

# We should welcome abuse investigations, not fear them

On a warm Tuesday in late April, I stood in front of the Wisconsin State Capitol building alongside sexual abuse survivors and fellow advocates while the attorney general announced [an investigation](#) into abuse by Catholic clergy and Church leaders throughout the state.

I was there because I had been invited to speak at the press conference on behalf of [Awake Milwaukee](#) (the grassroots Catholic organization I lead) and because I wanted to bring a compassionate Catholic voice to this public conversation.

But really, I was in Madison that day because God led me there, and I've learned that when God calls, it's best to just say yes.

Believe me, three years ago I never could have imagined myself standing with abuse survivors in front of a sea of news cameras. But the same God who drew me to work in parish ministry – coordinating Vacation Bible School and leading Bible study and pouring my heart into the families at my parish – led me to a new ministry that involves listening to abuse survivors, speaking hard truths and standing up for justice.

I know that many Catholics might greet news of another investigation of the Church with concern, frustration or even anger. For those of us who love our Church, it's hard not to feel defensive when the issue of sexual abuse in the Church is brought up, especially in such a public way. We want people to remember all the good that is done by our Church and all the progress we've made in keeping children safe. We worry that renewed attention to this issue will drive even more people away from our faith communities. We tell ourselves that abuse

in the Church is ancient history, that we've learned and changed and are ready to move on. Honestly, we're tired of talking about this difficult topic. We wish that this would all just go away.

But the truth is that abuse in our Church is not simply a problem of the past. The most recent resurgence of the abuse crisis began in 2018 with the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, the revelations about former cardinal Theodore McCarrick and the scandal surrounding Bishop Michael Bransfield in West Virginia. But it continues today with abusive clergy continuing to be arrested and multiple U.S. bishops facing Vatican investigations into their handling of abuse allegations.

Of course, this handful of well-known cases is only the tip of the iceberg. Through Awake's ministry, I have had the privilege of walking with many women and men who have been abused by Catholic leaders, during childhood or as adults. Their trauma is real and life-altering, whether the abuse happened 50 years ago or just last year. Many of these survivors are still seeking accountability and justice – for those who abused them and for those who enabled that abuse. Others have never reported their abuse, because they have never felt safe enough to do so. Their stories might not make headline news, but they are every bit as important.

The reality is that abuse in our Church has caused a deep wound in the Body of Christ, and we've barely begun the process of understanding and facing that wound, let alone healing it.

I wish that an attorney general investigation wasn't necessary in Wisconsin or in any other state; the process and the results of this inquiry will certainly be painful for those of us who love the Church. We have seen how investigations have unfolded in Pennsylvania, Michigan, New York and 19 other states over the past few years. The parameters and approaches

of these investigations have varied, but in each state, we have learned terrible truths about leaders of our Church – including some who are still in ministry today. We have seen cracks in the systems that the Church has established for transparency, accountability and safety. We have learned that we still have a long way to go in our efforts to build a community that is safe for all.

This truth hurts. But I take comfort in this: We worship a God of truth, who promises that the truth will set us free.

When I stood in front of the State Capitol, I encouraged my fellow Catholics to welcome the attorney general's investigation and face whatever might be revealed with both courage and compassion. I [concluded my statement](#) by addressing survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. I shared words of apology and sorrow, without excuses or justifications – the words I wish came more often from Church leaders. I pledged to stand with those who have been harmed.

Sometimes I feel like Catholics who are ready to make this leap are few and far between. But I also have hope that the Holy Spirit is moving in the hearts of God's people and that something new is possible.

I wonder: What if faithful Catholics welcomed every new investigation, every media inquiry, every hard question as an opportunity to seek accountability and to make our Church better? What if we took the time to truly listen to the prophetic voices of survivors as they speak painful truths we need to hear? What if we saw each person who has been harmed as a precious son or daughter of God, worthy of our attention and care? What if our prayers for survivors inspired thoughtful action on their behalf? What if we followed the example of Christ in standing boldly with those who are marginalized and suffering?

Perhaps then we would be one step closer to the Kingdom of

God.

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