

Monday 13 August, 2007

Christ the King Cathedral  
*Atlanta, Georgia*

*Healing Prayer Service for Survivors of Abuse*

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The suffering of the innocent has mystified and bewildered people of Faith long before Isaiah the Prophet wrote the moving description of God's Suffering Servant that we just heard in our first reading. Christians have always envisioned Jesus as the unique Innocent One whose suffering is a unique source of healing and life for all of us. Yet we also know that Christ is not the only innocent person ever to have suffered. Furthermore, recently we have had to admit that far too many innocent ones have lived with the pain of abuse at the hands of those who should have protected them, nurtured them, and sanctified them. Isaiah's prophecy while it was perfected in Christ remains a source of mystery and confusion in the world that Christ has already redeemed. The suffering of the innocent is the reason that we are gathered this evening in prayer in our Cathedral. It is the reason that you and I are here in God's House at this moment in time.

A light yoke and an easy burden – what a fascinating image the Gospel of Matthew then offers us. Most of our yokes are very heavy and the burdens that some of you carry are extremely difficult to endure. In addition, too many people carry yokes and bear burdens of which *few* people may be aware. This is especially the case of people who have suffered the violence of abuse – sexual, physical, emotional or the dreaded combination of all three of those forms of brutality. And the yoke and burden are made infinitely more difficult to endure because so many people feel that they must bear them all alone. Some of you are here because you have had your innocence taken from you, others are here because they have endured domestic violence – physical or psychological, some are here because they have been abused in ways that they alone know, still others have come to this prayer service because you want to support all those whose lives have been damaged by any form of violence.

For more than two decades the Church of Christ has been compelled intensely to find ways to comfort, to heal, to console, to support our people who bear such burdens and who labor under such yokes of pain and isolation. And the most important part of this challenge has been the duty for all of us to acknowledge that the Church herself has too often added to the burdens and weighed down the yokes of too many people through the deeds of some of her ministers and colleagues, through the negligence and regrettable decisions of some of her Shepherds, and through reactions that have added to the feelings of isolation of those who were bent low with the burdens and yokes that events in the past had placed upon their shoulders and most importantly within their hearts.

The Church in North Georgia gathers this evening in prayer and in solidarity with some of the people who bring these yokes and burdens with them in hopes of finding some peace, finding some understanding, and in God's grace perhaps discovering a bit of closure.

As the Shepherd of this local Church, I acknowledge a few things before all of you this night. First there is much about the pain and the sorrow that fills the hearts of many in our Church that I do not fully realize. There are onerous yokes and burdens that are beyond my meager ability to grasp. Therefore I cannot pretend to comprehend the depth of sorrow that so many people have and continue to endure. I do not want anything that I might say in our prayer this evening to suggest that I know more or that I understand more than I do about the pain that fills too many hearts. I also want to apologize for people that I may never have met and for events that occurred before I became your Archbishop or in places far removed from Atlanta. I do that from the heart and I do that in justice and in love because these people deserve to hear no less than those words spoken sincerely and from the heart of the Church.

I am truly sorry for any pain that a Church minister might have inflicted upon any person here or upon any relative or friend of anyone gathered here in prayer this evening. I am sorry that a spouse or a child has had to live with domestic violence of any kind or form. I have spoken those words before, both here in the Archdiocese of Atlanta and in my previous Diocese of Belleville. I suppose that I shall have to speak them many times in the future because the residual hurt that so many people may continue to feel requires that the Bishop of a local Church offer these words again and again. I must do more however than speak a word of apology, I must continue to assure people that the Church is doing everything within our power to provide a safe environment for the vulnerable, comfort for the injured, and a compassionate heart for those who seek to share their sorrow with us.

Some of you are present because you are the counselors and the therapists who have assisted people who have endured abuse. I thank

you sincerely for all that you have done to bring comfort to broken hearts. I thank especially the families of survivors of all forms of violence for the understanding and the compassion that you have extended to your loved ones, for the tears that you have shed for them, for the hope that you offer to them as they continue their journey of healing. I thank my brother priests and deacons both those in attendance this evening and those who have worked quietly, generously, and effectively to comfort and console the victims of violence and abuse.

Some of you may be at this prayer service with heavy hearts because you have been alienated from your own families and friends because of what you have endured. I assure you that Christ who in His Passion was betrayed and abandoned by many of His own friends and loved ones understands the pain of alienation and isolation and He stands with you. May Christ heal all the hearts and spirits of the survivors of violence of all types. May the truly Innocent One who endured suffering for all of us bring healing and comfort to all here gathered in prayer and especially to those whose burdens and pains still weigh them down. Amen!