

Searching for answers: A victim-survivor's story

Bill May was a typical Catholic student in the 1950s, growing up in an Irish American family in a Philadelphia suburb where all the neighborhood kids went to the local Catholic elementary school. The nuns were highly disciplined, students memorized their catechism lessons thoroughly, and meeting the pastor felt like a holy experience.

At the Catholic boys high school, Bill played soccer and was thrilled to attend an institution where the boys competed for city championships in football, basketball, baseball, swimming and bowling — and won. “It was heady times,” remembers Bill. Sports and academics, he believed, would be a good combination to land him and his brother in college.

In his sophomore year, he met a young woman from the Catholic girls high school and the two started going steady. They chatted by the trains each morning before heading off for their respective schools. One morning near the beginning of their junior year, Claire didn't show. Bill was stunned to find out that a clot in her brain had burst, leaving her in a coma. He spent a week at the hospital with Claire and her family, and then another week preparing for the funeral and serving as a pallbearer.

Bill was heartbroken and griefstricken. But nothing could have prepared the vulnerable 15-year-old for the harshness and the perversity that awaited him when he returned to school following his two-week absence.

He was summoned to meet with the school disciplinarian, a priest, who told him his absence had been “unacceptable.” Bill would have to sit for an hour in detention each afternoon with his textbooks on his lap, arms dangling by his side, staring silently at the wall. The priest said he would also give Bill remedial lessons in English to make up for missed classes.

In the disciplinarian's private office, the “tutoring” quickly turned into sexual fondling and abuse.

‘No authority’

These “lessons” went on a couple times a week for several weeks. One day the priest requested that the young teen come to his residence after school. Bill felt doomed. “I had no authority,” he says sadly. “The priest had all the authority.”

Unable to break the 1950s Catholic culture of silence, and determining that the secretaries outside the disciplinarian's office and other priests were either complicit or in denial about what was really happening, Bill fought for his survival the only way he knew how. He quit school, ran away from home and walked 20 miles to his grandmother's place.

“I couldn't tell my Mom. I couldn't tell my Dad. I ran away from home,” remembers Bill, now in his 60s. His parents thought Clare's death was unraveling their son and turning him into a delinquent. “They didn't realize there was a larger trauma than Clare's death,” he says of his family. The abuse “took away my faith totally. Why would God let this happen?”

Eventually, Bill graduated — barely, near the bottom of his class — from a local public school. Having dropped out of the academic track, he was working full time at the Philadelphia Chewing Gum Factory. His brother, meanwhile, was attending a prestigious Catholic college.

“From 15 years old on,” he says, “I was the oddball.”

Then Bill decided to enlist in the Air Force and get out of the country. “Quite frankly, that was a turning point. That was the beginning of a new life.” Having lost his religion, the Air Force offered him discipline, training, and the chance to succeed. Bill was sent to Turkey and learned to intercept Morse code by the Russians, Romanians and Bulgarians during the Cold War.

Upon his return he used his newfound confidence to move to

Thirty-ninth in a series.

Southern California and start a business. When the business failed, Bill realized he needed more education and, in his 30s and with the help of the GI Bill, went to college, then to law school. He then began another business, flooring, tiling and carpeting homes and offices, which he managed successfully for more than 30 years.

He credits his Irish Catholic stubbornness for helping him to persevere through the trauma of his youth. “I wasn't going to allow myself to end up badly, and that came from good Catholic training.”

Slowly, he started attending Mass again. “The nuns [from elementary school days] were pretty much in the back of my head, and responsible for me getting back into the religion,” he says. “They gave me a foundation.”

A longtime parishioner at St. Mark Church in Venice, Bill has served as lector 15 years and as an usher 20 years. He's also Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus Marina Council. Married twice and divorced twice, he is proud of his son and his daughter and their achievements in school.

Now semi-retired, the good-natured and jovial man thoroughly enjoys a new career getting small acting parts in several movies — recently in the role of a professional poker player.

A lifetime journey

Still, healing from sexual abuse has been a lifetime journey for Bill and his family. When the clergy sexual abuse scandal broke out in Boston in 2002, Bill was shocked to learn that the trauma he had suffered alone more than four decades earlier had been inflicted on many minors across the country. At that point he decided to reveal to his family his own molestation experience.

His 85-year-old mother said she finally understood what had happened to her son. His father had passed away without ever knowing the truth.

Some of the wound remains unhealed, Bill admits. Too many priests and bishops around the country who were complicit, silent or who exercised poor judgment remain in positions of authority. For the good of the church and the recovery of those who were abused and their families, those priests should humbly resign from their offices, he says.

Meanwhile, with support from the archdiocesan Office of Assistance Ministry, Bill has received letters of apology from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and from the order of priests that ran his Catholic high school. He found out the priest who abused him died several years ago.

He and nine other victim-survivors met privately with Cardinal Roger Mahony and each shared part of their stories. “Then he spoke to each one of us individually. When he knelt in front of me and apologized — well, I don't know what it's going to be like when we meet our maker, but it was that kind of significance,” recalls Bill. “It felt like a cleansing.”

Bill has never received a clear answer to his faith question as to why God allowed the death of his teenage sweetheart followed by the trauma of sexual abuse by a priest. “We're all put on this earth to see what we're going to do,” he observes. “And then there's the test. How did I deal with it? How did I live my life? Did I know the difference between right and wrong? How much good did I do?”

The questions have been enough to guide Bill throughout the years and to offer his life choices back to God.

This weekly series of feature stories, commentary and analysis is compiled and edited by an advisory group to the Media Relations Office of the Archdiocese, through which the articles are distributed.