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Pastors recount parishionersí pain, faith

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St. Alphonsus Parish in Greendale, Wis.

Asked about parishioner reactions to the latest reports of clergy sex abuse -- now with focus on Pope Benedict XVI himself -- some U.S. pastors interviewed by *NCR* shrugged the reports off as old news, while sharing worries about the scandal?s long-term effects.

Fr. Chuck Thompson, pastor of Holy Trinity Parish in Louisville, Ky., said the story was more personal in 2002 when the Louisville archdiocese had to settle with victims. In the current situation, he said, ?no one has threatened to withhold attendance or tithing,? although he has heard secondhand that a couple of parishioners said their faith has been shaken by the scandal.

Fr. John Myler, rector of St. Peter?s Cathedral in the Belleville, Ill., diocese, said his community felt hardened as it went through the crisis even a decade or so before it blew up in Boston. ?While none of this is ever old news -- it?s pain and it is painful every time it?s remembered -- it?s something we have been reconciling almost three decades.?

Fr. Joel Garner, pastor of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary in Albuquerque, N.M., a blue-collar parish of 2,600 households, said parishioners aren?t really talking about the sex abuse scandal in the larger church -- ?at least they?re not talking to us.?

Garner, a member of the Norbertines of St. Norbert Abbey in De Pere, Wis., said he attributes some of that silence to the Santa Fe archdiocese?s own sex abuse problems in the early 1990s. ?They?re saying, ?It?s déjà vu. Too bad they didn?t learn from the American church.? ?

Garner said he?s noticed fewer people attending Mass regularly over the last decade, but he doesn?t attribute it to the sex abuse scandal. He said people feel greater freedom to miss Mass and experience less guilt about it. They still identify as Catholic.

Garner, who?s been with the parish for 25 years, said people did leave after the local sex abuse scandal but many worked through it and returned. The broader scandal has not affected stewardship, he said. It remains an active parish driven by good liturgy and a sense of the larger church, with a sister parish in Tijuana, Mexico, involvement in Just Faith and community organizing, a strong pastoral team, and an empowered laity.

Most Holy Rosary parishioners are more upset with the more traditional direction the church is taking, he said.

?They?re good solid people, and I?m privileged to be their pastor,? Garner said.

Parishioners of the historic Holy Trinity Catholic Church in north St. Louis have not cut back on attendance or

tithing in the wake of the worldwide sex scandal.

?We?re a small parish,? Fr. Richard Creason said of Holy Trinity?s 175 members. ?We?re perking along.?

Creason said he has alluded to the sex scandal in homilies, adding, ?How could you not?? This moment in the church, he said, ?calls for being honest and admitting responsibility in our wrongdoing.?

In Jersey City, N.J., across the Hudson River from New York City, the abuse crisis has had little or no effect on the 3,000 mostly Filipino immigrant families of Our Lady of Mercy Parish (with 1,800 registered households, and another 1,200 not registered but who come to church).

?I don?t want to denigrate them, but the Filipino people have a simple and basic faith,? longtime pastor Fr. Jack Cryan said. ?They love the church so much, and see their priests as faithful servants.?

Fr. Gerard V. Bechard of Sts. Simon and Jude Parish in Westland, Mich., asked rhetorically: ?Does it affect things? To some degree, but I can?t say that it?s that noticeable. ... This is unfortunately in this country not a new crisis; it?s been going on since 2002 at the upper level, you know, very blatant, very publicly. [People are] discouraged that it hasn?t gone away; they?re discouraged that it?s still this endless line of bad news.?

Fr. John Bambrick, pastor of St Joseph Parish in Toms River, N.J., and a sex abuse survivor himself, said his parishioners are disgusted about what they read, but they ?view it as the sins of the father, or the bishops, not of their faith itself.?

Fr. Alan Jurkus, pastor of St. Alphonsus Parish in Greendale, Wis., said he sensed an anger, ?not only at the abuse, but the perceived cover-up.?

?What angers most people who talk to me is that there have been no consequences or accountability,? he said. ?Where are the consequences to the people that enabled this to happen??

He said parishioners he has spoke with worry about the long-term consequences of the scandal. These folks are worried about the younger generation. One woman said her children are in their 20s and now have simply written off the church.

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