

Impact Statement of Paula Gonzales Rohrbacher

USCCB Meeting
Dallas, Texas
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Thank you for allowing me to share my story today.

When I was a little girl, my family, at the request of Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon, befriended several Mexican seminarians who were students there. The seminary placed one of these young men with my family, who is also Hispanic, no doubt to ease his transition to life in the United States. My mother, who regarded him as a son, and encouraged my siblings and me to treat him as a brother, generously welcomed him into our family. We housed him over school holidays and summer vacations. The young seminarian that my family sponsored was named Jose.

Our family situation was difficult when I was a child. My father died in 1960, leaving my mother a widow with 14 and 8 year old sons, and myself, age 5. During summer vacations she had no choice but to leave us at home while she worked. The summer of 1967, Jose lived with us during his break from the seminary. He took advantage of my mother's trust in him and sexually molested me. As difficult as it is for me to reveal these deeply personal aspects of my life to you, and also probably uncomfortable for you to hear, I feel it is important for you to understand the harm he did to me. Jose molested me by digital penetration of my vagina and fondling. I was terrified to do anything but keep quiet and not move while he violated me. He told me "don't tell Mom". Because I was afraid of Jose, and the effect that I believed disclosing the abuse would have had on my family, I did not reveal his actions to anyone, and hid my horror and shame for many years. Because of his status as an adult, a man, and a future priest, I believed at the time, and continued to believe for many years that the abuse was somehow my fault. Jose continued to be treated as member of my family. My mother was a special guest at his ordination to the priesthood, and was as proud of him as if he were her son.

In 1984, when I was 29 years old and pregnant with my first child, Fr. Jose came to visit my husband and me in Juneau, along with my mother. This visit precipitated a nervous breakdown. I disclosed the abuse to my husband after the visit and sought counseling at his urging and with his encouragement. I have been in counseling because the effects of the sexual abuse, off and on, for almost eighteen years.

Treatment for depression, rage, anxiety, and sexual dysfunction has involved medication, group therapy and individual and couple counseling. Although in recent years the therapy and medication helped to make my situation more

bearable, the recent revelations from Boston and elsewhere have reopened wounds that I had hoped were in the process of healing. While I hope this is not the case, I fear that my need for therapy and/ or medication will be ongoing for the foreseeable future.

This crime has left deep scars on my soul. Fr. Jose violated my innocence, ruined my adolescence, and deeply wounded my self-confidence, self-esteem, and sexual response. I have suffered from chronic depression and anxiety since the abuse: depression and anxiety so severe at times that I have contemplated suicide. It is only through the divine mercy of God and the support and love of my family and friends that I am alive today. As you know, there are many victims who have ended their lives because of the pain of sexual abuse.

The abuse I suffered has had a continuing impact on my marriage. Because of Fr. Jose's abuse, it is very difficult for me to trust or to be open and giving sexually to my husband, whom I love very much. This beautiful sacramental sign of total self-giving and union has, because of the abuse I suffered, been too often for us an experience of division and separation, to the point that, several times in our marriage we have seriously considered separation or divorce. It has been with the help of God and the strength of our commitment to each other that our marriage is intact. Other victims in similar circumstances have not been so fortunate--marriages can and often do founder under the weight of such trauma.

I wrote to Fr. Jose in 1986, previous to a visit to Portland to visit my family, to confront him about the abuse and to tell him that I did not want to see him or have him anywhere near my daughter. He replied to my letter and admitted his guilt. These documents constitute substantiating evidence that he did indeed commit the crime of sexual abuse of a minor.

In 1986, Fr. Jose left active ministry (although he was not officially laicized) to marry a woman with whom he had had a relationship and who had become pregnant. In 1991 I revealed his sexual abuse of me to my mother and siblings, resulting in his estrangement from my family. His lies and betrayal have caused immeasurable pain to my mother and to all of us.

At the invitation of Bishop Michael Warfel, I have shared my story with the priests, deacons, religious and lay ministers of the Diocese of Juneau. I thank Bishop Warfel for his compassionate response to my experience and for the support I have received as a victim. I have recently contacted the Archdiocese of Portland and Mount Angel Abbey and Seminary to tell them about the abuse committed by Fr. Jose. I have been very fortunate in that I have been listened to and believed. I am even more fortunate in having been treated so far, with concern, compassion, and understanding by church leaders. Tragically, this has not been the case for many women and men who have been victimized by seminarians, priests, and bishops.

Through all of this, I have remained a faithful and active Catholic laywoman. I have always sought to distinguish between the actions of one unfaithful minister and the Church but it has not been easy, especially in recent months. I have sought healing and peace in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Unfortunately, the abuse and its aftermath continues to make recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation very difficult for me.

I ask all of you, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals, to remember me and all victims of this crime against children and adolescents, as you make your decisions at this meeting. Please heed the words of our Holy Father: there is no place in the priestly ministry for those who harm children. I urge you to adopt a policy of zero tolerance for all offenders, whether they have abused one child or adolescent or many, whether past, present or future. This policy will send a message to all of us who are victims that we are your primary concern, and that you desire our healing and reconciliation with the Catholic Church. I pray that the Holy Spirit will be with you, and all of us, in the days ahead. Thank you.

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