

## Meaningful Connections

### *The Dentist, the Hygienist, and the Catechist*

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*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

—Psalm 139: 7-10

For a few years now it has been my great pleasure to travel from Diocese to Archdiocese seeing so many beautiful parts of the country. It has been a great blessing to meet so many dedicated people and see how they responded selflessly to the problem of child sexual abuse in our Church and in our communities. The blessings of these meetings and encounters have greatly enriched my life.

Traveling often means long hours of waiting and the inevitable conversations with the strangers I encounter on airplanes, trains, busses, and even sea planes! Having worked for the Church my entire life I am used to the many questions that follow when someone asks me, “What do you do?” When the focus of my ministry turns to the issues of child sexual abuse prevention I do my very best to keenly screen out any potentially difficult conversations by being evasive about my work. Especially the time in the early days, the last thing I don’t want to engage in a debate or hear angry remarks about what the Church was doing or not doing. I am proud of my work and what I do, but I must admit that I heard the “cock crow” a few times when I was not fully upfront with the nature of my work. Business men and woman would dig around and try to figure out what a lay person was doing flying around doing “Church work.” With a thick Boston accent, I learned to be careful as much anger was thrown our way in those early days. Many an arrow was shot my way, but God, always near, granted me the Grace I needed to get through. If anything, it strengthened my will and resolve to spread the good news about the Protecting God’s Children® program. So many wonderful people befriended in me, confided in me, and welcomed me to their dioceses, parishes, schools, and organizations. Seeing the many good works of the Church across the United States made me even more proud to be a Catholic working among such fine, dedicated, and loving people.

Those early days were scary... we were all trying very hard to do the right thing and, in the midst of it all, more and more victims were coming forward. We moved forward, together, and with a great force powered by God’s power. We relied on the power of God and He never let us down.

A couple of years ago I was home for a few days in between traveling and had squeezed in an appointment with my dentist. That afternoon I was also to attend the funeral of a good friend's uncle. I was glad to be home and grateful I could attend the services. Feeling exhausted and somewhat dejected from traveling and doing work that doesn't go over particularly well with everyone, I slumped into the dentist's chair and remember thinking that for an hour or so I could escape—I was home and away from my work. My hygienist, Elaine, is the best in the world. No matter how you are feeling or what you say or are going through, she makes you laugh and offers you great advice. You get to listen to her a lot because all you can do with a mouthful of dental equipment is mumble, "uh-huh." As she settled into cleaning she said, "I loved your article last week on VIRTUS®." I tried to say "What!?" but she went on to tell me how it helped her prepare for her religious education classes and how her pastor got her to coordinate the lessons for her grade level and what she was doing to help the teachers prepare and how wonderful the program was, etc., etc. I couldn't believe it. She knew that I worked in ministry but I never told her what I did. We ended up having a great conversation in time for the dentist to come in and give me a check-up. In the middle of his poking he said "Nice article—I like reading those—they are really helpful." I couldn't believe that either. It turns out that he volunteers to drive and chaperone for children in his parish school and they asked him to attend a PGC program and to complete *VirtusOnline™* bulletins.

The day not over, I attended the funeral services and was talking to a few old friends at the mercy meal (in New England, a mercy meal is the dinner or luncheon held after the burial services or funeral). In the middle of the conversation, my friend's sister changed the subject to the events of sexual abuse and the church. I immediately wanted to retreat to the other room, but she, too, brought up my articles on the website. She, too, volunteered in her local parish as did others in the room that day. All were enthusiastic and talked about the requirements as if they were not so much a burden, but a blessing. "Finally" someone said, "We have a program to educate us about child sexual abuse and how to stop it."

As I drove home that day I remember singing the words to the old Saint Louis Jesuits song, *You Are Near*. "Yahweh, I know, you are near, standing always at my side, you guard me from the foe and you lead me in ways everlasting. Where can I run from your love..." Everywhere I seemed to go, I was reminded about the PGC program and its mission. Even when I tried to escape it, it found me. It still finds me, in a friendly email from a person I met in a Diocese a few years ago, or a letter that I received from a victim I met in 2003 who desperately seeks to be a Thriver. The good work of the Protecting God's Children program has become part of who we all are as Catholics seeking to make right what was done wrong. It is no longer new, but now "Old Hat" to many. It has united us and continues to bind us together. It is part of our culture and we have embraced its mission like we embrace all of God's Children—with love and respect. Where can we run from God's love, indeed?