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Judge Janine P. Geske: Circles of Healing

By John Feister

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JUDGE JANINE P. GESKE has a groundbreaking approach for resolving damage done to the Church by sexually abusive clergy. The former Wisconsin Supreme Court justice wants to bring to the Church a practice that has been used in criminal justice for decades: restorative justice. She's leading an effort at Marquette University, in Milwaukee, to help bring healing to a damaged Church—not only to victims of predatory priests and misguided bishops, but also to entire parishes.

This past April, she and others convened a national gathering of approximately 150 Church leaders, sexual-abuse advocates and survivors to demonstrate her approach.

Judge Geske is now Distinguished Professor of Law at Marquette, where in 2005 she founded the Restorative Justice Initiative. *St. Anthony Messenger* visited her office, overlooking the Marquette campus, where she explained the approach.

Restorative justice, a broad movement in criminal law, takes the focus of law enforcement away from simply punishing, housing or even rehabilitating criminals. It seeks, rather, to provide an opportunity, after trial, conviction and incarceration of the criminal, for victims to meet criminals face-to-face and seek some kind of understanding: Why did this happen to me? What was going on in this criminal's head? How can I move on in my life with a renewed sense of wholeness?

The truth and reconciliation commission established in the wake of apartheid in South Africa in 1995 is a good example of a restorative-justice program.

"The whole approach here is: Who was harmed and what is the ripple effect of that harm?" explains Judge Geske. "What is the nature of that harm? Psychological, emotional, relational, economic? How do you go about repairing the harm?" The effort is to promote understanding and healing, to whatever degree possible, to both victims and criminals. It can be applied in any situation, including the

Church.

Geske describes how she got “hooked on this approach.” As a criminal court judge, before her five years on the Wisconsin Supreme Court, she had been teaching in a prison, working with victims’ groups and community groups as a way to inform her work in the court system.

She was invited by two teachers to come to a three-day restorative-justice program in a maximum-security prison with “high-end offenders” (her term). “I actually fell in love with it!” she exclaims, and set about trying to find ways to get involved. She began running occasional programs of her own, and, to this day, leads a similar program in two maximum-security prisons.

During one of these weekend events, she might have 12 community members, she says. “They might be priests, police, judges and three survivors of violent crime meeting with murderers, rapists, armed robbers and sometimes drug dealers with long, sometimes life sentences.” (Occasionally, they are people she herself had sentenced while serving as a judge.)

Over the course of the weekend participants tell their stories—victim, criminal, community leader. “I have seen the victims’ stories absolutely transform everyone in the whole room, every time, over the three-day process.” While working in the local courts over the years, she found those weekends were her spiritual and community volunteer work. “I always talk about finding God in this process more than anywhere else I go,” she says. It’s the reconciling heart of our faith that she encounters.

Healing Circles

Fast-forward the clock many years from Geske’s early days in Milwaukee’s courts. Along the way, Judge Geske has been asked by Republican Governor “Tommy” Thompson (in 1993) to fill a vacated Supreme Court seat, and she has successfully been elected for another term following that term.

In 1998 she resigns from the Supreme Court, seeking the work she considers her calling, joins the Catholic Church (“after searching for a Church, I found one I liked”) and is hired by Marquette to teach law. In 2005 she approaches the dean of Marquette Law School and gets permission to establish the Restorative Justice Initiative, building on her many years of experience in the field.

“I have a course and a clinic,” she explains, “and we do everything from victim-offender dialogue on some programs with high-end offenders, school-based ‘harm circles,’ domestic violence survivors, offenders, sportsmanship in the Catholic high schools—” she stops to catch her breath. “We’re kind of a resource for the community. When there’s a problem or harm, we approach it restoratively and try to help them set up a process that works.”

Those “harm circles” became a key for Judge Geske’s work in the Church. Using restorative-justice weekends in prisons as a model, this advocate leads groups who gather to confront the sexual-abuse crisis head-on. In parishes, she calls them “healing circles” and suggests that they offer a model for parishes everywhere. Like in the prisons, a group—now of priests, parish leaders, abuse survivors—gathers, though just for a day.

They assemble in a private room, sit on chairs in a circle and take turns sharing their pain, one with another. A hand-sized object, in this case a painted, polished stone, is a token of voice, the “talking piece.” It is passed among those circled, giving the holder permission to share his or her story. There are no arguments here: Only the one holding the stone may speak. Everyone gets a turn.

Geske explains, The reason I brought this to parishes is that so many times I've heard, 'Why don't those victims just get over it? We've been through this for a long time and it's time to move on.'" She wanted people in the parishes to have firsthand experience of sexual-abuse survivors. "Once you hear the experience of a survivor, you don't ask, 'Why don't they get over it?' anymore."

Some parishes may even have had some sort of healing liturgy and act as if "they've taken care of that," says Geske. "But I think that knowing someone who has been victimized and saying, 'What do you need? What can I do? What can we as a community do?—those little acts can make a big difference."

Judge Geske's parish-based concept has been so attractive that a group of local priests—some of the 94 percent-plus priests who have done no harm and themselves feel victimized by the crisis—took the initiative to help Milwaukee parishes conduct healing circles. (Six of those priests were at the Marquette gathering.)

As her program developed, Judge Geske, working with local TV producer Rita Aleman and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, made a training video to demonstrate the concept and help groups get started (see our Web-plus feature for details).

The video gives face to victims, face to an abusing priest who is angry about the 2002 Dallas *Charter* (see below), face to a woman parishioner angry at the Church. "The question is: What impact has clergy sex abuse had on your life?" says Geske. The video, now about five years old, has been used in places far beyond Milwaukee: "People round the world are using it," she states proudly.

One-of-a-Kind Gathering

Some of those people around the world attended the conference that Judge Geske and her Restorative Justice Initiative sponsored in April. A recovery team from Australia was there, as was Diarmuid Martin, archbishop of Dublin, Ireland, along with representatives from the U.S. bishops' conference, researchers from the City University of New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), Milwaukee-area survivors, advocates and parishioners.

In a lecture hall adorned with large portraits of Wisconsin justices with Marquette ties (including Geske), about 150 people gathered for two days of presentations, including a model healing circle. The event was timed to coincide with the release of the USCCB-sponsored John Jay study of the sexual-abuse crisis (see pp. 38-39), but the study was released late, on May 18. The conference went on with preliminary reports from John Jay data analyst Margaret Leland Smith.

Following Geske's broad-minded approach, participants heard from all sides. The presentation that grabbed the headlines was from Ireland's Archbishop Martin. He spoke of how he, who had spent much of his career in Rome, including directing the Pontifical Office of Justice and Peace, representing the Vatican's concerns at the United Nations and serving the International Red Cross, was caught offguard with his 2003 assignment as coadjutor bishop of Dublin.

In 2004 he became the archbishop and walked into what only can be called a mess of sexual abuse and coverup. "I remember very well the first complaint of behavior of a priest that arrived at my desk," he told those gathered. He went on to tell how there was a cover sheet on the priest's personnel file, indicating that there was "nothing found" regarding child sexual abuse.

Feeling he should study the file more carefully, "I found that the very next document read, 'Father X seems to be back to his old activities.'" Archbishop Martin removed the priest from ministry and notified civil authorities.

That file was a red flag for this archbishop, who had experience with the United Nations investigations of sexual-abuse claims in U.N. refugee camps. After hearing that all of the files had been examined by priests, "My first decision was to have all files reexamined by an independent outside expert," he told the conference. The resulting exposure of a broad pattern of abuse has made headlines ever since and, says Martin, will continue to do so.

Martin spoke in terms that garnered media attention: "The person who is at the epicenter of abuse was not the priest; it was the victim, a child" or "The culture of clericalism has to be analyzed and addressed" or "There are signs of a renewed clericalism which may at times be veiled behind appeals for deeper spirituality" or "The avoidance of scandal eventually landed the Church in one of the greatest scandals of its history."

He concluded with an allusion to the Parable of the Good Shepherd, calling Church leadership to "learn to abandon their own security and try to represent Christ, who still seeks out the abandoned."

Equally moving at the conference, though, was the testimony of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) cofounder Peter Isely, a controversial victims' advocate who has doggedly pursued exposure of abuse across the United States. Isely gave a public presentation different from his angry calls for accountability.

He spoke from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 5:25-34, the story of the hemorrhaging woman. St. Jane Doe, he suggests, might be a good name for the unnamed woman who touched Jesus' cloak, "patroness of sexual-abuse survivors," a woman who has seen doctor after doctor over 12 years, has spent everything and still is not healed.

Jane Doe, after all, is the name in the public record of so many sex-abuse survivors. Probably, Isely speculated, the woman of the Gospel was a sexual-abuse survivor herself. Bleeding, she is isolated; she cannot be touched. "Who touched me?" Jesus asks. That is the probing question being asked today. Isely plead, "Every touch is a moment of truth."

That touch from the Church, too often in the past a touch of abuse, can be a touch of healing, says Judge Janine Geske. To the survivor, she says, "It's the affirmance of hearing, 'We believe you, and we are sorry, and we are sorry not only for you but for all the victims who followed.'"

Statements from bishops that "mistakes were made" ("like a two-year old!" she exclaims) only add to the problem. "We need to have accountability in the sense that there is true remorse." When we move beyond the attitude "We'd better protect ourselves," she says, the touch of healing will begin.

The John Jay Study

The 2002 U.S. bishops' meeting in Dallas, Texas, became a reckoning, where abuse victims and 2,000 media members gathered to give intense national focus to the clergy sex-abuse crisis.

In the *Charter* hastily drafted at that meeting, the bishops promised, among other things, a serious sociological study of the problem. This was one of a number of initiatives directed at stemming the crisis, including establishing a National Review Board, auditing each diocese and ensuring youth protection plans for all dioceses. (Enactment of the diocesan plans has met with varying amounts of success throughout the country, as the most recent indictments in Philadelphia, earlier this year, show.)

Over much of the past decade, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, at City University of New York, gathered and analyzed data. One result, released May 18, 2011, is officially called "The Causes and

Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010.”

Its finding, among many, that the social upheaval of the 1960s was related to the sex-abuse crisis caught the attention and ridicule of the national media. But the John Jay study is extensive, and is the only study of its kind.

Some highlights of the report's findings:

- Four to six percent of all priests abused minors during the past 60 years.
- About one percent of all priests were pedophiles (victims were preadolescent children 11 or younger); about four percent of all priests abused adolescents.
- The majority of priests with allegations of abuse from 1950-2002 were ordained between the 1950s and 1970s; the majority were diocesan rather than members of religious orders.
- Sexual abuse of minors by priests increased steadily from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, then declined.
- Inadequate seminary formation prior to the mid-1980s, specifically, overemphasizing spiritual and academic formation and underemphasizing life skills required for celibate chastity, contributed to the steady increase of abuse.
- Neither celibacy nor homosexuality cause clerical sex abuse.
- The abuse was often related to social situations with both the victims and their families and the abused, and most often occurred in rectories.
- Abusive priests were mishandled by many bishops. Tactics included reassigning priests to unknowing parishes, failure to report crimes to civil authorities, hiding documents and creating a culture of fear among priests against reporting abusers.
- Total reported payments from 1950 to 2002, after insurance settlements, was \$572,507,094. (The study itself cost almost \$2 million, about half of which was paid for by the bishops, the rest by various foundations.)

At the Marquette conference on restorative justice (see accompanying article), National Review Board chairwoman Diane M. Knight, a leader of child-protection programs, told *St. Anthony Messenger* that the report shows the depth and breadth of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. “Everyone has been harmed by this,” she observes.

“We have to have opportunities for transformative dialogue with each other,” Knight says. And we “always have to keep our guard up to protect children.” She adds, “In reality, there will always be adults who are attracted to children.”

Spokane Bishop Blase Cupich, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Protection of Children and Young People, told this magazine that healing is the number-one priority. In the *Charter* which guides the bishops' work against the crisis, says Cupich, “We didn't say that we have to deal with all sorts of investigations first, or to have different organized tactics, but we talked about healing, simply because we came to the realization that this is about how we exercise the ministry of Christ in this day and time.”

John Feister is editor-in-chief of this publication. He has master's degrees in humanities and theology from Xavier University, Cincinnati. His latest book is the award-winning *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (Orbis Books).

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