, it was noted, all working with children must be fingerprinted and take the VIRTUS training program, designed to ensure children are protected within religious organizations. In addition, as noted, the archdiocese has its own review board of lay advisers, which is led by a Blessed Sacrament parishioner and includes, among others, the Montgomery County chief of police.

But several parishioners questioned whether the VIRTUS training is sufficient, with one questioning whether volunteers have been advised to report cases of abuse directly to law-enforcement authorities rather than to the archdiocese. This parishioner recommended that the parish work with an independent agency or parishioners with expertise to design an independent program.

When asked whether parish leaders would report cases of abuse to law-enforcement authorities, Father Alec Scott said: “We—Father (Foley) and I and all the priests—are mandatory reporters....The question of who do you call if you see

something, there's no ambiguity as far as among me and any of my peers. You call the police, and you call your archdiocese as a courtesy if you want to."

### **--The future of Archbishop Wuerl**

Several parishioners expressed disappointment and anger at the way Archbishop Wuerl has handled the sexual-abuse crisis, both as archbishop of Pittsburgh and amidst the latest revelations. At one point, a parishioner said: "My first and urgent question is, have the clergy in this parish made clear to Cardinal Wuerl that we insist that he step down immediately?"

Father Foley replied: "Just a quick answer. Yes."

One parishioner, who said she was a victim of inappropriate actions by a priest when she was 12 years old, said: "Someone needs to stand up and say to Wuerl, 'Take responsibility and step down if they knew about this.'" At least one other parishioner, however, admitted to confusion over Cardinal Wuerl's culpability in the Pennsylvania cases, and noted that he is credited with doing more than did other leaders.

### **--The church needs to open itself and its records to outside authorities to clear the air.**

Some parishioners expressed hope that church leaders would open records and cooperate with investigations by law-enforcement authorities. "Any surgeon, no matter how brilliant, cannot cut out his own tumors," said one participant.

One parishioner specifically called for an investigation of charges raised by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, the former Vatican ambassador to the United States, who has charged that both the Pope and Archbishop Wuerl knew of abuse allegations against former Cardinal McCormick. The parishioner acknowledged that Cardinal Vigano "may have an ax to grind" because of animosity toward Pope Francis, but that the charges should be explored anyway.

Another asked that church leaders be less defensive, and less reliant on lawyers, in responding to abuse charges. Noting that the church in Pennsylvania has resisted opening up records, one participant called for the church, there and elsewhere, to open records "to get to the bottom of this."

Some asked for a clearer understanding of where their weekly church donations are going and whether they can target their contributions. It was noted that there is no targeted church fund for sexual-abuse victims, and Father Foley suggested parishioners "discern in your heart" where money might be directed to help victims.

## **—Is the Catholic Church still right for us—and for our children?**

The scandal also seemed to undermine the determination of some to stay in the church or to seek to pass on the religion to their children. One parent described the difficulty of defending the church to young adult children who already harbor doubts about their faith. A couple of others questioned whether they should enroll their young children in parochial school. Two participants noted that Blessed Sacrament's School of Religion has seen a drop in enrollment and in the number of volunteer catechists this year, and drew a link to the sexual-abuse crisis. Another noted the Gym Mass community's drive to recruit more young families to serve in volunteer roles and said she has "no enthusiasm to encourage young people to participate" in the current environment. If we lose our children, said another, we lose the future.

A psychology expert said Catholics feel attachment to the church much as a child does to a parent. So each revelation of clergy abuse causes a further break in that attachment and leads to loss of trust. "As children of the church ... we are suffering. ... And the hierarchy of the church has to be able to hear that as a parent and respond. ... From a psychological perspective, it's all about healing and regaining that trust."

## **--Are chastity and homosexuality related to pedophilia?**

Lay experts on hand noted that studies, including one undertaken by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, don't find a link between priests' vows of celibacy and pedophilia. Nor, the experts said, does research find a link between homosexuality and pedophilia.

Pedophilia, one of the experts said, is its own psycho-sexual problem.

Several of the experts, and some parishioners, suggested that those interested in the most recent teachings of the church examine "Theology of the Body," the collected reflections of Pope John Paul II on the human body, sexual relations, love, marriage and celibacy.

One of the experts said that in addition to adhering to the church's teaching on celibacy, seminaries now also are focusing more on "human formation" to help these young men develop as healthy individuals.

## **--We are grateful and proud of our parish priests; the problem lies in the church hierarchy.**

Another recurring theme was gratitude to our own priests for the work they do. “We love our priests,” said one participant. Another thanked in particular Father D’Silva and Father O’Connell for their outspoken homilies on the sexual-abuse crisis.

A Blessed Sacrament teacher in the audience praised the parish priests for their devotion to the school and its children. Another expressed confidence that the priests are listening carefully to parishioners amidst the current crisis.

There was much less confidence expressed in the church hierarchy. How was it possible, one asked, that church leaders put the reputation of the church ahead of the security of children?

However, another urged keeping the Catholic clergy abuse issue in perspective; similar problems occur within other institutions as well, he noted.

*(Compiled by Barbara Rosewicz and Jerry Seib, Blessed Sacrament parishioners)*

### **Summary of the Blessed Sacrament Virtual Town Hall**

Frustration, sadness and anger at the Catholic church’s leadership was vigorously expressed by parishioners who recently participated in a Blessed Sacrament online town hall. Commenters insisted that church leaders must get out in front of the clergy abuse scandal by fully disclosing everything in church files to independent investigators around the country, including those scrutinizing the Diocese of Washington. They also voiced a desire to be part of the solution going forward.

Blessed Sacrament’s virtual town hall

( <https://blessedsacramentdc.ideascale.com/> ) was the digital follow-up to the parish’s two-hour live town hall held Sept 15. It was promoted as an opportunity to air concerns, emotions, and ideas after the recent disclosures of clergy abuse and cover-ups in Pennsylvania over a 70-year-period.

The scandal’s aftermath resulted in the resignation of former Washington Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, and his most recent successor, Archbishop Donald Wuerl, as cardinals, as well as a recently announced federal investigation of the Roman Catholic Church of Pennsylvania. Authorities in at least 14 states and the District of Columbia have also launched probes into clergy abuse linked to the Catholic Church.

The dozens of parishioners' posts to the website made it clear that the scandal has deeply shaken many Catholics' trust in their leadership. "We are in the midst of what may be our Catholic Church's most profound crisis in centuries," one group of parishioners posted. "We are confronted with revelations of sickening widespread predatory abuse compounded by a history of insidious institutional cover-up of these crimes."

Woven through nearly every submission was a call for greater accountability and transparency by the church's hierarchy, a greater role in governance and oversight by laity, as well as the need for full cooperation with law enforcement officials. While some parishioners said it was time for prayer and forgiveness, the majority insisted on the need for publicly disclosing the full extent of the clergy abuse scandal before there could be space for true healing. Some also called for removal of statutes of limitation, and the creation of a national searchable database as necessary steps toward resolving the crisis.

"The constant drumbeat of systemic scandal from diocese to diocese must end," said one contributor. "Let's open the doors and let a third party examine everything—records, allegations— and get it all out. If bishops and cardinals or those high up at the Vatican are implicated, so be it."

"As taxpayers and donors to the Church, we demand more accountability from leadership" another added. "Our tax dollars should support criminal investigations of organizations that lack the moral and ethical fortitude to self govern."

The lack of moral leadership by the church's hierarchy, its emphasis on clericalism and protecting the institution at all costs were spotlighted for blame by many contributors. "The current crisis is really about accountability of the upper clergy," one participant said.

"Because of their mishandling of clerical sexual abuse, the church has lost both credibility and moral authority," said another poster, adding that there is a "need for independent reporting, investigation and accountability of bishops."

Parishioners also felt strongly that more attention, concern and relief needs to be directed at the victims by church members. Not only do "victims need to be first

and foremost in our prayers,” one contributor said, but “church lawyers should not fight reasonable requests for compensation. This action will—and should— be costly.”

Many expressed a conviction that reform must include a bigger role for laity, including women and parents. “Given how badly tarnished the institutional church is today, any effort to bring greater independence and credibility to its decision-making will be helpful,” one commenter said, adding that “lay involvement must be meaningful. It cannot be rubber stamp or superficial involvement.”

While many said any true reform effort needed to include an equal role for women in all levels of the church, a movement away from required celibacy and openness to married priests, greater acceptance of homosexuality and less overall focus on sexual issues, others argued that right now, the church needs a laser-like focus on dealing specifically with the clergy abuse scandal.

Our own parish of Blessed Sacrament was seen by many as the ideal place for parishioners to begin the reform effort. “What came through so clearly at our town hall is that we have a committed and capable congregation and a pastor open to engaging us in addressing the problems we are facing,” said one contributor. “Acting together, we can propose and implement changes that address some concerns that are within our capacity—creating parish structures that insure accountability, transparency and greater lay leadership.” The Blessed Sacrament community “can’t solve everything right away and right here. But we can make our parish a model for change,” the contributor added, and “a platform from which we can speak to the hierarchy about the larger issues that must be changed. “

While some posting on the site said that this latest scandal had prompted them to leave the Catholic church or withdraw financial support, many others said they felt compelled to be part of the solution. As one parishioner put it, “Doing nothing to change the situation makes us all complicit.”

*(Compiled by Pat Wingert Kelly, Blessed Sacrament parishioner)*