

Dear Pope Francis, Bishops, Cardinals and Priests of the Catholic Church,

I write this letter to you out of hope for victims of the sexual abuse by clergy and out of the great love I have for my son, Oliver, who was abused by our priest of 12 years. Although at this time, with all the news of cover-ups and new accusations being revealed every day, I still remain hopeful in the promise of Our Lord that the church will remain until the end of time.

Shortly after midnight on May 21, 2018, my husband, Scott, had woken me. I immediately knew something was terribly wrong as he could hardly speak through his sobbing. As he opened his mouth to tell me what was wrong, I asked him to stop. My heart was beating so hard it felt as if it was going to beat out of my chest. I needed a minute to pray to be able to clearly understand and accept what I knew was going to be devastating to me. After a few minutes of praying, I told him I was ready to hear what he needed to tell me. But, I wasn't! He began to tell me that our second son, Oliver, was molested by Father Mike when he was only 16 years old. The molestation had happened three years prior to our son coming forward this night.

Father Michael Guidry was our parish priest for twelve years. My husband is a Deacon in the Diocese of Lafayette and was ordained a deacon while at the church parish with Father Mike. We were completely devastated! How could this man, who had administered the sacraments to my children, given them First Holy Communion, heard their confessions and ours as well, consecrated the Eucharist while my husband stood next to him as deacon and my sons as altar boys, do this to my son, our son, the brother to our five other children and continue to have a friendly relationship with us as if nothing had ever happened?

At the time my son finally told us what had happened to him, my husband Scott, was a Probation and Parole Officer for the State of Louisiana. With his police background, he knew the first thing that needed to be done was to drive my son to the Sheriff's Office first thing in the morning. This also complied with Safe Environment. We stayed awake and cried until sunrise trying to wrap our heads around this, come up with a plan to help our son, figure out what to tell the younger children or if to tell them anything at all, and try to make some sense of it all. Amazingly, we were very naive to the scandals that had plagued our Diocese and the rest of the United States. This was before Pennsylvania so the one comfort we had was that this was very isolated. He was just a bad priest in our diocese and we would be able to move on with healing very quickly. I was wrong again! Soon, we learned of others that had been groomed or abused by priests. People then began to send us articles about our diocese and the history of abuse in our diocese. A few weeks later, the Pennsylvania report and the many other reports from around the United States and the rest of the world began to flood the news.

A few days after my son made his formal report with the St. Landry Parish Sheriff's Department, we learned that Father Mike was called in to the Sheriff's Department to answer questions about the accusations. A few days after that he returned again to give his full confession with his attorney at his side. On the morning that I knew he was going to the Sheriff's Office, I offered a

prayer to God asking Him to send down the Holy Spirit to speak to whatever goodness and holiness Father Mike had in him, to appeal to that part of his heart and soul, to confess to what he had done to Oliver so as to make this legal process easier on my son. I thought a confession would mean that Oliver would not have to be made subject to public scrutiny and it would be easier for him to heal from these deep and horrible physical and spiritual wounds. Although Father Mike did fully confess to getting my son drunk and then molesting him, it did not keep my son from having to endure public scrutiny.

All this happened a week and half before our oldest son's wedding. We were hoping to keep all of this out of the public so that it would not overshadow one of the most important days for us as a family but for our oldest son, Alex, and his new bride. But again, that was not to be. The Bishop gave so many details about the victim and his family to the two parishes where Father Mike was serving and Scott had served for twelve years, that people were able to figure out that it was one of our sons who had made the accusation. Bishop Deshotel made the first announcement two hours before the wedding and the second announcement just as the wedding and Mass were beginning. Friends and family of the church parish began receiving text messages from those who had been to the four o'clock Mass. At this point, I had not even told my own parents in order to spare their joy for the wedding of their oldest grandson. Others figured it out from a published statement by the Bishop that was emailed two hours before the wedding. Some guests left the wedding reception or asked my husband about it during the reception. I knew at this point, we could not run or hide from this.

For three years following the molestation, we went out to lunch and dinner with Father Mike on a regular basis all the while my son held onto this torment deep inside of him. During this time, Father Mike pretended to care for us and our family as if nothing had ever happened. He was counting on our son to never say a word about what he had done to him. Scott served with Father Mike during Mass as the Eucharist was consecrated next to him not knowing the agony and devastation our son was enduring. We hosted events at church, taught CCD classes, RCIA, worked with couples in marriage preparation to name a few things, and Father Mike was always alongside of us offering his support to us and yet, he had molested our son. How was he able to do all these things with a cheerful smile on his face? How was he able to stand next to my husband and elevate the consecrated host knowing what he had done to the young son of the man who stood so faithfully next to him at the altar?

As a mother and wife, I have to look to Our Blessed Mother and her suffering at the crucifixion of her only Son. In the following weeks, I felt that my faith was lost. I was completely broken. I had nothing left but Jesus. I felt all alone with him as if I too was at the foot of the cross. Just me and Jesus and we were abandoned. I had no church to turn to, no priest to spiritually guide me through this. Who could be trusted? How could I decide who was a good priest? Father Mike was what I had told people was a good priest. Obviously, I was able to be fooled. I went from being able to text or call almost any priest in my diocese to not even trusting one of them. This priestly betrayal has placed a great burden on my faith life but pales in comparison to what it has done to the faith life of my son and our family.

Not long after my son told us of the molestation, my husband was asked to do a funeral service for a deceased parishioner. I watched as my husband dressed to do something he had done so many times before. My husband began to cry as he was about to put on his collar. Then I began to cry. This was a painful reality to him and to me that for the few weeks leading to this point he was the father of a victim. At this moment not only was he daddy to our son, but he was also a member of the same clergy who abused our son. The priestly collar was now a source of great sorrow and unspeakable pain. We realized we would have to change some things that had once been common in our house because these had now become visible and painful to our son. These ordinary things like family rosary, having priests over to visit and eat dinner, mentioning the names of once priestly friends, waking up for Mass together, all these things that had once been done with the intent of growing our Catholic faith in our home and bringing our children closer to Christ would now prove so painful to our son and sources of dismay for our younger children. We still have difficulty answering the younger children's questions about why priests are not coming over to our house? Why isn't Oliver coming to Mass? Why can't we go eat lunch with Father, didn't he just invite us? We are hoping that as our children grow older and begin asking more questions about what happened to their older brother and about why Father Mike did such a terrible thing to him, that God will provide them with an understanding that we will most likely not be able to give them.

My oldest son, Alex, is currently in graduate school at Holy Cross University in New Orleans seeking his master's degree in theology. His desire is to earn his PhD in Theology and teach at the seminary. This was his plan in May prior to learning about his brother's molestation. He is currently working as the Director of Youth Ministry at a church parish in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. This has been so difficult on him because he now has to decide if he will be able to continue on this path. He has always been a pious young man and never hid his faith. The pain of losing trust in our priests has been so difficult for him too. It would be a tragedy for him to leave the faith because that would also mean his wife and future children, all because of one priest. Which leads to the four younger children, what can I do as their mother to help them to understand all that has happened. Our Bishop and Vicar General could not answer these types of questions for me. They simply said they did not have an answer. What if the story ends with no justice for their brother or the other victims that they may know? Or no changes to the moral standard of the deteriorating character of our bishops and priests? The effects of the actions of one priest causes the loss of faith of so many and unfortunately, sadly, it's not just the one priest.

So, where are we today with all of this? Not much further along. Father Mike will have his arraignment on January 17, 2019 in Opelousas, LA. We have learned that he will enter a written plea of innocent of the charges against him despite his confession and admission of guilt. By this written plea, he is placing himself above common criminals who show up for their arraignments. It is hard as a mother, for me to think about the message this is sending to my children. We, as Catholics, follow the examples of the great saints who gave their lives for their faith, even to death. How do I explain to my children to be heroic when a priest they knew, loved and respected has done the unthinkable to their brother and is now cowardly hiding from or attempting to get out of his inevitable punishment? I would guess that if he were counseling someone on this same crime, he would tell them to act in a way that would be more healing and

acceptable to the victimized. Because, again, my son will have his wounds opened and become vulnerable and as a mother, I will only be able to stand by and cry for and with him and console him as a mother consoles her hurt and broken son.

I want my children to say, our mom stood up and worked for change and justice in the church and made a difference. It's why we remained in the church. I do not want them to say she was cowardly and hid from the corruption that is currently in the church or gave up because it became overwhelming and tiresome. My hope is that I can make a difference by becoming active in advocating for my son and other victims of clerical sexual abuse while helping to root out the evil and corruption that is in my church. I have met with my Bishop as well as the Vicar General. We have tried as a family to help them by being open and honest about how this is affecting our family. We have become vulnerable to public scrutiny not by our own choosing. Our son has been accused of lying despite the confession. My son had to endure comments at work by a co-worker asking him if his daddy played with little boys too since he is a deacon. We have been accused of being ignorant for allowing our younger sons to continue to be altar servers. Do those accusations have merit? We have been accused of reckless behavior because we allowed Oliver to work at the church. But, isn't this what we are told to do? Allow your boys to be altar servers, it helps with vocations. Allow your children to be part of the church community to foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life. I think by the standards of the church, we have done what we were supposed to do and yet, look where we stand today. What example has my family set?

We are still waiting for action from our diocese. I think the only way to succeed in destroying the evil, is to stand firm in the Truth. Bishops must use the correct language when speaking about the sexual misconduct and sins of the clergy. Sexual misconduct is sexual misconduct not Boundary Issues or other words that seek to discredit the accuser and lessen the effects or punishment for the crime. Also, any abuse to a child, young adult or adult is either molestation or rape. If the accuser is a young adult it does not lessen the effects of the nature of the crime or make it somehow acceptable. Sexual perversions are sexual perversions that require long-term treatment. No one should be allowed to re-define or re-name the crimes in order to lessen their effects on the laity. This only further humiliates and brings greater hurt and sorrow to the victims and the family. It causes the laity to lose trust in our priests and bishops. Sadly, it seems to me, that those who are most concerned about the church and the outcome of all these scandals are the faithful laity, not our priests and bishops. The faithful laity to include victims or their family members are the very people who I believe, should be asked to help to repair the damage done by the scandals that plague the church. It is the sex crimes and cover-ups that are destroying the church not the lay faithful. My prayer is that lay faithful with varied backgrounds will be asked to step in to do what our Bishops are clearly not able to do nor trusted to do.

Our family life was centered entirely around our Catholic Faith just eight short months ago. Now, we are struggling just to keep that faith as a family. We will have a lot of explaining to do about why we tried to keep our children in a church of moral decline and corruption and a church that is becoming unsafe for children and in particular boys. As parents, and the first teachers of our children, we too lose credibility in trying to instill a Christian faith in our children unless

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there is a credible and moral change to the way sexual crimes are dealt with. If nothing is done about the current crisis, I fear my husband and I will watch as our children walk away from the Catholic Church. Please, I beg you, don't let this be the final paragraph of the story of my family and their Catholic faith.

Sincerely,

Your Sister in Christ,

Letitia M. Peyton