

Four Courageous Conversations:

Responding to the Catholic Church Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis

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Facing Our Pain

Catholics are feeling deep sadness, anger, and pain regarding revelations of clergy abuse and the cover-up highlighted in the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report. Allegations of decades-long abuse by retired Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and his resignation as a Cardinal are additional sources of deep pain. Finger-pointing and infighting among leaders has diverted attention and resources away from the victims and their families. Meanwhile, the rest of us are left wondering how such a thing could happen.

It's heartbreaking to learn about the suffering of the victims. Compounding our heartbreak are the disbelief and horror that Church leaders opted for scandal-management over the welfare of our children. We are profoundly sorrowful for the victims, especially for those who took their lives. Outrage leads some to leave the Church forever, and leads others to gather to pray and resolve together to respond in faith: "Never again!" All of it raises questions about what this means for the Church, for the faith of its members, and how trust might be restored.

We people of faith normally turn to the Church in our times of pain, loss, sorrow and need. We sort through and assign meaning to what is happening in our lives and the world. We find meaning and hope through prayer, Christian community, the sacraments, and by helping others through service. Yet turning to the Church is difficult when her leaders – whether some or many – have been morally and criminally complicit.

There is excruciating pain as well for the vast number of Church leaders, ordained and lay, who feel shame and betrayal that the Church they love and serve could be the source of such cruelty and suffering.

Why Courageous Conversations?

We need safe places and relationships to face and respond to the Catholic Church Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis. We need opportunities to gather together to reflect, pray, and listen to each other to discover and assign meanings to this experience. These places need to be safe in every way – psychologically, spiritually, and physically, because it's risky and vulnerable to sort things out in community through conversations. "Safety" means that the conversations need solid guidance, structure and clear boundaries so as to help people listen to each other in *love*.

Courageous conversations build intimacy and trust when people are encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings, vulnerabilities and hopes within a loving Christian community. Courageous conversations are building blocks for caring, intimate, and compassionate relationships that form Christian community. Courageous conversations are forms of accompaniment, with the hope to walk with one another so that no one has to carry their pain alone in an isolated manner. Accompaniment and courageous conversations are sacred, painful, memorable, and beautiful. Courageous conversations lead toward more conversations that prepare our hearts and minds to take courageous actions that bring about change.

Healthy and loving communities require and develop ways to navigate and talk about things that matter, however painful and difficult. Active steps and opportunities for structured conversations are needed to help people with the unfolding pain and trauma of the harm done to the victims and to people of faith. Learning how to have these conversations models and nurtures civil discourse that is rooted in respecting and upholding the dignity of all persons.

Loving Christian communities need to gather people for prayer, community, reflection, support, and listening to one another in a safe and judgment free environment. Gentle and loving listening, shared vulnerability, and conversation in community is a path towards healing, growth, and change. This conversation contributes to changes that are needed at the personal level, the parish level, and the institutional levels of the Catholic Church in order to be effective.

Framework and Design

Below are detailed descriptions of the Four Courageous Conversations, followed by a “Gratitude Conversation.” The conversations build one upon the other, and are best accomplished during a single session of 90 minutes to 2 hrs. If that amount of time is unavailable, the conversations could take place on different days, beginning with Conversations 1 & 2, then concluding with Conversations 3 & 4. In that case, both days ought to conclude with the Gratitude Conversation.

It would be a serious mistake to try to squeeze all four conversations into an abbreviated time frame. Each conversation requires the necessary time, and ideally each builds on the one before. If one were to choose to have only one or two of the conversations due to limited time, we counsel avoiding the temptation to abbreviate or skip Conversation 1, since it provides a safe forum for the expression of emotion. If there’s only time for one conversation, it’s far better to devote the time to Conversation 1 and to do it well.

Objectives - Participants will:

- Experience warm hospitality in an environment that is safe in every way;
- Pray together as a Christian community;
- Learn and practice the Art of Accompaniment as a Christian community as they move through the Four Courageous Conversations and concluding gratitude conversation;
- Reflect, speak, and listen to others so as to assign meaning to their experience of the Catholic Church Sexual Abuse Crisis;
- Make recommendations to Church leadership.

Preparations & Room Set Up

- Meet in advance with Table Facilitators and Recorders to orient them to their important roles.
- Provide notepads and pens for Recorders. Laptops are optional.
- Photocopy a sufficient number of the “Participant Guidelines” sheets.
- Post objectives, agenda, and participant guidelines on newsprint (or use PPT)
- Set up round tables that seat 6 – 8 persons, including a facilitator and recorder at each table. (This accommodates seeing and hearing one other and establishes a common place where they are welcome and belong. Being at the same table and sharing the gift of presence and vulnerability is a gift given to each other, that also diminishes the dynamic of referring to or blaming “those people.”)
- Hospitality preparation should include nametags if people won’t necessarily know one another, as well as beverages and food to sustain their energy.

Welcome and Introductory Remarks

The General Facilitator welcomes and affirms everyone for their presence, their willingness to express their thoughts and feelings, and their caring enough to make the time to participate. The General Facilitator informs those gathered that he/she will guide and facilitate the process for the large group while the table leaders will assist and facilitate the table conversations. The General Facilitator and the Table Leaders will not respond to the conversation questions.

Opening Prayer Service (Prepared by the local faith community (8-10 minutes))

Review Objectives, Agenda, and Participant Guidelines

The General Facilitator has the session objectives and agenda displayed and briefly reviews these with the group. The ground rules that have been photocopied and provided to participants are briefly explained so as to establish clear expectations.

Participant Ground Rules

1. **Be Here Now** – Give full attention to each other as you pay attention to the movements of your heart and listen for the Spirit of God.
2. **Listen for Understanding** – Take to heart what’s expressed by others, and thoughtfully consider and express what you want to say.
3. **One at a Time** – One person speaks and everyone else gives the gift of listening without judgment.
4. **Everyone Speaks Once before Anyone Speaks Again** – If you wish, you may choose to pass with the opportunity to speak later.
5. **Speak Your Truth and Let Others Speak Theirs** – Say “I am, feel, think, need to, etc.” instead of “They are, think, feel, need to, etc.” There will be no discussion, feedback, or comments after each person speaks. There will be moments of silence in the conversation for people to digest what has been expressed and how it relates to their own thoughts and feelings.

Table Facilitator & Recorder Roles

The role of the table facilitator is to assist in opening up and guiding the conversations. Kindly follow their instructions. The Recorder will record what’s said as accurately as possible so there’s a record of these important conversations. The notes will be anonymous. The content will be recorded, not who said it, and will be available to participants afterwards.

General Facilitator Instructions

The General Facilitator introduces and comments on the following quote from The Church in the Modern World as one of the reasons we are having the courageous conversations: *“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican, Dec. 7, 1965).

Conversation #1: What are your feelings re the Catholic Church Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?

Let each person speak without any further comments. Only the facilitator responds by saying thank you when a person is done speaking. If or when the person speaking expresses strong feelings or emotions, the group patiently waits and does not jump in or speak on a person's behalf. The group models the safety of the facilitator, who listens attentively and allows for emotions while patiently waiting and giving the space needed for people to feel, think, and express what is going on inside their minds and hearts.

Silence and active listening by group members does the heavy lifting throughout the conversation. The facilitator manages group dynamics by stating and modeling the expectations of how the group will interact. The facilitator will call the group back if or when someone breaches the protocols of how the group seeks to operate in this conversation. If necessary, a per/person time limit may be introduced and followed.

The sharing of responses by all group members will be followed by three minutes of silence for each person to reflect on what they heard from others and how it affected their own thoughts and feelings. Then each person will be invited to respond to the sentence stem, **“As I listened, what I heard was...”** The sharing of responses will be recorded anonymously.

** Courageous conversations about a single theme often take 90 minutes – two hours. When people feel safe to listen, reflect, and speak, they often have much to offer.

Conversation #2: What are the two or three most important factors that you identify as the root causes of the current Catholic Church Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis? Ask group members to reflect and write down their top two or three reasons in rank order. No more than three reasons for any group member may be offered. The table facilitator will use the simple sharing method to invite each person to respond to this question. The sharing of responses will be recorded anonymously.

Conversation #3: What are the two or three most important things that you want church leadership (any level – include the roles or levels in your comments if you wish) to be aware of as they and we consider how to respond to the current Catholic Church Sexual Clergy Sex Abuse Crises? The sharing of responses will be recorded anonymously.

Remind table group members that we will share the notes with all participants and with staff and church leaders at every level.

Conversation #4: All of this says to me that...

The General Facilitator introduces this prompt to the large group and requests small group members to privately reflect and jot down responses on their worksheet. After reflection time, the small group facilitator will invite members to respond using the simple sharing method.

Gratitude Conversation – I am grateful that I was here in this conversation because... Or One gift I received in this conversation is...

The gratitude conversation is introduced by the General Facilitator and implemented in the small groups. One of the gifts of concluding with the Gratitude conversation is to allow participants to name and express what they have received from listening to others and being heard by others. Often participants find it difficult to express gratitude for only one gift received, and they may mention more than one. It is a wonderful problem to have when group members are departing the conversation with too much gratitude. The group facilitator quietly says thank you to each person after they speak and then the next person responds.

Gratitude Conversation Prompts: **I am grateful that I was here in this conversation because... And/Or One gift I received in this conversation is...** The sharing of responses will be recorded anonymously.

Closing Prayer - (Prepared by the local faith community (8-10 minutes))

Community and Social Time - Allow for social time with hospitality after the session concludes.

