

# Live Jesus!

## Choices in Healing: Spiritual Journeys after Sexual Abuse

Spiritual Retreat & Fellowship  
Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse  
Diocese of Arlington, VA  
September 28, 2013

The theme for today's retreat is, "Choices in Healing: Spiritual Journeys after Sexual Abuse." Teresa and I will speak briefly on four topics that are related to different aspects of choices in healing. Each of our presentations will be followed by your table discussions and reflections. The four topics were among those that gained the highest degree of interest with the people who helped to plan this day of retreat and recollection.

These four topics are: "Why?", "Safety," "Emotional Boulders," and "Simplify." How each topic is related to choice will hopefully become clear in our presentations and discussions.

### **(1) WHY?**

#### Teresa Green, Survivor Reflection

Why? This question, it killed me, over and over, for most of my life. My day would be going along fine and then that dark whisper from the shadows: Why? Why me? What's wrong with me? Or, darker yet, why, could God be that cruel? Either way, the day, well, it'd be blown.

The only secret to answer this I've found is here, being smart enough to spend time with you and your amazing faith stories.

As for me, I made a strange peace with Why. Eventually I stepped back and looked at the pain around the question—and not the question. The pain was about longing ... for God. He felt cut off from me when the Why took over. It felt like He had abandoned me and, worse, like I deserved to be abandoned.

When I looked longer at the pain, the longing seemed, to me, to run deeper than the question. The wound in my heart seemed more real than the question in my head.

Now, for me, the appearance of Why is a signal I use. It tells me I am despairing, and that tells me I need care, and I know it's the kind of care I do not have in myself. It is care I need from God. That's a short leap now, after a long, long road. Now, the question in my head and the ache in my heart both lead me to God.

#### Fr. Lou Fiorelli, Reflection & Guidance

Let's begin with the first topic, "Why?" The question of "Why?" grapples with very challenging issues regarding God and abuse. Why did God permit it in the first place? Where was He when you needed Him most? How can you ever believe in him again or trust in him? What spiritual, emotional or relational obstacles do you need to overcome before you can choose to believe once again in God, before you can choose once again to love Him and to be loved by Him?

The question of "Why?" or the question of the apparent absence of God during abuse is what theologians call the "theodicy question." It is an attempt to understand why "bad things happen to good people" –why, for instance, do innocent children suffer abuse?

In the Old Testament, Job struggles with the theodicy question in a very personal way. Job is a good and holy man who is subject to the capricious, sudden, total and tragic loss of family, fortune, and friends, as well as the destruction of his health and reputation. Job and his friends

wrestle hard and long with the question of “Why?” Why has God allowed such things when, being God, he could surely have prevented them? Yet, despite everything, Job continues to believe in God; and he chooses to continue to trust in God’s love for him even when everything else in his life seems to suggest that God has abandoned him.

Every victim of abuse has had to grapple with those same questions, and in a very personal and painful way. Where was our good, loving and all-powerful God when innocent children were confronted and overpowered by evil? Where was God then?!

The questions are real, and they need to be asked and, in some manner, to be answered. Yet, the head alone has never been able to answer those questions in any satisfactory way. I believe that it is only the cross of Christ that can give us a possible understanding of the mystery and struggle between good and evil, between innocence and abuse. Still, the Cross of Jesus provides an answer that speaks principally to the heart, not to the head.

On the Cross, Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15: 34) At the same time, He also utters a word of complete trust: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

Abandonment and trust: on the face of it, these two sentiments are mutually exclusive. Yet, they exist in one and the same Jesus as he hangs dying in the most excruciating pain. The Letter to the Hebrews assures us that Jesus was like us in all things but sin. This means that his experience of abandonment is real and deep and very, very painful. It is not just pretend! He truly feels abandoned; He truly feels alone.

Let us listen with “the ears of our hearts” to the words that Jesus speaks to his Father as he hangs in agony on the Cross and as his emotions see-saw between feelings of abandonment and trust:

*“Where are you, my God? It was on behalf of your love and your Kingdom that I preached to the people and ministered to their every need. For them, I spent*

*myself utterly. Yet, here I hang suspended in shame and pain from the gallows of a cross, rejected by the leaders of the people, abandoned by my closest disciples and friends --and even by you, the one I have come to know as, Abba, "Father," "Daddy!" Where are you?! "My God, my God why have you abandoned me?"*

*"Yet, I will continue to trust in you. I know you. I love you. And I know that you love me. Somehow – somehow!-- you will know how to bring the victory of your Kingdom even out of the ignominy of a criminal's death. And you will know how to bring me from the horror and utter lost-ness of a blasphemer's grave to a new and glorious and risen life. I truly feel abandoned by you but yet I choose to trust in you, my Abba. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."*

*"I know, Father, that some of those who follow me will at times have to make the brave choice to trust in you too, even in the throes of their own horrible sufferings and frightening feelings of abandonment. At those times, please, dear Father, help them to know that you love and choose them too. Indeed, help them to see that your eternal and ever-present love for them is the very grace that now makes possible their brave choice to love and trust you. I now go there and back in order that they need never go there alone, nor need they ever have to return from there alone. For those who believe in me, I will always be "Emmanuel" for them -- God with us" --"God with me!"*

Abandonment and trust: in the head those feelings can never coexist. But they can and often do coexist in the heart of those who choose to believe, despite everything. Like Jesus before them, they too can experience two opposing feelings, two contradictory emotions at one and the same time: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15: 34) "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46)

## **(2) SAFETY**

### Teresa Green, Survivor Reflection

Surviving abuse—it takes a lot of courage, not that I had any idea was I being courageous. All I knew is that I was focused on escaping harm as often as I could. I lived in a state of flight.

There was a different courage later. I needed it to survive the aftermath—the fallout. You may know what I mean, the aftermath, that way I kept dancing some misfit dance to a song that wasn't even playing any more.

Surviving the aftermath—it's quite a battle for safety: safety from escapism, from chemical abuse, dangerous behaviors, compulsions, from physical illness and psychological wounds inflicted during trauma.

Then there was safety now from people who were abusers, or who were inadvertently stand-ins for former abusers, or who are too hurt to be any help to me, or who mismatched with who I was before I had even figured that out.

There was for me also the battle for safety in good things. Good things—the things I didn't even dare imagine I could be worthy of—like friendship, colleagues, family, a loving spouse. At the core of all this danger—was a self who still believed the abuser.

I had learned the abuser the wrong lesson all too well. I believed in my own unworthiness very, very well. Abuse had also taught me there was no such thing as choice.

My healing? It has been about choosing to know truth in faith over lies and false lessons offered by abusers.

What was the most courageous choice I made? I chose my identity as a child of God. I had heard it, had believed it, or at least didn't disagree with it, but when I chose this identity it came

with new permission to choose whatever God would have me choose—and that meant self care that evolved into a healthy self love. This love was not something I taught myself but something God gave me .....

### Fr. Lou Fiorelli, Reflection & Guidance

The horror of abuse steals or blurs or confuses the identity of its victim. Healing begins, therefore, when one's identity is able to be reclaimed. But what identity will I choose? Will I let myself be defined by the abuse, that is, will I let my identity be that of "victim"? Or will I choose to be defined by my Maker, by God in whose holy and good image I have been created? Here again, choice is at the beginning of healing.

St. Francis de Sales has a beautiful saying: *"Be who you are and be that well so as to give glory to the Master Craftsman whose handiwork you are."* Genesis tells us that we are created to God's image. In the fullness of revelation, we know that to be created in God's image is to be created in the image of Jesus who is the human face of God.

Who Jesus is, therefore, tells me who I am created to be. Who is Jesus, then? First and foremost Jesus is "Son." He is, therefore, first and foremost the Holy Child of God the Father. If that is who Jesus is, then that is who I am as well! The most fundamental and the most beautiful truth about me, then, is that I am God's child, his beloved and precious and irreplaceable child. This is who I am! And this is who I am called to be!

"Be who you are and be that well!" This means that I am called to be that child, that is, I am called to embrace my fundamental relationship with God as his precious and beloved child. He loves me, even by name, and He has loved me even before He created me. Indeed, because he has loved me from all eternity, he created me. I exist, therefore, because God has loved me into existence. My whole life's journey is to learn how to love him back just as completely as he has first loved me.

But how? How can I love God in that way? Jesus has shown me the way. Indeed, Jesus *is* the way! So, “be who you are and be that well,” means that my vocation as a Christian is to live my own life the way Jesus lived his life. As he loved, so I am to love. As he was the beloved Son of God, so am I the beloved Child of God. “This is my beloved Son.” God says that of me too: “This is my beloved Child!”

“Safety” for the Christian is, fundamentally, the security that comes from knowing that I am loved and treasured by God. That knowledge and security were comfortably in place right up to the moment the abuse occurred. But then for a while, perhaps for a long while, abuse shattered everything. It completely destroyed even identity itself, leaving its victim lost and confused, hurt and alone, a cry without a cryer.

The first step to identity’s recovery is to resolve in some fashion the theodicy question. Only then, can one’s true identity as beloved child of God, follower of Jesus, and temple of the Holy Spirit be reclaimed, maybe only at one small and halting step at a time. But God is patient with me. So I must also be patient with myself as well.

Here is a very comforting thought. God brought about the first creation “from nothing.” So God can surely recreate my broken or shattered or lost identity “from nothing” as well. All I have to do is bring myself to God just as I am. He will do the rest. Therefore, I am only as lost as I let myself be, and I am only victim as long as I permit myself to be victim. I can choose to reclaim my true identity as God’s beloved child. I can choose to be who I was always meant to be, who I was created to be. Choosing God is but the first step in a process that lasts a life-time and often goes forward one small and difficult step at a time. But that’s ok.

*Prayer: God, let me be the person You created me to be, and let me be that well! Re-create me into that beautiful person you know to be, whole once again and holy in your sight! I am loved and I am loveable! This is my true identity: this is me. I claim it!*

### **(3) EMOTIONAL BOULDERS**

Teresa Green, Survivor Reflection

There are so many emotions. It's all a part of the past catching up with us. And, frankly, life is a ride of emotions with or without a history of trauma.

Recovery is about weaving all that feeling into the present. My well-being is a place where rifts with the past have been healed—or are healing. That doesn't mean everything is neat and tidy. Recovery is messy. Life is messy. What I mean is that that I started in fragments, and I live now as a whole person.

When I started facing all this, the emotions were huge and unpredictable. Anger or pain would just come out of nowhere like a rogue wave and take me down—for days. It made me feel pretty crazy. Well, here's the deal. Those waves? They get smaller with time. Their force gets spent. And, it helps to learn how to work with everything “in here.”

Take anger. It can be a very destructive force. But, it became my fuel for driving through some pretty dark days. Now it's my trusted “emergency alert system.” When I feel anger flare up, I don't act on it, but I look for what triggered it. If I tend to that as a mature adult, the anger of the wounded child subsides.

One trick with emotions is to remember they are not as overwhelming as they feel. I dive in water, I feel surrounded, but I know there is air and that I will surface. It is the way of things. This is just a normal life lesson I did not learn as a child.

Another trick with emotions is how to feel them without losing myself. Take anger, again. I may feel anger, but I am not an angry person. This is a choice I made. (It could have gone either way.) I am choosing my identity. I am choosing to say YES to the invitation to realize that I am first and foremost a child of God. I am not what happened to me.

## Fr. Lou Fiorelli, Reflection & Guidance

There is a lot of very heavy emotional baggage to deal with once the long journey from victim to survivor gets underway. And there are a lot of choices that need to be negotiated along the way.

One of the first choices is how to deal with the righteous anger that you feel once you confront the enormity of the hurt and pain and shame of abuse. Right after the abuser himself, probably the one you are most angry with is God. Once again, the theodicy issue: “Where was God then?!!”

But once you realize that you are angry with God, you almost immediately step back and ask yourself, “*Can I be angry with God? Is that allowed?*” Can anger and love coexist in the same person at the same time? Yes, you can be angry with God. And you can tell Him just how angry you are with him. Let me explain.

When we think of the spiritual life we often imagine that it has to be handled in some artificially pure manner. When, for instance, we speak with God in prayer, we feel that we must use only holy and edifying words. Surely, we can't complain to Him or yell at Him. When I sense any of that thinking in people, I remind them of a type of prayer with which they may not be very familiar. It is called “the prayer of expostulation.”

The “prayer of expostulation” was very familiar to the ancient biblical prophets. They had no problem complaining to God or arguing with Him. They freely expressed their anger with him or their disappointment in him, while still praising and following him. They knew that He could handle it. They felt completely comfortable sparing with Him all night long, just as Jacob had done (Genesis 32: 23-32). They also knew that as long as they kept talking to God, no matter in what manner, that that itself was an act of faith in Him. The love between them was strong enough and deep enough to see through the pain and the hurt that provoked the complaint in the first place to the heart that continued to love and to trust anyway. Those prophets have left

us a powerful way of praying, one that permits us to love God even while we are still angry at him for not being there when we needed him most.

This kind of prayer is freeing. It lets you confront the God who, though so near now, seemed so distant then. It gives you the OK, as it were, to complain to the God who, though so caring, loving and present now, seemed so aloof and even indifferent then to the terrible hurt and the humiliating pain that was being inflicted upon one of God's little ones, often by one of God's trusted ones.

Remember, the prayer of expostulation, though often a complaint, is nevertheless still a prayer. It is prayed by one who, though feeling angry with God, still loves God. It attests to the fact that we still choose to believe in God's true heart. The one who prays in this way knows that there was never any part of God in any of this. Although He seemed not to be there at those times, we are now certain that somehow He was there, His heart as broken as ours. He descended into the very hell that we were then experiencing so that, being with us in that terrible darkness, he could in time lead us by the hand out from that darkness into his own glorious light. The next time you recite these words in the Apostles' creed, "He descended into hell," let them serve as a reminder to you that you were never alone in your abuse. Never.

Now, what about all these negative feelings, these emotional boulders that weigh us down and hold us back? Here it is crucial that we learn to distinguish between ourselves and our feelings. We are **not** our feelings, and they are **not** us. Yes, we have them; we feel them, but they are **not** us. St. Francis de Sales reminds us that our fundamental relationship with God is a supernatural one. This means that it is one of grace and is, therefore, in some way lived above nature. It is located in what he calls "the high point of our spirit," which is above and beyond every feeling or emotion, and every variable or change. There, it is rooted, solid, and immovable. Therefore, it can be—and often is—buffeted by all sorts of emotions and feelings, some happy, some sad, some negative and some angry. Still, in the high point of our spirit, we cling in quiet and tranquil confidence to the God we love and to the God who loves us. We are anchored there, secure, safe and solid.

#### **(4) SIMPLIFY**

Teresa Green, Survivor Reflection

Abuse—it's complicated. Shame. Lies. Secrets. Wounded family systems. All complicated. Condemnation from hierarchy and lay Catholics. Complicated. Recovery, slogging through the tsunami of feelings and memories ... complicated!

And .. my habits were complicated. Worrying as if I could “fix” life by “figuring it out”—constantly anticipating things, managing things, controlling things. I laugh now. But then, it wasn't funny. It felt life and death.

It took personal rock bottoms to get to rubble—you know, that point where all the superfluous stuff gets burned away as you pass through hell. What's left in the rubble is the keeper. That's when I saw how less can be holy. I saw the value of being a broken, empty jar. That was good, because finally I was open for grace to come rushing in.

Life has gotten simpler since I just let myself be God's child. That was hard. Childhood for a long time meant nothing more than being unprotected, like isolated prey. But as I came into my identity I started to see myself with God's love dominant. I stopped treating my recovery like I was a bodybuilder sculpting for a competition. I was just right, just like I was. This is radical in a world riddled with ... shame. Nothing in this world is more radical than our beauty in God.

The rosary really helps me simplify. Most people “say” the rosary. When life is complicated, I “crawl” the rosary. I complain all the way until I get through all the avoidance and finally start. Every bead I just “let it all hang out” about one thing or another, then I crawl to the next bead with a mix of Hail Mary and grieving and worry and confusion. Bead after bead: I come out the other side of a rosary—okay it can take an hour or two, I admit—light hearted and relieved and with a whole new lease on life. I emerge simpler, because I am confirmed in knowing that I live in grace as a child of God.

## Fr. Lou Fiorelli, Reflection & Guidance

St. Paul was very much aware that he was an earthen vessel. He actually rejoiced in being a clay vessel because it made it abundantly clear to himself and to everybody else that whatever good he accomplished and how ever holy he became, it was all God's work in him. St. Paul rejoiced in being clay and in being broken. It meant that people would never stop at Paul. They would go through him to search for the source of his holiness and the reason for his missionary success. In other words, they would go through Paul to find Jesus. They would be able to see the beauty and the work of grace because of the cracks in the clay that let the light shine through.

This reminds me of a verse from the poem, "Anthem," by Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring,  
Forget your perfect offering,  
There's a crack in everything.  
That's how the light gets in.<sup>1</sup>

Like St. Paul, every one of us is a clay vessel; in some ways we are all wounded healers. Now, without faith, our brokenness might lead us to discouragement or even to give up on our quest for wholeness and holiness

Many of us spend a lot of time and energy trying to lift ourselves up by our own boot straps. Once we have bravely chosen to make the effort to heal, we often wrongly conclude that everything now depends on ourselves. St. Paul never made that mistake. He knew that he could never do it alone. He knew that he was clay: broken, weak and wobbly. But he also knew something else. He knew that he had a Savior; he knew that he had been saved by the grace of Jesus. Thus, he knew that his power lay, not in his own efforts, but in Jesus, in God's Son and Paul's Savior.

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<sup>1</sup> From Leonard Cohen's poem, "Anthem," as quoted in the novel by Louise Penny entitled, "How the Light Gets In"

So what are we to do? Leave everything up to Jesus, everything up to grace? Paul did not do that. He worked and he preached and he suffered. He acted as if everything depended on himself and he prayed as if everything depended on God. He lent his considerable efforts as well as his brokenness to grace and let God do the rest!

Francis de Sales defines success in the spiritual life as our willingness to continue to work at it. Thus, for him, holiness lies in our struggle for it. It is as simple and straightforward as that. This is a very helpful approach to those who have made the brave decision to heal. We can all continue to work at it, no matter how easy or how difficult the process may be, and no matter how many more setbacks there may be than successes. The willingness to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and begin anew, again and again, is, in God's eyes, already to be successful in our quest for holiness. We can all try and we can all keep on trying.

For every step forward there may well be two steps backwards. There will likely be fits and starts, progress and the lack of progress. Discouragement is always at hand, as is the fear of failure. Still, the decision to heal is already a response to grace and, as such, it is the most important first step in being healed. It is a decision not to go back to the familiar but unwelcome terrain of victimhood, or to become one's anger, or to be solely defined as victim, either by oneself or by others. In the end, the decision to heal is a choice to become what God Himself wants us to become and, with His grace, we can become.

Are you more aware of your cracks than of your successes? That's ok. Just remember the example of the saints like St. Paul and the words of the poem: "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." So, rejoice in your brokenness; delight in being a clay vessel. They are reminders that in the spiritual life, all is grace. Thus, to God alone be the glory!

This bit of advice from St. Jane de Chantal underscores the right relationship between human effort and God's grace: "Hold your eyes on God and leave the *doing* to Him. That is all the *doing* you have to worry about."

*Prayer*

*God, let me be the person  
You created me to be, and let me be that well!  
Re-create me into that beautiful person You know to be,  
Whole once again and holy in your sight!  
I am loved and I am loveable!  
This is my true identity: this is me.  
I claim it!*

*If you find this retreat helpful,  
Please visit [www.teresagreen.org](http://www.teresagreen.org)  
And sign up to be notified when Fr. Lou's and Teresa's book is off press.*