



It's been a month since the New York Times first published an investigative report on Harvey Weinstein, a Hollywood film producer and studio executive who has been accused of sexually assaulting numerous women in the entertainment industry since the 1990s.

Already, the reports have been followed by a movement among women - both those who have made additional accusations against Weinstein and other celebrities, and women throughout the world who are sharing their own stories of sexual assault on social media, accompanied by the hashtag #MeToo.

The Catholic Church in the United States faced its own sex abuse crisis in the early 2000s, beginning with the Boston Globe's report on extensive sexual abuse by clergy, particularly against minors. Since then, the Church has taken care to provide numerous resources to such victims, and develop robust child protection policies.

But what can the Church provide for adult victims of general sexual assault, whether committed by Church personnel or other people?

Catholic psychologist Dr. Greg Bottaro said one of the most important things the Church can do to help victims of sexual assault is to anticipate and initiate the conversation about it.

"I think that's the good thing about the Harvey Weinstein case - obviously this has become a more common conversation, but there needs to be more of that," he said.

"Let people know that it's ok to talk about this, it's ok to report this, if something has happened to you it's ok to come forward."

Victims also need validation "that the assault is wrong, because sexual assault is traumatic. It's trauma in the deepest sense of the word, and the definition of trauma is the perceived harm to life or integrity of body. Having your bodily integrity violated is a traumatic event, there's a loss of power that happens, it's a real victimization."

If a Catholic experiences sexual assault, there are several websites that can help connect them to Catholic counselors and therapists, including catholicpsych.com, catholictherapists.com, and wellcatholic.com. Most dioceses also have Catholic counselors and therapists with whom they work closely and to whom victims can be referred, Dr. Bottaro noted.

Seeking a healing and help that incorporates one's Catholic faith is important, Dr. Bottaro said, because the trauma caused by sexual violence can wound the deepest parts of the human person.

"Our bodies are meant to be gifts to be given with full freedom in a full fruition of our choice, and when that choice is taken away, that's a strike against our sense of (self)," he said.

"So the healing we seek has to take that into account and help us rebuild the sense of self that is founded on a deeper principle."

People who have experienced sexual assault also often are in need of spiritual healing, because such traumatic events can cause them to question their belief in God as a loving father, Dr. Bottaro noted.

"One effect (of trauma) is that our sense of being safe in the world is violated, and that digs down into our sense of having a father who loves us and takes care of us," he said. "Victims of trauma have to make sense of that - how can you say that there's a father in heaven who loves me when this happened to me? So having a psychologist who can walk through that with somebody, and help wrestle with that reality, and learn how to accept suffering as part of God's will is an essential element to healing."

Sue Stubbs is the director of the Victim Assistance Office for the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Georgia. While her office was originally created to respond to the clergy sex abuse crisis, as were many diocesan child and youth protection departments, Stubbs said that her office has become a catch-all, and now provides resources to a wide variety of victims, whether they were assaulted by church personnel or not.

Besides helping connect victims with counselors, Stubbs said the office also puts on retreats every year, two for women and one for men, that help address both psychological and spiritual components of healing after sexual assault.

Stubbs said it was important for victims to seek spiritual as well as psychological healing, because the two areas often overlap, and because recognizing God as an all-good and all-loving creator helps victims make sense of their experiences.

"You have to believe that someone bigger than you cares about you, and created you a

certain way, to really understand that nothing...that happens to you and nothing that you do can change the way God made you. (Your worth) stays the same no matter what.”

Her office also facilitates trauma recovery groups for victims that are usually put on once or twice a year, for nine sessions each. The groups welcome people who have suffered all kinds of trauma and sexual assault, whether in childhood or later in life.

The benefit of a group, Stubbs said, is that people can get a sense that they’re not alone.

“You don’t feel alone, you don’t feel different. (Victims sometimes) feel like a freak and they realize they’re not. Someone in the group is saying the same thing that they’ve thought a million times,” she said. “And it provides a safe connection, because these people get it, they’re not afraid to reach out because they know that this person has had something similar.”

Stubbs said that she often tells other people in Church leadership that the Church has to start seeing victims of sexual assault as people who are on the peripheries, to whom Pope Francis has called the Church to minister.

“The people that come to church oftentimes are the periphery, you just can’t see it,” Stubbs said. “People who’ve been sexually assaulted are the periphery and they could be sitting right next to you and have no idea, because they don’t talk about it, they hide it, it’s an invisible secret that they’re afraid to show anybody.”

“There’s a part of them that feels broken, they perceive themselves as something sinful, but it isn’t their sin, it’s someone else’s sin that has affected their life, and it’s confusing,” Stubbs said.

“And I think that’s where the Church can help to untie those knots - I think we could add the spiritual piece” that is missing from other community resources, she said.

College campuses are unfortunately a place of increased risk for sexual violence - especially for women. RAINN - the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, reports that women ages 18-24 are at a heightened risk to experience sexual assault, both on and off college campuses.

In order to prevent and educate students about sexual assault and other harmful situations, The Catholic University of America (CUA) has created PEERS - Peer Educators Empowering Respectful Students - a group that seeks to educate other students and help foster a more respectful environment on campus.

Stephanie Davey is the Assistant Dean in the Office of the Dean of Students at CUA and oversees much of the work that PEERS does. She said that PEERS helps students

understand what sexual assault is, and how to either intervene to prevent it from happening or what to do if sexual assault has occurred.

Davey said they especially want victims to “understand that we are a supportive place and they don’t have to be fearful or ashamed about seeking support,” whether the incident occurred with another CUA student or not.

The university just concluded observing October as Sexual Violence Prevention Month, during which the school has participated in several national campaigns that raise awareness of sexual violence and encourage increased conversation about the issue.

For example, Davey said, the students participated in the national “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes” campaign, which usually involves men walking in high heels, but CUA decided to do it with a Catholic twist.

“Instead of having men walk in high heeled shoes we had a candlelit solidarity walk through campus and stopped at different places through campus and read testimonies of survivors...and culminated with a prayer service outside our chapel with our chaplain and then had some fellowship,” she said.

Much of their training, such as bystander intervention training, is rooted in the Catholic faith, she said - being a good Samaritan, being a good neighbor, and upholding the dignity of everyone.

“I think that that’s what we do well in terms of addressing these issues but also not ignoring our Catholic identity,” she said.

“Every person has worth and dignity, it’s our responsibility to look out for each other and uphold that dignity.”