

Harmed by church, faithful gather to seek healing

Robert P. Lockwood Catholic News Service | Apr. 15, 2009

PITTSBURGH

They gathered quietly for the "Service of Apology."

The roughly 250 people who came together at St. Paul Cathedral did not share the usual greetings with fellow parishioners that can be seen before Mass on any given Sunday throughout the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

Many of these people were strangers to each other, but all were gathered for the service led by Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik April 7.

Bishop Zubik had announced in a mid-Lent column in the Pittsburgh Catholic, the diocesan newspaper, that he would conduct the service for those "who have been harmed by the church in any way. There will be nothing expected of you but your presence and your willingness to pray with me."

Those who took their seats at the cathedral that evening were a mix of men and women, with the older more evident than the young.

As they came in, most dipped their fingers in the holy water font, made the sign of the cross, pulled down the kneelers in the pews and folded their hands in prayer. It was clearly a gathering of Catholics, comfortable in a Catholic environment, even though some may not have been in church for many years.

"You come here," Bishop Zubik said in his homily, "with hurts that you hold, and perhaps painfully so, in the inner recesses of your hearts."

"I stand before you tonight as shepherd of the church of Pittsburgh," he said, "and embrace the presence of each of you, women and men, who have come here tonight showing by your presence that somewhere, some time in your life, you have been hurt by someone who was entrusted to represent Jesus Christ and his church, but failed to do so."

"Some of you may have already expressed your hurt; for many others of you, you do so this night by your being here," he continued. "You call me, as leader of the church of Pittsburgh, to not only not forget the sins of those who hurt you, but you charge me with the need to continue to work to secure that the sins not happen again."

Bishop Zubik provided a powerful litany of possible failings, from "scolding and harsh judgment" in the sacrament of penance, to "heartless, unfeeling, un-Christian-like attention to your need" and for "any here tonight who have been in any way victims of abuse, sexual or otherwise, whether as a child or as an adult, or as a parent, or sibling or friend who shared in the pain of that loved one."

For each possible failing, Bishop Zubik stated forcefully: "I ask you, the church asks you, for forgiveness."

"With all the love in my heart and with all the sincerity in my soul, you can be assured that I -- David Allen Zubik -- will do all that I am able to do to restore your trust in the church and to work together with you to

reflect the very love, compassion and mercy of Jesus himself in and through the church," he said.

He concluded: "I stand before you tonight on behalf of the church, seeking your blessing, seeking your forgiveness, seeking a healing so that we as church can live our best, love our best, do our best, and give our best."

At the end of the homily, he leaned his head forward against his crosier for a moment, then turned and walked slowly down from the pulpit, bowed at the altar and crossed to his chair where he stood in silent prayer.

After the final blessing and the service was over, Bishop Zubik stood in the vestibule to greet any in attendance who wished to speak with him. While a number left by the side doors, many waited quietly to shake his hand and share a few words.

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