

*Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. (Is 10:6)*

**By SUSAN DE MATTEO**

**LONGVIEW:** Miguel Prats freely admits that he does not trust priests or bishops and that he is angry with a church hierarchy that allowed the evil of sexual abuse by clergy to reach crisis proportions.

Yet Prats, a survivor of sexual abuse by a priest, stood in the parish hall of St. Mary Church in Longview, joked with and embraced Father Gavin Vaverek, St. Mary pastor, and announced the launch of an outreach effort aimed at offering support and healing to other abuse victims “through the ministry of Jesus Christ.”

He was able to do that, he said, through the intercession and example of a 12-year-old Italian girl, herself the victim of a deadly sexual assault. Before she died, though, she forgave her attacker and expressed the hope that he would be with her in heaven.

The faith and forgiveness of that child, canonized a saint in 1950, is what gave birth to and guides the Maria Goretti Network, launched July 6, the feast of its namesake, at St. Mary’s.

“Maria Goretti was a child who demonstrated incredible courage and love for our Lord,” Prats told his 20-member audience. “Beyond that, she was a little girl who was attacked so brutally by someone who should have been like a big brother to her. Yet she accepted what came her way and instead of worrying about herself, worried about him. What lessons for us are there in that? We all know that Jesus is everything, but to see this example in this child É what unbelievable wisdom.”

Yet it is a wisdom that comes at a price and only after great suffering, for both the little girl who now serves the church as a model of forgiveness and those who, like her, have been cruelly wounded and must now seek some way to live with and heal those wounds. Prats said it is a wisdom that has only one source.

“We have to turn to our Lord,” he said. “He is the great comforter and he understands.”

Prats knows how desperately that understanding is needed. He was molested by a priest he’d turned to for help when he was 18, but his experience with abuse began long before that.

“I was born in raised in Houston,” he said, “and when I was 5 years old, a mentally challenged man in our neighborhood caught me alone down by the bayou. I don’t know what else I can say except that he put his mouth where it didn’t belong. He did it to me a couple of times and to other little boys.

“We didn’t understand what he was doing,” he said, “but we knew one thing Ð we didn’t like it. We were afraid. I wasn’t even in school yet, so I can’t tell you that I knew I was being abused. I just knew something was going on that wasn’t right.”

That “something” had a devastating impact on his life nonetheless, he said. “I’ve talked to social workers, and there are those who say that abuse at that young an age can actually affect a child’s cellular brain structure. What I know is that I carried around this shame, this secret, this burden for 45 years, and I didn’t even know why.

“I had all this anger in me, but I didn’t know where it came from. I had problems with drugs and alcohol and some self-destructive behaviors. I used to joke that I rode a motorcycle in Houston without a helmet, and that if that wasn’t a death wish, I didn’t know what was.

“But it was like a fog,” he said. “I did all these things and didn’t know why. I just knew I didn’t want to live.”

At 18, he said, “I had gotten into some trouble with the law, and like a good Catholic boy, I turned to the church for help, to this young priest I knew.” He was in St. Louis and was so desperate and despondent that “I was about to blow my brains out. This priest saw my vulnerability, and he used it against me. When I most needed help, when I was at my absolute lowest, instead of lifting me up, he kicked me down and stomped me even lower.”

Pain and betrayal turned to rage. Convinced that the institution was to blame, Prats, a lifelong Catholic who’d attended Catholic schools, turned away from the church, and tried to turn away from God.

“Luckily,” he said, “God never abandoned me, even when I abandoned him.”

Gradually, though, Prats began turning back. “Through all this time, I would cling to my old rosary, to the little prayer book I got on the day of my first Communion, to the things I knew were good about the church. There was that part of me that still wanted the church. I just didn’t like or trust the people who were running it.”

His downward spiral continued. He eventually married, but it only lasted three and a half years. “I lost my family because of my destructive behaviors,” he said.

Finally, in 2001, it all came to a head. And, ironically, it was the summer meeting of the U.S. bishops in Dallas, a meeting devoted almost entirely to the clergy sex abuse crisis, that started Prats on his path toward healing.

With the meeting came intense national attention focused through the lens of the media. Story after story of abuse flooded the airwaves and filled newspapers. Victims demanded and got their say. Prats heard stories that sounded appallingly like his own, or even worse. He realized he was not alone in his torment.

“Almost every victim of sexual abuse, whether by a priest or anyone else, feels that they are the only one this has ever happened to,” he said. “They carry this secret around and don’t talk about it because they can’t. Who will understand? They’re ashamed, even though it’s not their fault. But perpetrators almost always convince the

victim it is their fault. And I've had people blame me. They'll say, 'You were 18, you should've known it was wrong, you could've stopped it. You must have done something to cause it.'

"No," he said firmly, "I didn't cause that, I didn't deserve that, it wasn't my fault. It's not any victim's fault. No one brings this on themselves. Realizing that and believing that are important steps toward healing."

Another important step in his healing was his discovery of SNAP, or Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. SNAP is a victims' outreach and advocacy group that has long been critical, often sharply so, of the way the bishops have dealt with the problem of sexual abuse by priests. The relationship between SNAP and bishops is often so combative that, said Prats, "there are bishops in this country, in this state, who will not talk to you if you say you're with SNAP."

"And I can understand that," he added. "SNAP has people who are very angry and very hurt and who basically attack the church every chance they get. They criticize, but they never offer anything positive."

Still, he said, the group was exactly what he needed when he needed it. "To me, SNAP is to abuse victims what AA is to alcoholics," he said. "It's a place where people can come and tell their stories without being ridiculed, where they are safe, where they are understood. You are accepted, and you're not alone. I met people in their 60s and 70s who had carried this secret around for 40, 50, 60 years and had never told anyone. For the first time, I met people who'd been through what I had and some of them through so much worse. But none of us were alone anymore."

He joined SNAP and is now one of its leading volunteers in the state. Over the past three years, he's logged over 120,000 miles speaking out on behalf of victims like himself.

"I don't always agree with what SNAP says or does," he said, "but I still think it's a very valuable group. *Somebody* has to talk about this, and for the longest time no one would. Because of SNAP, it's no longer the church's dirty little secret. It's out there, and now the bishops have to deal with it."

Prats also entered therapy, getting help with his problems. Yet even with counseling and his involvement in SNAP, some element was still missing. "In SNAP," he said, "I saw people getting comfort and support. What I didn't see was anyone getting *healing*."

Then someone told him about St. Maria Goretti, who was killed in 1902 when she refused to submit to her attacker's advances. But even as she lay on her deathbed, she forgave her attacker, Alessandro Serenelli, and prayed that he would someday join her in heaven.

"Somebody asked if I'd heard about her," Prats said, "and I said no. So I did what everybody else does now; I went on the internet. I read story after story, and couldn't believe it. But it's true. This wasn't some legend, this was a little girl who lived (100 years ago). She was betrayed and attacked, and yet she had faith enough in our Lord to forgive the man who did it. That's faith, that's healing, and that's what I want in my own life and for others."

The more he learned about Maria Goretti, the more convinced he became that she had a role to play in the healing of victims today. And the idea of the Maria Goretti Network was born.

"In SNAP I see people who've walked away from the church, walked away from God. At the moment in their lives when they most need his grace, they turn away. And that's sad," Prats said. "You can't truly heal if you don't forgive, and you can't truly forgive without God's grace because we're just not strong enough to do it on our own. I've gotten to the point where I can say that I've forgiven my abusers. But I didn't get there by myself. It's only through the love of Jesus Christ that I can say that, and it's only through the strength I get from the sacraments that I can do that."

"I wish it were easy," he said. "But it's not. It's not magic and there's not a one-time fix. You've got to work on it, and you've got to learn to lay it down at the foot of the cross and walk away from it. You can't hold on to it, you can't keep looking back over your shoulder at it. You lay all your suffering at the foot of the cross and leave it there with Christ."

"But you don't have to do it alone," he said. "The purpose of the network is to put victims in touch with victims so that we can all help each other. And it's for all victims of any kind of abuse. You don't have to be Catholic, and you don't have to have been abused by a priest. This isn't a 'Catholic problem.' This is in all denominations, in schools and families. This is the world's problem, not just the Catholic Church's."

Prats said the network will focus solely on support and healing. "We'll leave the protests and the fighting to SNAP and Linkup," another outspoken victims' advocacy group. "Maria Goretti is not political and never will be."

The network is still very much in development, but it has a website offering information and volunteer opportunities ([www.mgoretti.org](http://www.mgoretti.org)) and has applied for 501(c)(3) non-profit status. Most of all, it has Miguel Prats.

"I want people to know that I'm here," he said. "If you're hurting, if you know someone who's hurting, I'm here. Call me. Email me. Get in touch by carrier pigeon. If you can find a way to contact me, I will find a way to respond. We are all brothers and sisters in the sight of God, we are all brothers and sisters in our shared pain. We're not alone, and we don't have to be silent or ashamed anymore. Together, by the grace of God and through the love of Jesus Christ, we can start down the path that leads to true healing."

And just as the prophet said, a little child will lead them.

*For more information about the Maria Goretti Network, email Miguel Prats at [miguel@mgoretti.org](mailto:miguel@mgoretti.org), call him 713-305-0159 or write him at 1001 S. Mason Rd. PMB 676, Katy, TX 77450.*