

Conversations That Matter - 2025 Men in Retirement Communities

Introduction:

The case of Father Matt details a religious who has successfully faced many challenges. One of those challenges is the betrayal of a friend who sexually harassed men in formation. If you have experienced this trauma or are currently dealing with this trauma, please do not suffer in silence and seek help immediately.

Prayer:

*God of endless love,
ever caring, ever strong,
always present, always just:
You gave your only Son
to save us by the blood of his cross.*

*Gentle Jesus, shepherd of peace,
join to your own suffering
the pain of all who have been hurt
in body, mind, and spirit
by those who betrayed the trust placed in them.*

*Hear our cries as we agonize
over the harm done to our brothers and sisters.
Breathe wisdom into our prayers,
soothe restless hearts with hope,
steady shaken spirits with faith:
Show us the way to justice and wholeness,
enlightened by truth and enfolded in your mercy.*

*Holy Spirit, comforter of hearts,
heal your people's wounds
and transform our brokenness.
Grant us courage and wisdom, humility and grace,
so that we may act with justice
and find peace in you.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. (USCCB, 2018)*

The Story of Father Matt

Eight years after ordination, and almost 16 years into religious life, I received a call from my provincial asking me to drive up to his office the next day. That's a call no one wants—I certainly didn't—but I knew what was coming. I had been drinking way too much for the past few years. I wasn't just getting drunk from time to time, but I was drinking on an almost daily basis, and enough to get a baby elephant drunk. People asked me about my drink of choice in those days, and I could only laugh and say, "whatever you've got." I carried booze with me everywhere I went so that I could get drunk whenever necessary. I knew I had a problem. (0:40)

I made the drive and had dinner with the community at the provincial's house. As usual, there were drinks at the social and dinner, and even though I hadn't had a drink yet that day, I decided to then. After dinner, I went into the provincial's office – he was an old friend of mine – and he sat me down in the most loving and compassionate way. He went through my whole case, what he had heard from people around me. The provincial said, "There are many people who think you're terrific and they're worried about you." Then he asked if I wanted to go to a treatment center. I agreed, and then went back downstairs to join the community for another drink. As I finished that drink, I said to myself, "That's the last drink I'll ever take." And it was, even after all these years. (1:30)

As agreed, I began my four-month stay in a treatment center where many of my religious brothers were also recovering. My brothers from all walks of life joined me: from a famous philosopher and theologian to the "dumb parish priest" (which is what I considered myself). There were some difficulties for me, and maybe the hardest part was the fear of people's reactions and the shame of telling old mentors, especially my uncle who was a priest. I also began to confront what led me to my alcoholism. Clearly it was in the family. But there was more. For years, I had suffered from what I sensed was my own academic and career failings. I loved words. Language. I am still an avid reader and an addict to the NY times crossword. I had thought about a linguistics degree. But in my prime, I was dismissed from a rather prestigious doctoral academic program for failing at foreign languages. I did not have the ear for it—literally—as much later in life I discovered my failings were due to a previously undiagnosed hearing disability. A childhood illness forced me to miss school for months and I felt the effects of that illness all my life, particularly in the way I doubted my merits, my worth, and myself. While all the rest of my community seemed to be constantly celebrated for all of their professional and intellectual accomplishments – something my order revels in – I felt like a disappointment. (3:02)

Another difficult part of my treatment was going back to one of my lowest points, which for me was blacking out just outside my parish some years before. Fortunately, I wasn't wearing clerics and I woke up before anyone from the church found me lying there. But when I came to, I knew everything was out of control with my life. As my time at the recovery house ended, I went back to that spot and admitted and accepted all of that.

And that was just one of the scenes of the crime that I returned to. I also had to return to a lot of the other difficulties in my life—all of which would tempt me to drink again—or to go off the rails as others say. I had to go back to some difficult superiors and difficult assignments. I

suffered—like most of us did—with the seemingly endless mass departures of fellow priests and religious, not to mention struggles with loneliness. I had to serve in parishes and communities that were divided by all the changes going on in the church back then. There were betrayals by brothers and friends, and I had to continue to deal with my own sense of inadequacy. (4:08)

Despite all the difficulties, and dealing with all the fears and shame, the experience of treatment proved to be a great gift as I moved back into ministry. I had normal accomplishments that helped build my confidence, to be sure, such as serving those in need and even becoming pastor of one of our important parishes. This meant the world to me, especially that I could return to such work only a year after recovery. But my greatest “accomplishment” after all my years in ministry has been simply accompanying people. That skill was something I had picked up during my recovery. (4:42)

Keeping up with my weekly AA meetings felt like a chore at times and it was difficult to trust that it was working, yet the sense of community and solidarity that I received and experienced in treatment never wavered. In fact, I was fortunate to have that same sense of community when I was assigned to be an administrator at one of our retirement homes. Now, I’m in that same place at the age of 90. It was here that I had to bury several of my religious brothers, and got to witness how impressively they accepted death, how the fakery—the bravado—of the past had faded away. I learned a lot from them: and so, if I go tomorrow, I go. I was also able to do my best “work” here, simply supporting and encouraging my brothers in community. One example of this was when I had a close friend and classmate here with me who was incapacitated by a stroke and bound to a wheelchair. On the 50th anniversary of our priesthood, I made sure we did everything to include him in the celebration. We rented a van and got him there, but he had lost his voice at that point, which for him was true agony because he was known as someone who couldn’t shut up. So we printed his memories and read them aloud for him. We all just wept when we heard it. (6:00)

Another memory strikes me with great consolation. It was when I went into a brother’s room who was facing imminent death, to simply say thank you to him. I wanted him to know how much he had done for me personally, for his brothers in religious life, and for the church. As I was leaving the room, he turned to me and said, “Don’t you forget, how many young men you have helped and encouraged.” It wasn’t what he said to me that was the great consolation, but rather it was who he was. Others and I did the “death watch” with him, alternating to make sure that he would never die alone. (6:35)

More broadly, friendships from both within and beyond my religious community were a big part of what has sustained me through all these years. Important figures along the way included the men in charge of our formation, as well as all the other men with whom I worked. None of these men were perfect, but each was wonderful in his own way. My outside friends were just as important. Through ministry and sometimes through other religious, I would become friends with a few families. I felt included in their homes and in their lives. They were there for me in times of great joy and in my struggles as well. I felt formed by them and they certainly taught me a lot about being a priest and pastor. Moreover, they taught me a lot about humanity—including my own—that made my journey as a religious all the more joyful and full of life. (7:25)

Vatican Council--when I was in formation—was also inspiring to us, especially seeing how all the good religious men and women we knew were involved in building up this hope. So many of the religious sisters knew what was needed and showed us the way forward. There were also a couple members of our order who were involved in the Council. And it was during the time just after the Council that I became close friends with one of them – George—who became a leading figure in the reforms. I was initially attracted to him not only because of his vision for the church at that time, but because of the great talents he had for spreading and implementing that vision. (8:05)

Many years later, my life was interrupted by another disturbing phone call from my provincial. Like the first one that led to my sobriety, it left an indelible mark on me. Unlike the first one, however, this one came as a total shock. The provincial called and asked me to participate in an intervention with George, who had become my best friend. My provincial revealed to me the horrifying news that George had been having casual sex with both men and women for some time. He had also taken advantage of seminarians and religious in formation. My heart was broken. I wasn't only disappointed, but I felt betrayed and I despaired that so close a friend—someone who I relied on for not only support but simply his mere presence in our larger, broader community—would do such a thing. My understanding of celibacy and my own place in religious life were thrown into a spiral of doubt. Many years later, when George died, the provincial at the time invited me to celebrate his funeral mass. The hurt, betrayal, and feeling of disappointment and abandonment was still so strong, I couldn't accept it. I did go to the funeral, but I couldn't do the mass because I feared what I would have had to say about him. I realized that for many years now my denial of his acting out didn't help me—or him—and it hurt others. My hope is that telling my story prevents this type of harm. (9:35)

This particularly awful disappointment never left me, but I continued to find happiness in religious life and community. Daily Eucharist, the office, and regular meditation has always been part and parcel of my life. Though my friend's betrayal raised certain doubts for me, I remained faithful to my vow of chastity. I had entered as a man who had not had any genital contact with another person. And though I struggled with chastity for a short period after ordination with print magazines, I stopped when I realized that it was not who I was as a religious. I felt I was betraying the love of my life, God! Living celibacy as I have tried to do over all these decades has only been possible through God's grace and close friendships. This is particularly true in our religious life when not a lot of time was spent on—as they say—“sharing.” (10:25)

It has been a difficult lesson to accept at times, but I have learned that religious life can offer us one of the greatest gifts: being honest with one's self and others, rather than the “accomplishments” of being smart or successful. I have also felt that there has been an abiding grace all along this journey for me. In fact, I feel that I have been led by grace this whole time. A lot of it was being led by the grace of other people, a sense of them showing me God's love and mercy. They shared with me images and a deeper understanding of God and how God is lovingly at work in the world and in our lives. There was also the grace of God I felt in me when I said the difficult or necessary thing; things I felt were beyond me. Religious life has been filled with these moments of “beyond me,” and the feeling of being utterly led. (11:20)

Questions for Men in a Retired Community:

Because of your many years and experience in religious life, we would appreciate your reflection on this case so that going forward past mis-steps can be prevented. Your reflection and your wisdom can offer important contributions to the future care of all of us.

1. This year's case provides us with a glimpse into the life of a man near the end of his life who has lived religious life and celibacy in healthy ways. Moreover, Fr. Matt is an example of not just aging well, but of basic human development, in religious life. What are your reactions to this case and his story? What emotions does it stir in you? How does it make you think of your own experience of religious life to this point?
2. What did you find consoling in Fr. Matt's story? What challenged you?
3. What in particular does Fr. Matt's story highlight about how to live both religious life and celibacy in a healthy way? In what ways can you identify with these?
4. Fr. Matt mentions the time period of and after the Vatican Council, what was that like for you? He seems adept at change, what helped him, and you do this? Additionally, how did so many departures change you and our common life?
5. Similarly, did you have friends, classmates, that were publicly removed because of inappropriate behaviors/relationships with children or adults? What have been your experiences of disappointment and betrayal?
6. In what ways might you resonate with Fr. Matt's stories of friendship, hobbies, etc., that helped him live celibacy in a healthy way over all these years?
7. Fr. George not only engaged in casual sex, but he also harassed and took advantage of men in formation. What reactions does this elicit in you? Have you had any experiences yourself of being harassed, or have you accompanied others who have been harassed? What was that experience like and what did you take from it?
8. Does the story of Fr. George make you question any of your own choices and interactions, as well as your observations of healthy boundaries, with regards to friendships with peers, laity, young people, etc.?
9. Despite the lasting, severe disappointment and betrayal Fr. Matt felt, what did you learn from how he dealt with such disappointment, as well as loneliness, his sense of inadequacy, and the other difficulties that can often accompany our life?
10. Sitting at the foot of our elders is something that helped Fr. Matt to learn healthy models from others in religious and family life. Who taught you and modeled for you a healthy way to face illness, loss, and diminishment? In what ways have you tried to be a model for others?

11. From the wisdom of Fr. Matt, we learn about his authentic vulnerability and an ability to let down his defenses that he initially found in recovery. With whom can you be vulnerable? With whom do you feel like your authentic self?

PLEASE PAUSE THE VIDEO AT THIS TIME TO ALLOW FOR SEVERAL MINUTES OF GROUP DISCUSSION OF THESE QUESTIONS.

1. Fr. Matt gives us one model of healthy grace-filled aging. All the components of healthy aging were present in his story. The role of prayer, healthy and intimate relationships, managing alcoholism, emotional maturity, healthy confrontation skills, entering and developing the skills of a serene recovery.
2. Fr Matt's story has both consoling and challenging dimensions. His story is similar to ours.
3. "Flourishing is a skill," it is not an innate gift. It consists of many different skill sets. Most notably being emotionally mature and developing that maturity over time is key. Learning to have an active and deep prayer life, intimate relationships, being able to confront and resolve problems well, balancing work/ministry and engaging in community. Essentially, it is living a "mindful" life.
4. Vatican II has influenced religious life tremendously- whether you were in religious life during it, or entered after it, you have had to manage the Council's influence. The ability to adapt and change has been linked to various aspects of good spiritual, mental health and well-being. It is essential to discuss, know and manage the loss of a brother who has left religious life.
5. The loss and betrayal in the sexual abuse crisis has many aspects and dimensions. It is important to acknowledge, manage and deal with the complicated spiritual and psychological dimensions of this trauma, especially when it involves classmates and friends.
6. Fr. Matt gives us one model of healthy grace-filled aging. All the components of healthy aging were present in his story. The role of prayer, healthy and intimate relationships, managing alcoholism, emotional maturity, healthy confrontation skills, entering and developing the skills of a serene recovery.
7. Sadly, we know anecdotally that this problem continues to affect seminaries, formation communities and apostolic communities. There currently is no research to give us hard data on this reality. Most importantly, what we've learned from the child abuse crisis is apropos here; we must be open and transparent about these realities. Abuse and harassment thrive in isolation, secrecy and fear.

8. Aging gracefully is about facing and acknowledging our joys, accomplishments and our mistakes, sins. It is about knowing and feeling God's mercy and God's pleasure in who we are today.
9. Fr Matt modeled the healthy use of hobbies, the necessity of an intimate and deep prayer life and the role and necessity of friendships to live a healthy, happy and holy life.
10. It is clear that various types or models of healthy celibacy exist, just as there are different models of integrating celibacy and sexuality in the lives and histories of the saints. It is essential to integrate and know as we mature, develop and age that we have these models in the saints that we can utilize. We also see this in our mentors and in one another.
11. The ability to accept and acknowledge vulnerability seems to be correlated with a more healthy and long life. This type of intimacy and connection is associated with longevity of life and an overall sense of happiness and well-being.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Let us end our time in prayer.

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit:
As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever.**

Amen.