

St. Peter Church looks to start healing process

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Prayer.

It is one of the pillars of the Roman Catholic Church.

Although prayer is not always easy because faith itself can be trying, it is the candle that will light the path for parishioners at St. Peter Catholic Church in Geneva still stunned at the reality that one of their own assaulted two young girls.

Former priest Mark **Campobello** acknowledged in court that he had inappropriate relations with two teenage girls, one an eighth-grader at the parish school, the other a student at Aurora Central Catholic High School.

"Personal prayer, reflecting on what the church teaches us about love and mercy and forgiveness and public prayer, where you can be with other people who can share your sadness, pain or even anger," will be needed for the parish to heal, said Penny Wiegert, editor of The Observer, the Catholic newspaper of the Diocese of Rockford.

She also said discussing the events as a parish will help, but that will not be easy. Although critics of the way the parish and diocese handled the investigation are optimistic that the parish can heal, others who lived through the two-year ordeal prefer to

remain quiet.

The discussion, critical parishioners maintain, must include what church officials knew and when.

Campobello lived at the church but did not perform primary pastoral duties when he touched the teenagers in 1999 and 2000. Parish, diocese and law enforcement officials still will not say when church leaders were made aware of the abuse. A criminal investigation was launched in 2002, when one of the girls approached Geneva police.

Her efforts to come forward prompted a second victim to speak with authorities. This week, **Campobello** agreed to plead guilty to aggravated criminal sexual abuse and was sentenced to eight years in prison.

The victims, prosecutors said, were pleased with the outcome as a first step toward healing. So were some parishioners.

"I think it's a positive development that Mr. **Campobello**, despite the terrible acts he committed, stepped forward and finally accepted responsibility for his actions," church member Frank Bochte said.

"I think now is the time for the bishop and the pastor to follow **Campobello's** lead and start seriously dealing with some tough questions about the whole **Campobello** episode from 1999 to 2002," Bochte said.

Geneva Mayor Kevin Burns, who attended St. Peter's Elementary School and still attends church there, said the church must disclose its errors - if any - to parishioners.

"I think first and foremost, any organization needs to take appropriate steps - transparent steps - to clean its own house and to eviscerate any evil that exists," Burns said.

"**Campobello's** guilty plea is a step in the right direction. I wish he would have come to terms with his own conscience earlier to spare this parish and this community embarrassment and shame.

"I say to him as he begins his eight-year term, 'Good riddance and good luck,' " Burns said.

But more than that, Burns said, church officials should fully disclose any errors they might have made and how those mistakes could be prevented in the future.

If the church refuses to give full disclosure, Burns said, it will prevent healing.

"To borrow a phrase from the church, 'Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.' Step up. None of this legal mumbo-jumbo. If there is nothing to hide, there is nothing to hide."