

The
WOUNDED
BODY OF
CHRIST

A Parish
Group Discussion Guide
on Abuse in
the Catholic Church

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Introduction



*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*

LUKE 4:18-19

The Church today is steeped in the experience of being a “field hospital” (see “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America Magazine*, Sept. 19, 2013). Unfortunately, there are many wounded and too few caregivers—a new and troubling take on Jesus’ words that “the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few” (Mt 9:37). The wounded include those who, at the epicenter of this tragedy, have been the victims of clergy abuse and the many misguided efforts to cover it up. Moving outward from the center, such scandals have gripped the rest of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27), which, most certainly, suffers in solidarity. While penance and prayer are always needed and have their place in the process of reuniting and healing the Church, the time has come for clergy and laity, together, to take more proactive steps.

The Wounded Body of Christ is one such step. The purpose of these adult faith formation materials is fourfold: (1) to engage, through education and faith sharing, adult Catholics whose faith has been challenged by the presence and effect of clergy abuse in the Church; (2) to provide an opportunity for the Church (at all levels) to discuss clergy abuse in a constructive, reflective, and prayerful manner; (3) to high-

light the call for justice and mercy-making as necessary agents in healing; (4) to solicit new ideas and means of protecting the body of Christ from future abuse and to share this feedback with appropriate local and national leadership.

Session One acknowledges and explores the reality that Christ's body, the Church, is one body with many members. Clerical abuse and its cover-up have wounded this body, the result of which is a shared sense of shame and mistrust that leadership must address, accept accountability, and atone for. This session encourages constructive sharing of concerns, fears, and sorrows regarding clergy abuse, and seeks to foster a desire for greater engagement between laity and leadership.

Session Two acknowledges and explores the reality that the Church will never be the same again. Because of abuse and its cover-up, every member of Christ's body bears an indelible mark of shame, sorrow, anger, and suspicion. Though our woundedness often makes forgiveness and mercy seem impossible, even unwarranted, this session challenges groups to consider the freedom and healing that come through forgiveness as a necessary step toward personal healing and the healing of the body of Christ.

Session Three acknowledges and explores the relationship between God's justice and mercy. It introduces the biblical vision of justice as rehabilitative, not retributive; and it encourages participants to practice forgiveness, not forgetfulness.

Session Four acknowledges and explores a path toward healing and wholeness through greater transparency and accountability measures. To help foster such measures, this session encourages groups to share their wisdom around what changes they think need to happen, particularly on the local level, and share their ideas/concerns with local leadership (e.g., parish staff, parish clergy, diocesan staff, the bishop).

Part of being a field hospital is meeting people (patients) where they are, meeting them in their woundedness, recognizing our own wounds, and walking together on the path of healing. Penance and prayer are vital components as well. But if we do not talk about clergy abuse together and with leadership—if we do not work together as a body and seek proactive solutions—healing efforts will remain impaired, like a wound

that has been dressed without first being cleansed. *The Wounded Body of Christ* is a call and a challenge to all the baptized to join together in this important work of healing.

SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

The Wounded Body of Christ is formatted as four small-group discussion sessions. Each session aims at facilitating constructive discussion and faith sharing around both the reality of clergy abuse and the repeated attempts on the part of leadership to cover it up. The hope is that such discussions may provide needed healing and greater solidarity within the Church, starting at the local level. Although these sessions may provide a cathartic or therapeutic experience for some participants—which is a blessing in itself!—its primary purpose is to be a vehicle for adult faith formation with an aim to accompany those who have been—either directly or indirectly—impacted by clergy abuse and its cover-up.

The format for each session includes an opening prayer, Scripture passage and reflection, questions for discussion, and a closing prayer. The time allotment for each session is 60–90 minutes. Meeting frequency is dependent upon availability and interest level, though not staggering the meetings too much is a good rule of thumb.

Each session should include a skilled facilitator. For this topic, a layperson is preferred, although a trusted member of the clergy or another institutional leader may be acceptable. The facilitator will lead the group in prayer, guide the conversation, and establish ground rules for discussion (e.g., respect each participant’s viewpoint, refrain from interruptions, encourage but don’t force participation from the entire group, etc.).

It is important that these “grass roots”/small group discussions at the local level have an influence on local (diocesan) and national (USCCB) leadership. However, sharing feedback from these discussions with leadership is a sensitive issue. How and what to share, and the level of confidentiality and anonymity, should be determined and agreed upon by participants from the beginning.

The purpose of these discussions is not to identify victims or particular persons in general. Rather, the purpose is faith formation, healing,

and providing feedback to leadership so they may have a sense of the local church/institution's practical and spiritual concerns and needs, as well as suggestions for moving forward. With this in mind, facilitators should work with participants who are willing to share their stories/suggestions so that such information is communicated to leadership in an agreed upon and appropriate way. *It is important that the Church be heard!*

In preparation for the first group session (and in times between sessions), all participants are invited to pray and reflect on the following prayer for healing.

A PRAYER FOR HEALING

O Lord, my heart is aching and my spirit is heavy as I consider my own woundedness and the woundedness of your body, the Church, of which I am a member. As a member of your body, help me to find strength to bear my wounds by gazing upon the wounds of your Son, Jesus—wounds that were shamefully inflicted and unjustly received. Help me, too, to be courageous and full of tenderness as I consider how I might, through my own woundedness, bring about healing and light in this toxic and dark time in the Church.

I know that to love others, and to seek out justice, I must seek, first, your kingdom (Mt 6:33), which pours forth from the heart of your Son, Jesus. This heart was pierced for the salvation of many. By his wounds, we are healed (1 Pet 2:24). Help us work together to cleanse and dress the wounds of your Son, as Mary once did. And may we wait in joyful hope for the coming of the Lord and, with him, the resurrection of our own bodies, which make up the body of Christ, the Church!

Amen.

Session One



THE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTIONS

[Facilitator should encourage people to introduce themselves and to share what brought them to this gathering.]

OPENING PRAYER

All: Merciful God, through our meeting together, and by your Holy Spirit, your Son, Jesus Christ, is present with us. Together, may they guide our prayer, reflection, and discussion, that we may give you glory and bring healing to our wounded Church; for we are the body of Christ. If one suffers, we all suffer. We suffer together, and we are saved together. You have called us together, now, to try and live this truth more deeply, and to be a beacon of hope in a time a great darkness. Amen.

SCRIPTURE (1 CORINTHIANS 12:12–13, 24–27)

Reader: For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

The word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION

The body of Christ is wounded.

We are a wounded people.

(JOHN 1:1–5; ROMANS 12:4–10)

[Take turns reading: one reader per paragraph.]

The Church is the body of Christ. Each of us, through baptism, has become a member of this body. As Saint Paul teaches, when one member suffers or rejoices, we are all called to suffer and rejoice together. Clergy abuse (and those who have tried to cover it up) has severely wounded the body of Christ. First and foremost, such abuse and secrecy bring violence and shame to victims. However, clergy abuse has impacted each member of Christ's body, evoking feelings of shame, anger, and dependency in various degrees. So deep is this collective woundedness that many members—both victims and those who empathize with them—are wondering if God still abides with them, individually, and with his Church. Today, many are struggling to rediscover their value and dignity as children of God in the Catholic Church.

By their actions, abusive clergy have caused great division in the body of Christ, beyond a felt disconnect on the part of those who are currently disillusioned with God, who wonder how God could let such things

happen. This division is being interpreted by some as a kind of “laity versus clergy” phenomenon, where all clergy are to be viewed with suspicion and treated as potential abusers. How difficult it must be for those who have adopted this view to remain in the Church! How difficult it must be to be a priest or bishop today and be looked upon with such suspicion. So many prayers need to be offered. So many conversations and conversions need to occur. So many new and daring decisions need to be made at leadership levels to make this divided body whole again.

Healing begins with humility. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) teaches, all of us carry the potential for great evil within ourselves. This is the unfortunate effect of original sin (CCC, 396–402). We all have the potential to be demonic or divine, satanic or saintly. The violence and shame caused by clergy abuse and its cover-up have led to division, the fruit of which is mistrust and, ultimately, separation. Opposing all division is the Spirit of God, who creates, renews, and unites.

[Pause for a moment before asking the following question.]

How might the Spirit use your voice, your gifts to bring about greater peace and understanding during this difficult time in the Church?

During this time of great sorrow and shame, is there another way forward rather than removing ourselves further from the rest of the body of Christ, or demonizing those clergymen who have shown themselves to be more wolf than shepherd? Now is the time to renew our commitment to Christ through a renewed commitment to his entire body—a body that includes both the “sheep” and the “goats” (Mt 25:31–46), the “wheat” and the “chaff” which God, alone, will judge (Mt 3:12). This recommitment includes both a cry for mercy and a call for justice. It involves prayer and action, greater accountability and transparency, and even greater compassion.

[Allow for 5–10 minutes of quiet time before beginning the questions.]

QUESTIONS

1. In what way did the Scripture reading speak to you?
2. What, in the reflection, caught your attention?
3. How has clergy abuse impacted your life, challenged your faith?

CLOSING PRAYER

All: Merciful God, you gave us your Son, Jesus, to be our savior. Through baptism, and in the Holy Spirit, we are united to his body and, therefore, to you. When one of the members of your Son's body suffers, we all suffer. May each member of the body of Christ work toward healing in his or her own way, inspired by the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and descended on the apostles at Pentecost. Holy Spirit, come into each of our lives in a fresh and powerful way, that we may experience the healing we need and share that healing with others.

Amen.

Session Two



BEING A WOUNDED BODY

OPENING PRAYER

All: Merciful God, you sent your Son to heal and to forgive sins. I need your healing love, both now and always, so that I might find a way to live as a member of your wounded body, the Church. Though I might feel that I cannot trust your ministers, I know I can always trust you. And I know that you still call forth and anoint good people to share your gospel and your grace with others. But I am struggling to live with the shame I feel being a member of your church. The only thing I can cling to is the truth that you have called this church into being, and you will shepherd it into your kingdom. Father, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you. Holy Spirit, I trust in you. Amen. [CF. EZEKIEL 34:1-24; PSALM 23; JOHN 10:11-18]

SCRIPTURE (PSALM 10:1-6, 8A-9A, 12-15, 17-18)

Reader: Why, LORD, do you stand far off?