

Service addresses clergy sex-abuse crisis



PHOTOS BY PAT McDONOGH, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

Sister George Mary Hagan, right, held a candle and sang during yesterday's prayer service. It and others around the state were organized in anticipation of the U.S. Catholic bishops' meeting in Dallas to deal with sexual abuse by priests.

Dozens pray to heal church's wounds

By BRANDY WARREN
The Courier-Journal

ST. CATHARINE, Ky. — Sister Mary Agnes Sullivan has been shaken by the sex-abuse scandal exploding in the Roman Catholic Church. She is relying on prayer.

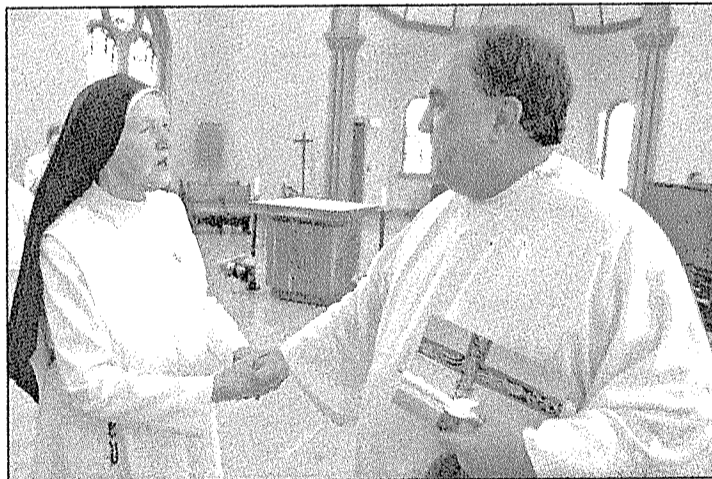
She was one of about 50 people, many of them Dominican sisters, who gathered yesterday for a prayer service at the community's motherhouse in St. Catharine, near Springfield. The service, and others around Kentucky, were organized in anticipation of the U.S. bishops' meeting in Dallas this week to deal with sex abuse by priests.

"Prayer and faith will get us through this," Sullivan said after the service, her eyes filling with tears. "I think we've been hurt, but we have the resilience to rise above it."

At least 300 lawsuits alleging sexual abuse by priests and church employees have been filed in 16 states since January — 119 of them in Louisville.

"We entreat the bishops to confront the complex issues that have brought us to this troublesome time," Sister Joan Scanlon, president of the community, said as she opened the prayer service.

She said she hopes the bishops will create a substantial policy to fight the abuse.



Sister Thomas Ann spoke with the Rev. Gary Hayes yesterday. Hayes heads a support group for victims of clergy sexual abuse.

One of the speakers was the Rev. Gary Hayes, a priest in the Owensboro diocese who told of being sexually abused by a priest when he was serving as an altar boy in Camden, N.J. Now he is president of The Linkup, a support group for victims of clergy sexual abuse.

Hayes weaved into his story the biblical account of the blind man cured when Jesus put mud on his eyes.

People called the man a sinner and refused to believe him when he described how he had re-

gained his sight.

"For so many people who have been victims, this is what happens," Hayes said about feeling like an outcast and having no one believe you when you decide to speak.

"It's an agonizing truth, but it is the truth nonetheless," he said.

Hayes said victims who have spoken out about their abuse are sometimes called "money-hungry opportunists" or even terrorists in the Catholic Church.

Hayes said he was expelled from the Camden diocese when

he came forward about his abuse, but the priest he accused of molesting him was allowed to stay in the diocese.

"I know what God thinks of me," Hayes said yesterday. "I like to think he's proud of me. God ultimately honors the truth and those who speak it."

Elaine Riley, 47, a lay person, said she was moved by Hayes' story and has been praying on her own since learning about the allegations of sexual abuse among the clergy.

Yesterday she was praying for the bishops. "It's hard for anyone in authority — hearing the painful truth is hard to accept."

Each person at the service lit a candle, and they sang hymns as they prayed for guidance.

At one point, the faithful offered their prayers aloud. One person prayed for the victims, and for those who know about the abuse to break their silence. Another prayed for the priests who have worked to help their communities.

Sister Barbara Rapp said the problem has been at the forefront of her prayers.

"I think our church is wounded very deeply. I think prayer is needed to heal those who are wounded," Rapp said. "We can't sweep this under the table. It has to be dealt with."