

Bishop Dowd: Church must continue to learn hard lessons and get house in order

The fall meeting of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops brought with it an unexpected invitation. The group SNAP (Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests) organized a viewing in Cornwall, Ont. of the documentary *Prey*, a film that sheds light on the predatory actions of Hod Marshall, a now-deceased Basilian priest who served in the Windsor, Ont. area. He was convicted for sexually abusing minors.

I first saw *Prey* at its premiere in Toronto in April. I had been invited to attend by Mike, a victim of clergy sexual abuse. He had reached out to me not long after one of our own priests in Montreal had been sentenced for the crime of abuse. Mike had gotten my name through the media coverage surrounding that judgment.



Bishop Thomas Dowd

My experience of *Prey* involved more than watching a film. More than 200 people, including victims of clergy sexual abuse, their families and others connected with the cases, attended the viewing at the Toronto International Film Festival theatre.

Mike and I were joined by his wife, and over supper we shared our own stories. People came over to our table at the restaurant to say hi to Mike, people whose faces I would soon see in the documentary itself. I realized that this was more than a film: I was being given a chance to share the experience of a community of survivors.

Given its subject matter, *Prey* is, of course, hard to watch. More than once, something would be said that I found jarring, even disagreeable. But I could not deny the raw authenticity on the screen, including scenes expressing trauma, anger and also hope. I tried to keep my heart open to everything being revealed. It was the only way I could think of to honour the moment.

After the premiere ended there was a brief but intense question and answer period. Mike introduced me to the audience and the spontaneous reactions of some was quite negative.

One woman offered sarcastic comments about me and other bishops; another man demanded to know why I was there. I get it: this premiere was like the unveiling of a monument to survivors of these terrible crimes and not everyone there was sure a bishop should be present.

As I left the theatre, an 80-year-old man named Bob approached me and just let out his thoughts and wounded feelings. His own son had been victimized by Hod Marshall. In the emotion of the moment he seemed to search for his words, but he told me how proud he was of his son, and how his faith in the Church had been betrayed. It was time to just shut up and listen.

My invitation included the chance to join the after-party. It gave me an opportunity to interact with many other movie-goers and have serious but more relaxed exchanges. Bob approached me again, and we spoke at length. (Like Mike, he granted permission for his name to be used in this article.) A clearly well-educated man, his words expressed a sense of loss and grief, but were also deeply profound and reflective.

In September, when *Prey* was screened during the CCCB plenary, I had the chance to share some of my experience with the bishops. Five of us went: as one bishop put it, we wanted to honour the invitation. From my previous experience, I knew it would be more than just a movie. We were being invited into a narrative of lived experience.

I'm glad we went. After the movie we had a chance to dialogue with the organizers. We heard of a deep desire for healing and renewal. More than that, human connections were made. For the bishops present, "survivors of clergy sexual abuse" was not just a mental category, it was real people in front of them. Conversations became possible. I found myself renewing contact with people I had met in Toronto, and starting new dialogues as well.

It is clear to me that such conversations need to continue. Make no mistake, they will be challenging. Survivors of clergy sexual abuse will not be

satisfied with platitudes and general reassurances that “something” is being done. Nor should they. As bishops, we need to dig deep.

My personal dream is for the Church to go beyond being just a safe place for our own children. Abuse happens everywhere, and Catholics have a global presence. We have a unique opportunity to be advocates for all victims of abuse. But it will require us, as bishops and as a Church, to continue to learn the hard lessons and to get our own house in order.

Survivors can help with that. As I was leaving the premiere in Toronto, Bob said goodbye to me with these words: “We are not frivolous people.”

Indeed, they are not. Let’s be sure to take them seriously.

-Bishop Dowd is Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Montreal. This column was first published in the Catholic Register.