



## **Survivor Reflection: Alone, Safe in a Chapel**

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Last Saturday at St. Ann's parish, a private, day-long retreat was held for victims of abuse. This diocesan program has matured since beginning in 2004. Long-time participants now offer encouragement to newcomers. As Bishop Loverde said during the prayer service, "You are like the good Samaritan – carrying others who are wounded to the Divine Innkeeper, ready to assist healing."

Many of us are drawn together to hear how other victims have survived and then go on to thrive in life because of (not despite) the wounds of abuse. Attendees are quick to agree: We feel gratitude for a unique ability to help others who are struggling with grief and pain so great that most people recoil. That is why our ability to find healing and begin to thrive depends on gatherings such as this one.

Bishop wisely has expanded our groups to include victims of other abuse and violence. The opportunity motivated many of us to remain – to help others. Now, retreats and prayer services not only tend to people newly facing painful experiences within the spiritual care of the Church and her sacraments. They also permit us to participate in care-giving.

Sr. Gabriella captured the idea when she offered perspective as a trained therapist. She recounted how St. Francis once invited his brothers to preach, leading them silently through the tiny town of Assisi. When they asked about beginning to preach, Francis referred to their walk saying, "Preach always, but use words only when necessary." In a diocese which has been willing to listen to people whose need to weep was silenced by the denial of others, now another witness is growing. Victims of abuse now speak with their presence before they ever say a word to others who are beginning the daunting first steps.

Fr. Mark Mealey, OSFS, is particularly trusted by a group not inclined to trusting priests readily. Counter to the damaging impact of priests who harmed us years ago, Fr. Mealey often reminds us of the healing power of God's love. Unlike traditional therapy which offered some of us limited insight about the experience of evil when we were far too young, Fr. Mealey's counsel helps us make sense of the evil and find ways to survive our encounter with it. He led the retreat in a reflection about how a loving God could have let these terrible things happen to us as children. He invited us, no matter how our encounter with evil may have left us doubting our worth, to do as St. Francis de Sales did, and let our lives be entirely transformed by a deep experience of God's unconditional love.

A window above where we prayed together depicted St. Ann, with Mary as a child at her knee. I sat there feeling as safe as Mary looked – and as safe as every child can now be in a Church that is willing to witness evil and to care without flinching for those wounded by it.

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**Teresa Hartnett** founded and works with Spirit Fire, which promotes collaboration with survivors in Christ-centered restorative justice for adults, families and faith communities wounded by child abuse. Spirit Fire offers spiritual mediation, pastoral training and survivor partnerships to inspire and energize Catholic and all other Christian ministries. For our resources and services, see [SpiritFire.Live](http://SpiritFire.Live) today.