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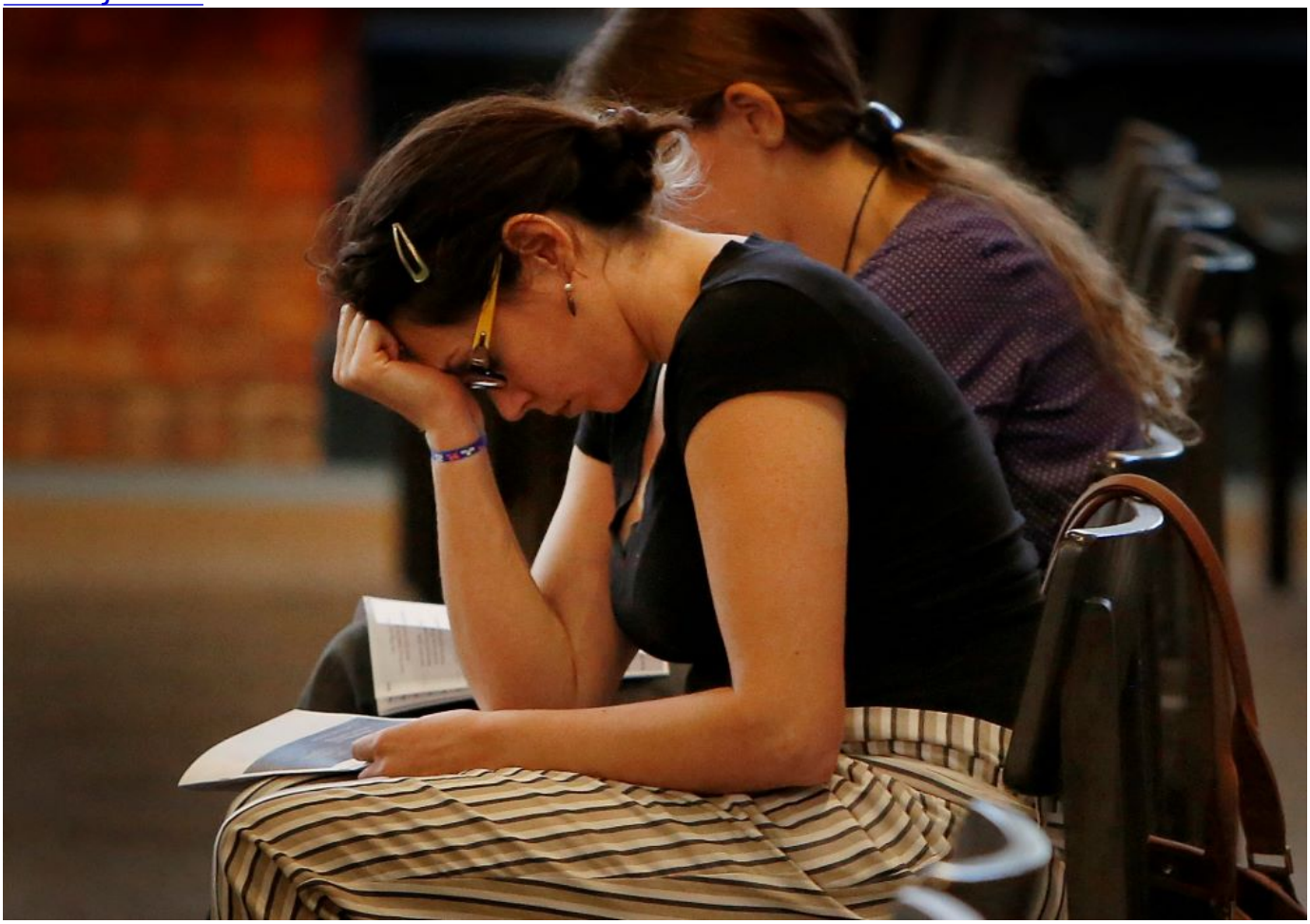

Mariana Hernandez prays during a 2018 prayer service for repentance and healing for clergy sexual abuse at Our Lady of the Brook in Northbrook, Illinois. (CNS/Chicago Catholic/Karen Callaway)

by Sr. Nicole Trahan

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I won't soon forget the day. It was early October 2021 and I was driving back to the high school where I work after a retreat for a group of juniors. The radio was playing National Public Radio as usual, and I was trying to catch up on what I had missed while on retreat — but I wasn't listening very intently. Then I heard the following

> An estimated 330,000 children were victims of sex abuse within France's Catholic Church over the past 70 years, according to a report released Tuesday that represents the country's first major accounting of the worldwide phenomenon. The figure includes abuses committed by some 3,000 priests and other people involved in the church — wrongdoing that Catholic authorities covered up over decades in a 'systemic manner,' according to the president of the commission that issued the report, Jean-Marc Sauvé.

I was immediately enraged. Perhaps that seems like too strong a word, but not from my perspective. Being *enraged* seems the appropriate response, especially given that this was just another revelation in a long line of revelations. And truth be told, I'm still angry — about this and for many other reasons.

On a recent Sunday our community was watching the CBS news program "60 Minutes," as typical for us on Sunday evenings. One story was an exposé about the residential schools in Canada and the abuses there under the leadership of Catholic religious and priests, with the support of the Canadian government

The report was recorded not long after 200 unmarked graves were uncovered at one of the residential schools. It was heartbreaking and upsetting to watch. It reminded me of a few murals in a parish back in my home diocese in Beaumont, Texas, that depict the contentious meetings between Franciscan missionaries and the Indigenous peoples at the birth of our diocese. The murals only tell one side of the story. I wonder at times what those murals are missing.

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As we prepare to enter the Lenten season, I think a good way to observe Lent this year is for all of us as a church to repent for our collective sinfulness — historical, present-day, systemic, embedded. To repent of our church's treatment of Indigenous peoples. To repent of our church's support of systems of racism and oppression. To repent of the systems that allow for abuse of children, vulnerable adults and religious women. To repent for the times the church has aligned itself with the rich and the powerful at the expense of the poor and marginalized. To repent of our complicit silence in the face of the brutal treatment of people of color by government agencies and our civil justice system. To repent of the vitriol and demonizing in our discourse as a church. This is not an exhaustive list, but it's a good start.

Repentance is a first step — to admit wrong and express sorrow. What a gift that would be for the healing of the church! However, we can't stop there. We need metanoia — a change of heart.

As Psalm 51: 3-6,12 prays:

> Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love;
>
> in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions.
>
> Thoroughly wash away my guilt;
>
> and from my sin cleanse me.
>
> For I know my transgressions;
>
> my sin is always before me.
>
> Against you, you alone have I sinned;
>
> I have done what is evil in your eyes
>
> So that you are just in your word,

and without reproach in your judgment.

A clean heart create for me, God;

renew within me a steadfast spirit.

Can we get back to being a community of disciples that more closely models the person of Jesus? We will never be perfect, but we *have* to do better. God, grant us the grace of humility that we might step away from our self-righteousness and love of power. May this Lent be a fruitful time of change and growth.