

Torrent of Grace

*A Catholic Survivor's Healing Journey
after Clergy Abuse*



Mark Joseph Williams

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Prologue

For the many people harmed by abuse, there is no greater pain than the feeling of shame. And in many instances the shame we carry isn't even ours to carry, instead created by those who exploited and used us. This is something I know well. When I was a child, I was sexually abused, first by a teacher and then by a Catholic priest.

Carrying that kind of trauma is the devil. It stays in the core of your being. For many victims of abuse, they go to their graves never revealing what they endured. For fear. For shame. Some—like my friend also abused by a Catholic priest—take their own lives because they cannot live with that unbearable pain.

In my own life this torment of shame took many faces: addiction, depression, suicidal thoughts, bankruptcy, job loss, and home loss.

A line was crossed. My childhood was lost. My development was stunted. I was afraid. I did not know how to break away. When trust in another was broken, brokenness took root in me.

My life became so fragile and grew into severe isolation. I was young when my father died at only forty. My mother responded by falling into rage, loneliness, and drink. In my early life she was largely absent. By her late thirties she was a widow and would live only to sixty, dying not long after I married. Looking back at the circumstances of my life, I was prey, vulnerable to being groomed for abuse.

The kind of pain I endured and the shame I carried weren't,

as I later discovered, rare. The Church's crisis today stems from large-scale, ongoing sexual violation and abuse at the hands of priests, and it is a crisis that threatens the heart of the Church and its sacredness.

The depth of this crisis is unfathomable: priests have sexually violated children, minors, and vulnerable adults, including seminarians.

For far too long the Church has tolerated this harm. Truth didn't seem to matter. Secrets abounded. Files were concealed. Priests covered for other priests. Abusers were moved to other parishes who weren't informed, and then the cycle of abuse began again.

But those who were victimized never forget.

For me, the saving grace was my healing journey in grace itself. God's loving grace somehow reached me, and in that grace I found my ultimate spiritual director in the person of the Holy Spirit. My story of grace also includes religious women, family, friends, and the surprise of some good—flawed and holy—priests, human like all of us, bonded together by a loving Christ—all who were people who heard my story and never failed to love me.

And yet, at first, none knew my secret—the same secret that the hierarchy of the Church kept for far too long.

Within the silent secret the Church held, it was difficult to for me to find my voice. It took time.

Now we are meeting a watershed moment in the life of a broken Church. No time is more pressing for all to learn to weep. Bishops—including the Bishop of Rome—must now weep. At this writing, in the historic time in the life of the global Church, during the Synod on Synodality—a time set apart to listen to all brothers and sisters in and out of the pews and discern how to enhance the fruits of meaningful communion, participation, and mission so as to walk together as pilgrims of faith, the

Church must listen now to the voices of those it has most hurt through its devastating silence, neglect, and selfish self-interest: the victims of clerical sexual abuse.

People are leaving the pews in droves. And Catholics will not continue to embrace a hierarchical Church if those appointed to lead will not encourage healing, insisting rather on holding onto the false power of clericalism that exonerates abusers and those acting to cover up their sins. It is only by forgiveness and refusal to exonerate those who harm the vulnerable that we can shape a renewed community of believers.

No longer can the Church ignore the collective voice of the abused.

To truly imagine a different Church under Pope Francis during and beyond the Synod on Synodality process concluding in October 2024 requires what Ronald Rolheiser calls “paschal imagination,” for those hurt sexually by the Church, for the journey from victim to survivor where a real theology of healing is found in the lived experience of those, like me, who have touched a living death on earth and discovered the resurrection. It’s a resurrection in the loving grace of Jesus. Before he was the Risen One, Jesus was the Suffering One who wept for his friend Lazarus, and who then met his own agony on the cross.

Mark Joseph Williams
Feast of St. Luke