



**DARK TIMES and SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE**  
**October 22, 2014**  
**Workshop**  
**Offering Spiritual Guidance to Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**

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F., M., and Teresa**

*This document represents the comments by participants only, not the agenda or discussion topics. This workshop for priests and sisters seeking to offer spiritual counsel to survivors of abuse was prepared and coordinated by Teresa.*

**UNDERSTANDING THE DARKNESS (Fr. Fiorelli)**

It took a while before we landed on the title for today's workshop, "Dark Times and Spiritual Guidance." Those words capture well so much of what we will hear and discuss today. They speak to our efforts to be of help to victims and survivors of abuse for whom the "darkness" of abuse pretty much accompanies them well into their adult years and probably, in many ways, all their lives.

"Abuse itself was traumatic and dark, and the years following abuse are often painful and dark as well. Even going through the therapeutic process can, from time to time, be dark too, as they are often made to relive the darkness of abuse in order to learn how in practice to get past it." (a variation on Teresa's words) Thus, this darkness will impact every aspect of their adult lives: their self-image, their relationships, faith, Church, coping mechanisms and so on.

One of the first things to be aware of is the fact that the person who has come to you for spiritual guidance is a "survivor"! Through sheer will-power, courage, therapy, and the fundamental instinct to survive, and often so many other helps as well, they have made it through the long and painful years from the period of their abuse to the moment they come

to you for the first time seeking spiritual guidance. On the surface, they might at first present themselves just like any other person under your guidance, but the darkness within often maintains a stubborn, short-circuiting and suffocating hold on them. This combination of outward light and inner darkness is the context within which you will seek to guide them.

What does this darkness look like? It takes many shapes and occurs at different times and under various circumstances during the long trajectory from the abuse itself through the stages of healing and recovery. With healing, it will hopefully mitigate in intensity while often remaining as the unsettled and unsettling background of daily life. This darkness can be the nagging memory of having been abandoned when most vulnerable or of having not been believed or listened to when they spoke of the abuse to family or church. It can be the guilt and shame that one feels even long after the head has figured out who truly deserves the shame and the guilt. It may be the heavy weight of depression which holds one in its stubborn grip and suggests thoughts of despair, self-loathing or, worse, self-harm. It may be the strong feelings of regret for having looked for relief in all the wrong places such as drugs or sex or unhealthy relationships. Darkness often takes shape in the feelings of not being good or loveable or worthy. The struggle against the debilitating drag of this darkness may manifest itself in sudden and seemingly uncaused outbursts of anger or of prolonged withdrawals from family and friends. It often shows itself in the neglect of both one's body and one's home and work environments. This list is hardly exhaustive.

What do you need to bring to the spiritual guidance of victims of abuse that will be sensitive to the levels and tenacity of this darkness while gently guiding them, step by slow step, into a deeper relationship with God, a greater comfort with the Church, and a fuller and richer life of prayer and virtue?

St. Francis de Sales was taken with the way that Jesus describes his approach to people and ministry in Matthew 11:29: "Learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart." I believe that those signature virtues of Jesus, gentleness and humility, are especially suited to dealing in a Christ-like way with all people in spiritual guidance but in a particular way with victims of abuse.

How does one offer spiritual guidance to victims in a gentle manner? First of all, there is great respect for the dignity and worth of the person before you as both the image of God

and the child of God. Precious in God's eyes, they are dealt with in an unhurried and low-keyed manner, giving them the time, the space and the pace with which to become comfortable and trusting of both you as a person and of the God and the Church that you represent, both of which may be very problematic for them. Just be there every time and on time, courteous, unhurried and respectful. More than your words, your presence, time and again, over the course of months and years, become for them a parable of God's tender love and compassionate fidelity. In short, victims of abuse may—at least initially—need far less “guidance” and far fewer words of “direction” than a gentle, faithful and affirming presence. This may very well modify the way you generally engage in spiritual guidance. But it speaks to the very important principle of all spiritual guidance, that is, the importance of accepting people where they are and, following the Spirit's lead, moving forward one small next step at a time. It's always more a question of the quality of the journey than the attainment of the journey's end.

How about the Christ-like virtue of humility in the spiritual guidance of victims of abuse? How does one guide another in the context of the darkness of abuse and its lasting effects into adulthood and beyond? In preparing this reflection, I asked myself whether the darkness of abuse might have any connections with the classical dark night of the soul. St. Jane de Chantal is known to have experienced such a dark night of the soul for over 47 years. I believe that she and Mother Theresa of Calcutta hold the record for the longest dark night! At one point in his spiritual guidance of Jane and after hours of trying without success to provide her with some spiritual comfort, Francis simply stood up and quietly walked away, leaving her quite alone. At first perplexed, she finally realized that he was suggesting to her that she must go directly to God and find there, not necessarily removal of her darkness, but a welcoming and healing Presence. She did go to God and often returned there. There was humility on the part of Francis in acknowledging that despite his best efforts, only God can lessen such deep and tenacious darkness. On her part, Jane went in humility to expose her darkness to Light itself. Comfort came and healing too.

As spiritual guides, we simply cannot enter into the darkness of the victims we guide. We can certainly make use of words and of Scripture and prayer and the example of saints to help, but perhaps the best way to help them at times is to gently lead them to God. It may take some time to clear any obstacles that hinder their going to God such as the theodicy issue which we have discussed many times before. Once they are comfortable enough to be alone

with the Alone, be sure to be there when they return to you to help them understand, do, or accept whatever they have heard in the presence of the divine Light. Both of you bow in humble silence before the Light which is God and let his healing light gradually lift the darkness from both of you: your darkness in not knowing, in every instance, how to be of help to them; and their darkness stemming from the stubborn and sad legacy of abuse.

Recall another helpful maxim of de Sales regarding humility: “Humility is the footstool of God’s mercy.” Humility is the acknowledgment that only God saves and heals. Such humility is the very thing that unlocks the healing grace of divine mercy. We never have all the answers. Indeed, spiritual guidance is never principally about answers anyway. Humility acknowledges that He who created Light out of the chaos of primordial darkness is the only One who can truly bring forth Light from the horror and darkness of the abuse itself and from its stubborn tentacles and various manifestations throughout the long years that follow. In the end, we must let God be God and in humility step aside and let the Holy Spirit do the guiding –of both you and the one you are accompanying from darkness into light! Faith assures us that, in the end, it is the Light, not the darkness, that prevails!

## **11:00 AM – DIFFICULTIES & SUCCESSES IN SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE – SURVIVOR EXPERIENCES**

### **F (FIRST SURVIVOR SHARE)**

By way of context for my remarks, from the ages of eight to twelve, I was repeatedly abused by my family’s dentist. And on my 16th birthday, I was assaulted by a religious Brother who I accidentally interrupted and stopped from continuing his sexual assault on a younger student at my Catholic boarding school. My late parents never knew of these events, and I told no one else until 5 years ago, at the age of 62.

As these events happened and having been raised by a devout first-generation Polish-American mother, the physical structure of my parish Church became my private sanctuary. But by age 21, I stopped going to Church and having any spiritual life. I began my journey back to God 5 years ago, with some incredible grace-filled events that I will not describe here. Yet, since that time, while under the care of an extraordinary therapist, I have not had nor have now a religious spiritual advisor. Why? Let me describe my 2 attempts to obtain one.

The first time was about 6 months after I started back with the Church, about 9 months into therapy. There was this very well-spoken priest, not of the parish but regularly saying Mass there. His homilies were articulate, well-crafted, usually the right length, and full of empathy for the difficulties individuals encounter dealing with the minor crises and major traumas of this life. I had never met this priest, yet one day after the early daily Mass, I found myself in the Sacristy asking whether he would consider becoming my spiritual advisor. He very kindly stated that he did not do extended spiritual advising, and since I had mentioned Georgetown University, my alma mater, during our conversation, he suggested I might look there for assistance.

My second attempt was four years later, this past June. There was this newly-minted priest assigned to my parish. Different from the priest I just mentioned, yet full of empathy, enthusiasm, and positive energy. This time, I sent an email. Got a reply within a day, suggesting we meet, but warning that: [quote]...I am not sure that I would be the best 'advisor' per se at this point in my priesthood...[unquote] and writing that it is usually 4-5 years before such a role is to be considered. We did meet about a month ago and he is a wonderful addition to the parish and the diocese.

So, what is the insight here? In the first case, immediately upon getting the priest's response, I felt "stupid" and rejected. This reaction should not be new to you. All survivors, including me, have lost trust and lost a sense of control in our lives.

Yet, what the young priest did was not "abandon" me. He helped encourage my sense of trust /—in God and in another human being. He suggested meeting, despite his warning that he may not be what I seek /—a spiritual advisor. This may not seem like a lot to you, but it was huge to me. Here was a young priest, one of God's representative on earth, who after reading the same information about my abuses that I had told the older priest, and you, stilled wanted to meet with me /—and try to help me in any way he could.

Let me give you another example of such spiritual help. As a survivor, I struggle with what is sinful and what isn't. By default, survivors always blame ourselves /—we "learned" that from our abusers. Yet, many behaviors are survival mechanisms for coping, continuing even into adult life. Very recently, I was breaking down spiritually, and emotionally, over this issue of what is sinful. I was in despair. In the confessional, the priest told me I needed no absolution

because there was no sin to forgive. Like with the young priest, that moment was huge! I felt hope and God's love. And these feelings continue to have a profoundly positive effect on every aspect of my life!

You know, 50-plus years later, I am, at times, still ashamed of my abuse events and still blame myself for letting them happen! Intellectually I know they were not my fault. But, I have for so long felt both abandoned by God and unlovable to God. So, spiritually, to again feel lovable to God empowers me to be able to finally heal emotionally. What you are doing /—it permits everything else to heal. It ripples into every corner of our lives.

It is often the small things, and how they are done, that have the biggest effect. Yet, you are not the only ones who will be out there interacting with survivors. And you are not likely to be the first ones to interact with survivors when they first reach out for help spiritually or emotionally.

You are all very courageous to take on this ministry. So, I would like you to consider helping your colleagues in the diocese by giving them 2 or 3 fundamentals you have found in your personal experiences that can guide them, that they can use compassionately with survivors, whenever and wherever they encounter us. And, they will encounter us —at the most unexpected times!

So, please talk about this subject, informally, with all of them. Seek out their thoughts and fears; dispel any stereotypes they might have. Share with them your knowledge, experiences, and wisdom. Help them become more confident in ways they can help survivors!

This effort in the Arlington Diocese, of which you are an indispensable part, is very special and blessed, at least in the eyes of we survivors who experience it. I hope you know that—that you are what makes this Diocese the best in the country at helping the survivors heal. For that, I thank you, and pray every day for you to continue receiving God's Graces in your efforts.

## **M (SECOND SURVIVOR SHARE)**

Hi. My name is M. I am a wife, a mother, a teacher, a coach, a friend. I am also a survivor of abuse by family and their friends from as early as I can remember thru my late teens and by a priest in my early 20s. I have a love of life and a passion for working with young people. My life is full, busy and chaotic.

As I grew up, I can't remember a time that didn't include abuse. I also have very precious few memories of safe people except priests. They seemed holy and powerful. I had just assumed they couldn't hurt anyone, convinced that once they took their vows, God would take away anything bad in them. One day, I went to confession to a priest I knew and trusted only to find out that my assumptions were wrong. His act shattered me completely. So I left the church. Not God, just the church and I was gone for a long, long time.

When I realized it was time to come back, I knew I would need help. I figured I would have to speak with a priest and this thought really, truly freaked me out. This first experience was really quite painful and even more damaging to my relationship with the church. In fact, it was so bad, it's almost funny as I think back on it. The second experience turned out to be surprisingly good.

The First Experience. I have children and I want them to have the beauty of the church that obviously wasn't meant for me. They were pure. God would protect them. I thought the right thing to do was to make an appointment and try to get right with the church which meant meeting with a priest. The thought made me break out in a cold sweat and my stomach tied itself in knots. The appointment day arrived and I was a wreck, nervous and filled with anxiety. I even had to remind myself to breathe. We were supposed to meet at 1 pm. I didn't actually get into his office until 1:30 because he arrived late and then spent even more time schmoozing with staff and going over his schedule with the receptionist. I really felt forgotten, invisible and completely unimportant. When he finally turned to me, he didn't even know my name. He turned to head to his office assuming I'd follow him. His office was dark and his face was obscured because the only light was from his window. This was frightening to me because I rely on facial cues to keep me safe. He walked behind this very large desk and sat down. Uncertain what to do I asked if I should close the door. Privacy was something I really needed and since the wall was made of glass, I knew I could be seen but he said no. The door had to stay open. OK, if I don't want the entire office hearing what I'm saying the open door limits my seating options to the worst possible position in the room –

kind of behind the door, in the corner, with no easy escape. With quite a piercing voice (the people down the street at the pool could have heard him) a rather terse interview process began. Why are you here? I've been away from the church for a while. Why? A priest hurt me. How many years? 17. How many masses have you missed? Seriously? You want me to do a math problem? He completely glossed over the reason why I had left. As far as I was concerned, the interview was over. This experience shut me down for 7 more years. I went to church for my kids. I was a role model. I went to confession and said nothing. I went to communion – unworthily - figuring I was already damned to hell.

Appointment #2. I met a priest at my parish and had watched him with the kids and other adults. I listened to his words. I heard kindness in his tone of voice. I saw the joy in his eyes. I watched him listen to others, I mean he really listened. My own kids loved him. They threw their arms around him every time they saw him. He hugged back and joked with them. I saw no deception in him. I kept my distance from him, but close enough to ensure my kids' safety. He always said hello to me. He always used my name and never pushed for more than I was willing to give. One day, out popped a question. Can I come and see you? Sure, he said. Just email me. After the last appointment, I learned to come a few minutes late. He was a minute or two after me. He apologized for being late. Really? Apologize to me? Then he invited me into his brightly lit office and waited til I came in the room, then closed the door behind us. I was already feeling a bit safer. He told me to sit wherever I wanted and after I sat, he took a seat. Of course I chose the safest seat in the room, next to the other door in the office. This door opened outward so that if I was wrong and he was unsafe, too, I would be able to get out no matter what happened. He made small talk for a few moments – asking about my kid, my husband, my job. Then he asked me what he could do to help me. He looked me in the eye and waited patiently until I could figure out what I wanted to say. I remember the most amazing thing after this first appointment was that when I saw him next, he acted as if nothing was wrong with me. I had always viewed myself as dirty, toxic, shameful, bad. To have him greet me the same way he always had confused me and forced me to start looking at what I had always assumed to be true. I had begun to talk about my past and he took it in stride. He told me that it wasn't my fault. This was a completely novel thought, too.

That was three and a half years ago. At the beginning I went every week because I needed it, then sometimes I'd take months off. He gave me the power to decide when I wanted to

come and if I had been away for a while, he'd say something like "I miss our chats. Let me know when you'd like to come back." He'd figured out all by himself that I needed permission sometimes to see him – so convinced was I of my unworthiness, fearful that he was wasting his time with me. I had been so powerless in my life before, that being able to make these decisions helped me build my confidence.

So what was hard? Everything. And I do mean everything. Asking for an appointment took a lot of courage. Showing up was even harder. I grew up with an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment. Thou shalt not speak of this to anyone at any time. And that commandment was hammered home more than any other. I was concerned that when I said that a priest had hurt me, this priest would be mad at me or yell at me or worse – act like the other one – bored almost, cold. Instead, he said that it made sense. A priest hurt me so a priest was needed to help heal me, too. I was worried about confidentiality. He assured me over and over again that he wouldn't ever share anything that I told him. He kept every one of those appointments I made with him and kept every promise he made to me, so I began to trust him and by extension others and eventually God. He would joke around with me in our meeting time and outside of it. He didn't make a big deal out of the occasional tear or two. He meant what he said, and said what he meant. He didn't sugar coat anything, though he might word things a bit more gently at the beginning.

So I come to the end of my Tale of Two Appointments. What made the difference for me? In both instances, I was afraid, alone, alienated, anonymous - sure I was worthless, deserved what I had gotten from family and the church. I had major issues with faith and trust in people and God. I had learned that I was disposable and unlovable.

In my first experience, the priest played into each of these concerns. He didn't care or didn't know how great of an impact he could have on someone like me. I needed help to find my way back, but this priest had somehow forgotten what his role was supposed to be. I didn't matter because other "things" did. He forgot to use simple courtesy. He didn't look beyond his schedule to see what might be needed by the other. His focus on the letter of the law as opposed to Christ's love and mercy made my already tenuous existence even more so.

The second experience, though long and still on-going, was a real turning point for me. I told this man about being harmed all those years ago by a priest. He said the most amazing thing.

“I’m so sorry, Michele. Are you OK?” I sat in shock. You know, when a child skins their knee, you realize they are hurting, you stop what you are doing, you hug them, you tell them you are sorry, you dry their tears and you help them clean the wound so it can heal, you take special care of them. In those few words, the priest began my healing. Simple courtesy set the stage for the work to come. Being there when he said he would taught me I could trust him. It also taught me that I was important enough to him and by extension God to be there. Speaking to me kindly and with compassion taught me that my emotions would be safe in his presence and that maybe I could figure them out. When I was really struggling, he would share one of his struggles and how he dealt with it. This taught me that everyone struggles and when those struggles are shared, they become easier. His constant reassurance that though what I had been through was indeed bad, he was absolutely certain that I would get through this. Giving someone access to their personal power again helps them protect themselves and those for whom they are responsible.

If you haven’t figured it out already, remember that someone coming in for one kind of appointment, especially returning to the Church, might really be checking you out to share a story like me.

## **HOW TO BE THE BEST SPIRITUAL COMPANION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DARKNESS OF ABUSE**

**(Fr. Fiorelli - 25 MIN)**

The topic for this second reflection is “how to be the best spiritual companion in the context of the darkness of abuse.” In the context of the darkness of abuse, the most important thing is: to be *aware* of the darkness itself. In my first reflection today, we dealt with some of the many manifestations of this darkness, as well as a few suggestions as to how to lessen its impact on the spiritual life and daily interactions of the person you are guiding.

In this second reflection, I would like to offer some concrete suggestions as to how to exercise our ministry to victims of abuse within the context or horizon of darkness and then a couple more suggestions as to how to lessen its impact on the spiritual life and daily interactions of the person you are guiding. In the table discussions that follow, we will share other effective practices and suggestions with one another. Suggestions based on your actual practice will be most helpful to the rest of us.

Let us, first of all, keep in mind that we must try to be for them an alternative to the many OTHERS who have abandoned or failed or disappointed them in some way, large or small, along their long and difficult journey from the horror of abuse to recovery. So it is vital that we model for them safety, fidelity, constancy and consistency. There is always more art than science to spiritual guidance, and this is even more so in this situation. Never forget that the goal of spiritual guidance is the deepening of one's relationship with the Lord. One of the most important bridges to that deepening relationship with the Lord is their relationship with you, their spiritual advisor. The survivor's relationship with the abuser was demeaning, and it was constructed on a sweet-talking and mind-confusing Lie. The survivor's relationship with you must, on the contrary, be built on transparency, honesty, simplicity and truth.

We must be reliable too. As we heard earlier, this is not a person for whom missing an appointment will be viewed as a simple scheduling matter. Rather, it is likely to be viewed as yet another in a long list of disappointments and let-downs, perhaps even triggering once again feelings of being unloved, unworthy and abandoned. There are no such things as "little things" or trifling matters here. The impact of such a little thing as missing an appointment or of being curt or flippant or indifferent can trigger very bad memories and major negative reactions in victims of abuse.

In dealing with adult survivors of abuse, there is always the sensitive but important issue of boundaries. We are dealing with people whose boundaries were brutally violated as children. Understandably, they are now very protective of the boundaries they have established for their own safety. Comfortable within those boundaries, they often keep people at a very safe distance, both spatially and emotionally. We must not broach their boundaries; they must be respected and protected in the way we conduct our spiritual guidance of them. The difficulty is that we may not at first know what boundaries are especially important to the person before us. Until they are known, it is best to err on the side of caution. Speak softly, do not encroach upon their physical or emotional space; avoid words of affection and do not touch their person, however chastely or casually. Nor ought any of this be done with artificiality or awkwardness. In time, they will let us know the shape and scope of their boundaries and how to honor them. As trust develops between you, some of those boundaries may be lowered – but only if and when and how they choose.

Healing has its own pace. Even though they have come for guidance, they need to proceed at a pace and in a manner with which they are comfortable. Once again, our faithful presence is far more important to them than our words. Words in the sense of advice and avenues of spiritual guidance will follow with time –that is, in *their* time.

Sometimes and for whatever reason, they may get stuck or stop or regress. Don't be overly concerned with trying to "fix" or "manage" things when things like that happen. Just continue to be there for them. After a while, they will get unstuck again. Spiritual guidance with victims is likely to be an uneven process, but keep in mind that what is essential is the quality with which we accompany them along the journey and not the journey's end itself. It is the quality of the *process*, not the end product itself, that counts most.

In our first reflection, we mentioned the importance of humility. Humility acknowledges limitations –especially our own limitations in helping victims to move forward and to make progress in the spiritual life. We have to be willing to let them go where only they can go and at whatever pace they are able to manage. Our role is to be there with them as they make their way, praying for their progress, encouraging their successes and comforting them in their failures, reversals or set-backs. We are not exactly in the back seat here, but we are not the driver either. They are. Better, the Holy Spirit is. Let us do whatever we can to prepare the Spirit's way for them. In the spiritual guidance of victims, it might be helpful to think of ourselves as John the Baptist for the Holy Spirit. This paradigm will help us shape our ministry of spiritual guidance in general and with victims of abuse in particular.

Shame clings to the victim like sticky glue. It is unwarranted to be sure and they must often be reminded of this fact: "*it was not your fault.*" "*It is not your sin but the abuser's sin.*" Still, shame sticks, often causing them to feel unworthy of anybody's attention, including yours, maybe especially yours. Shame often prompts them to isolate, often skipping meetings with you for quite some time. Be patient with them. Do not take their absences personally, and welcome them back graciously when they once again show up.

While in the spiritual guidance session itself, the feelings of shame may at times make them emotionally unreceptive, maybe even angry or somewhat hostile towards you. Once again, try not to take any of this personally. Painful feelings are just getting in the way of behavior here. A good practice is to pray to the Holy Spirit or to their guardian angels at those

moments in the silence of your heart. You will be amazed at the power of prayer, especially at times of seemingly greatest impasse. God knows the way forward and how to get both of you there. Wait in prayer for the Spirit's lead.

Promises made must be promises kept. We have already touched on the importance of being there when you say you are going to be there. If you make any promise such as following up on a particular line of discussion or investigating an issue that has surfaced, be sure to keep those promises as well. They may very well be little things in your eyes and in fact, but they are never little or inconsequential in their eyes. Indeed, they are like little tests of your commitment to them and must therefore be honored. It is much better not to make a promise in the first place that you may not be able to keep than to make one and then fail to keep it. It is no little or trifling matter to them and is likely to trigger bad memories of past disappointments.

It is important not to be overly delicate in listening to their often very troubling and disturbing accounts of abuse. The very telling of them is often healing for them, and your ability to listen and to hear them without any negative reaction is very important. You represent God, Church and authority to them. They need healing on all those fronts and that healing, at that moment, comes through you. Truly, you are then a channel of peace for them. Be willing to be that for them.

In the first reflection, I suggested the example of Francis who sent Jane to be alone with God in prayer, and to find there perhaps not answers to her darkness but comfort and solace nevertheless. I think another way that might help them in their darkness is to recall the ancient rite of baptism of adults, a practice which is finding renewal in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Three times the candidate for baptism is totally immersed into the darkness of the waters and each time is lifted up to the light. This triple immersion is an allusion to the Trinity of course, but it also suggests that letting go of the darkness is a gradual process that leads, finally, to standing fully in the light. This may help the victim to understand that the healing of their darkness will also be a gradual process and will always be related to both our triune God and the sacramental life of His Church.

I will give one final suggestion that might be of help to those in darkness. It comes from the Treatise on the Love of God by Francis de Sales. Book 9 of the Treatise treats of the spiritual

dark night of the soul, with the experience of St. Jane de Chantal very much in the background of what he writes there. Even in the midst of the powerful downward drag of darkness, Francis affirms, one can still cling to God and hold on tightly to the divine will. That clinging is often simply a sheer act of the will, one that is made without any consolation and while in the very throes of the deepest darkness. In chapter 5 of Book 9, for instance, Francis alludes to this verse in Ezekiel (8:3): *“He stretched out what seemed to be a hand and took me by the hair; and the spirit lifted me into the air and, in visions from God, took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the inner temple...”*. In this passage God’s hand grabs hold of one strand of the prophet’s hair and carries him to the temple in Jerusalem. The point Francis is making here is that our willingness to cling to God, even in the throes of darkness, is sufficient for God to carry us out of our darkness and bring us into the consolation of God’s house. It is possible that every other level of our being will still be shrouded in darkness, but that one strand of hair, that one act of willing, is enough for God to bring us release and light, at least in the deepest depth of our being. A guided and prayerful reading of Book 9 can be very helpful to people who come to us in the midst of a great darkness. To be honest, Book 9 is not an easy read, but with prayer and patience it can provide much spiritual insight into how to cling to God and how to find comfort there, even in the midst of a terrible darkness.

And now, let’s hear from one another!

### **SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE INTERACTING WITH THERAPY (Teresa, 30 MIN)**

Today we’re talking about the toughest challenges, the toughest times for survivors—and probably when we survivors are the most difficult to deal with.

Our wonderful survivors have related difficult and successful encounters which don’t necessarily reflect on an unkind or even callous failure on the part of a sister or priest. Yet, there are some basic practices you might find helpful, especially those Fr. Fiorelli is pointing out through today’s discussions. For your further consideration, Fr. Mealey suggested I post brief (six- to ten-minute) video presentations on YouTube for those whose schedules don’t permit them to join our workshops. On the YouTube Channel “Teresa Green” you’ll find a dozen brief videos. Several walk through the detail of setting up a office or thinking through the most basic steps of greeting a wounded and skittish person, especially during early meetings. This reflects, too, what Pat and Fr. Mealey offered to me a decade ago.

For my contribution today, I thought I'd focus on what to expect as therapy proceeds in parallel with spiritual guidance you are offering—and ways your offering a sacred space of solace and peace in companionship might be helpful in relation to therapy.

First, remember that getting into therapy and early therapy is a really rocky road. The moment we reach out for help we expect relief, but starting therapy, while it really will help stabilize us before we begin the hard work of “integrating” our feelings and our experiences, has a expiration date on the euphoria we can feel finding a good therapist. Because the work before us is daunting, and often something in us already knows that.

The fact is that, in therapy, we will suffer a different way, but we will suffer from the same wounds. My first therapist, who was the one instrumental in my surviving therapy and making a profound peace with my past, used to explain therapy can be like resetting a bone that re-knit after an injury in a painful way. The cure includes a new break, horrible as that sounds, but offers much hope. So, while the therapeutic setting may offer some rare safety, we will need to re-experience the abuse to finish the healing. It will be very difficult, upsetting, confusing; we'll feel crazy sometimes. Often the defenses and behaviors born in us to cope with the abuse—defenses and behaviors we do not even like about ourselves—will get worse before they can be soothed into transformation.

This introduces significant risks, in particular with survivors who contemplate suicide. Consider depression, with which I am familiar. Most people think suicides occur at the nadir of depression, and they do. But onlookers assume once help is gotten, things will improve. However, far more suicides occur on the early upswing out of depression, just when we start trying to move forward. Why? Moving into the healing mode confronts us with things we fled into depression to avoid. When I speak in other settings I tell people to treasure their anger, because it's right about at this point we can draw on our anger to help fuel ourselves forward and through the worst of the psychological thicket.

So, with this in mind, here are a few ways you can help.

At certain points we can live in a constant crisis or be struggling with many or all relationships in our lives. Chances are these are signs we could use a therapist to help us, first to stabilize

and second to begin to heal. Yet, finding a therapist can be an impasse, especially when we are so vulnerable that making great judgments about something as important as a therapist can be very hard.

First, you can help point out therapy is an “additional” option for improving life’s situations. For example, you can talk about what is common in most self-help—the patchwork of support, the network of support, or even the quilt of support we need to sew or weave for ourselves as an early step in any crisis. Adding one more piece, therapy, seems then less of a singular or momentous choice. You might also have honed a few very casual – and true, always true! – lines to reassure a survivor you will not abandon them but encourage a rich or strong network to help them: e.g., talk about your relationship as providing (as it does!) grace and solid footing to broaden recovery into therapy.

Another way you can help is by having a practiced line or two about what good therapy will do that you can’t offer and, also, good friends cannot offer. You might use that idea of resetting a broken bone that has not healed well, so that an arm may constantly ache and constrain a person from full mobility. Or the idea of needing to remove a band-aid so an infected wound can heal; pointing out when a wound is infected it can be so painful it takes over all our thoughts or attention, whereas after it heals it may continue to need a little care but certainly we are freer to think about more and do more.

At a certain point in my life I did this. Many survivors before they move into a later phase of recovery do this too. We unconsciously keep repeating our stories to any kind person who will listen as if we are seeking the key to unlock the secret to finding relief, to making sense of this experience, to make us “normal” again. The caveat is that we also, if pressed to consider it, want to find the key without giving up any of our defenses against the agonies of abuse. Only a wise therapist can help us find these solutions, and only spiritual guidance can help us infuse our psychological work with prayer and grace and questions for God.

Besides knowing these distinctions, you know there is a program in Arlington where survivors can find many different options for gaining knowledge and context as well as acceptance. Not everyone attends retreats or discussions, but there are knowledgeable people along with survivors who are available to talk privately.

Besides imparting this understanding and these unique options, you can also feel confident when you encourage a survivor about how this work can be done in any number of ways and at a pace that won't harm us.

Another way you can help is, after a survivor begins therapy, you may notice a struggle or discomfort. On one hand, that is a natural experience in therapy and part of something to "work through" with the therapist or on one's own. On the other hand, at times people start with a therapist but the connection just doesn't work and it can't work for the long haul of real therapy. Ultimately the survivor needs to make a judgment call about, after stabilizing and getting to a place from which deeper (and more distressing) work is likely, whether a therapist is right for them in the long haul or not, but you can be encouraging about having that choice—not necessarily feeling boxed into the first therapist one meets.

This is very much in tune with helping survivors see free choice in their lives—as the antidote for having lost all choice in the domination of abuse. Exercising free choice is overwhelming considering how little practice we've had, and even figuring out we are free to choose can come as a surprise in one situation after another. Learning we get to choose the therapist we judge will be the best fit is really an early, important exercise in choosing. Wherever there's choice we can also bring God, and in those struggles to learn and choose well your guidance toward God and trust and prayer can make a big difference.

Another way you can help with spiritual guidance and simple accompaniment is when therapy begins, as the survivor gets their footing and begins to form a rapport with their therapist, therapy will present some scary propositions, many of which involve on some level revisiting the painful past we have worked hard to put behind us—even to bury in dark memory.

Another way to look at this difficult juncture is that therapy starts with a "license" to feel everything. Floodgates can open, with both therapist and all friends and supporters in the network or patchwork of support can keep ensuring a survivor do not need to overwhelm him or her. That is, even though the feelings "feel" overwhelming, they will not overwhelm the survivor. They can be looked at, experienced, processed and LET GO at a pace that is manageable for the survivor. These feelings will lose power.

You can help by confidently assuring a survivor this intense confusing period will subside—maybe not disappear, but subside.

You can also help by under-reacting to the intense feelings and even unproductive ways of acting around the feelings. You need to take the feelings and behaviors seriously, of course. Along with a therapist and family or friend supports that may exist you do get to flag actions that are dangerous. But you do not need to get on the rollercoaster with the survivor, and you can use a couple self-help maxims which help ratchet down how feelings can dominate our thoughts at this time:

You are not your feelings.

While feelings are real, feelings are not facts.

You can help also help sort through the many disappointments in therapy. For example, a therapist may be disappointing and not right for a survivor, true, but therapy itself is disappointing. We all think of quitting. Some of us do. There are disappointments, however, which therapists consider a breakthrough. The best benefit comes from grappling with that disappointment, not running from it. I'm talking about, for example, the shocking realization that therapy doesn't remake our past. Therapy isn't even going to "fix us." We are left to integrate this wounded child into our adult selves.

You can help by putting our disappointment in all the adults who failed to help us into faith context. As we process the abandonment in childhood and the natural disappointments of adulthood, as we accept therapy is not a magic bullet, you can help us through faith to include perspective: All things temporal—even good things like therapy, even humans who should not fail us—have limitations. It may not be a reason to reject them. Only Jesus offers real healing and a wholly new life ... but as free gifts. We receive them not through lonely and sometimes willful efforts, but we receive them all in relationship—with God.

You can help by fostering prayer as the dialog in this relationship—and toward the gifts found in relationship with God.

So, now that we've looked at a few early phases of getting into and working in therapy, let's look at a couple common methods used lately for survivors of abuse and how spiritual growth with you can overlap or interact with these. What I'm about to say about a few methods does apply to most therapeutic methods; there is usually a profoundly enriching faith approach for a survivor's life beyond—and after—therapy.

Let's look at what is called cognitive behavioral therapy (or, CBT). First, importantly, CBT assumes a patient is also integrating feelings with memories as I just described.

The principle behind CBT is that our patterns of thought lead to moods and behaviors. Practically speaking, focus on negative thoughts and you foster negative emotional states which lead to self-harm. Focus on positive thoughts, live in positive emotional states. A great example is the use of CBT in treating depression, which many therapists believe should not be treated by medication alone but by a mix of medication and methods such as CBT. That is, medication stabilizes the person, but meanwhile the survivor learns how to avoid thoughts that eventually lead to them a dark place. In other words, we learn how not to think ourselves into a depression. I learned a similar approach from years of interacting with recovering alcoholics who learn how not to “stinkin’ think” their way into drinking; they hold the loss of sobriety as a moment when their thinking jumped the rails—the actual drink being only a symptom. I patterned my work on moving and staying out of depression on their view of drinking. There are other areas where self-awareness and choices about thinking work together besides psychology. In *VERONICA'S VEIL* (coming soon to an online bookstore near you), Fr. Lou writes about *couper court*—a faith tradition whereby prayer or Scripture replaces the undesired thought or focus.

You can help by reinforcing CBT as it happens, or you may introduce this idea in spiritual guidance by gently introducing *couper court*, for deep habitual habits of thinking that lead away from wellbeing and good choices.

CBT is really as kind of redirection, and so are affirmations. Affirmations are common in recovery work. They're a way to self-soothe when we become anxious or fearful. They can be part of successful biofeedback. Affirmations are used in self-hypnosis as a way to dial down panic attacks. These are all good things. They're very useful. Affirmations, to the Catholic ear, can sometimes sound—and can sometimes be—self-absorbed, such as, “I am a total person,”

or “I have everything I need to face this day in me already.” Remember: self-absorption in therapy is normal at some points, but its seeming dominance passes too, as the process of therapy continues.

You can help however by adding, introducing affirmations that deepen relationships. Consider how affirmations are a cornerstone in our diocese. Most survivors (including me) talk about having internalized Bishop’s and Fr. Mealey’s voices reassuring us that God loves me, and that “it isn’t my fault.” In these affirmations, many people resume a relationship with the Church. Here too I’ll point to Fr Fiorelli’s suggestions in *VERONICA’S VEIL* (coming to an online bookstore near you) that survivors find special quotations or prayers from saints. This is how they develop relationships with people who are quite safe—with a saint, with Mary, and ultimately with Jesus. These grace-filled relationships can help repair the broken human relationships that drive survivors into isolation and self-reliance in the first place.

Let’s now change the channel, so to speak, and while still looking at psychological treatment methods look more at some serious issues that precede *couper court* in therapy. That is, CBT can happen in therapy only after a survivor has stabilized and is free of self-abusive behaviors such as alcohol, drugs, violent homes, etc. If a survivor arrives with such dangers in the present, the first work of therapy will be to “stabilize” as they say. There are a wide range of interventions for such behaviors, but because many are based on the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous let me speak to these, since I know them well. I have been a member of Alanon (an exceptionally helpful program for families of addicts or alcoholics). Here are three main issues about the 12 Steps that relate to today’s topic.

First, people confuse 12 Steps with self-help. That’s wrong. The 12 Steps are the opposite of self-help. They are God-centered. In the 1950s when Bill Wilson was deemed by the best medical care an alcoholic beyond the reach of medical hope, it was turning to God that broke through the medical and psychological models that had forsaken him—and many men like him left in institutions with wet brain or on Bowery curbs dying of alcohol poisoning. How did the 12 Steps do this? They are path, indeed a fearless discipline, of relying on God for everything, including sobriety... and then serving others to save oneself. The steps start by admitting your powerlessness and lead to embracing complete dependence on God. So, in offering spiritual guidance, you will find someone in 12 Steps already focused on cultivating their relationship with God.

Second, the 12 Steps refer to God from the “least common denominator” so that every suffering addict, no matter how depraved or wounded, has access. That is, the “Higher Power” is so austere that no triggers exist to keep people away because of associations that make the alcoholic despair of being acceptable to God. This is why they spoke to me as a survivor way back when I started recovery. God was suddenly safe again for a fresh start. If you work with someone in 12 Steps, you help by sensing this need to avoid some painful context in which God has been presented at some other time—and by exploring how their understanding of God might evolve.

Third, and last, the 12 Steps involve a rigorous process of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. So, first, confession is often a natural next step after what is called a “fearless moral inventory.” But, also, in that inventory is not about sin only. In it, people confront and deal with character defects and lies one tells, including about having been abused. I was faced with the lies behind which I lived still, as an adult woman at 25 years old .... Just so no one would know what I had suffered. Because of those lies I was vulnerable to much added harm, including having avoided therapy and having involved myself with self-centered people who would not intrude on trying to know about me.

Also, that moral inventory in the 12 Steps challenges people to list their strengths and gifts, usually the far harder half of the exercise, but also a way to deepen one’s reliance on God in looking at gifts from Him and at ways He asks us to use the gifts for His Will. Often, strengths are not the focus of therapy; often, maybe too often, therapy can get caught up with the past so much that we who seek its wisdom and counsel also get stuck in reverse.

You can help support an intervention program in any number of ways, but first of all by knowing the basic principles that guide them. You may save some time knowing most are based in some way on the 12 Steps. As a spiritual guide, you’re set up to tap what is happening in the program, e.g., anyone in 12 Steps is already seeking ways to deepen prayer (“conscious contact with God”) and already struggling with the surrender to God’s Will.

Last, today, I’ll comment on a powerful concept in the self-help literature that helps me now, not so much in therapy as in speaking with other survivors. I’d like to mention a unique view of transference (radical at its time) as found in a classic book called “The Drama of the Gifted Child.” The author, Alice Miller, a renowned child psychologist who specialized in child abuse,

wanted to challenge therapists not to consider transference in the negative always. Her book became a must-read for recovery programs, and her idea permeates many. So you might find it interesting, and you might find your survivors talking about it, So, I'll try to distil for you its iconic idea that transference is a healing tool.

The idea is that the trauma of abuse is so horrible that it is stored somewhere in memory that is preverbal. (Now I'm being really simplistic here, but this is not a technical course!) While talk therapy works with memories the survivor can (and must) articulate, we have a lot to learn from expressions of the trauma that defies words.

I'll skip the psychological scholarship the author writes about and say how I apply her insight: At times I can, as I walk away from a conversation with any person who is "brimming" with emotions (whether obvious or hidden), I can feel strong feelings myself which I did not have when I started the dialog. It's as if I caught the feeling. They don't match the mood I had when I started. Alice Miller is referring to these feelings of transference, as you must recognize, but she helps me to receive them as the story that is not verbal. The feeling becomes the hearing.

As a survivor of abuse myself, the feelings are often familiar, so I am learning to make a distinction between what is mine and what is other. But that is why I do not need to avoid the person to avoid the feeling again, or even put up an interior guard against the person that will block some or all of our interactions. I have come to understand I am listening by feeling. This is what Miller suggests is being an audience to the drama of the gifted child, or what I call being a Christian witness to their Wordless Story. That is, they have managed to transfer a tincture of the feeling of their trauma to me. I am carrying that within, and just as hearing something trauma is saddening, this saddens even burdens me without words. But, also, what matters for me anyway is that I do not pick up this cross. I simply connect with the one carrying it on their own Via Dolorosa.

Alice Miller described with a great compassion how this happens to be an important letting go for the person with the cross—as important as telling their story. Indeed, it is telling the story that defies words. I have been blessed to be a conduit, but it still means I have to be careful not to own, not to think all feeling is mine to keep or even to feel as my own.

Over thirty years of having a certain proclivity for being the one victims turn to as they begin to move out of addictions or crisis into therapy, what I've learned to do is gather up the feeling, acknowledge it, maybe even reflect on it a bit, and then pray for the trauma, offer the thing gathered in me to God. I do the same for the whole person of the survivor, not just their wounds. And then I turn it all over to Jesus. It's care for the survivor, and for myself, to move their burden off my spirit, too. It may be because I am a survivor, so sometimes the feelings run close to my own scars, that I might take the night off to pray in my exceedingly messy and crowded prayer room—or sometimes to Adoration. Now my peculiar response is not necessarily what you should do, but I did want to mention this idea in case it might be something you can adapt for your own interactions with survivors.

In closing, I'll share that I grappled with how hard therapy was, how hard all recovery work is beyond therapy. In other words, how hard the path is out of the desert of victimhood. And after that too, how hard it remains to be a well survivor, a thriving person, with this trauma to manage in its aftermath. Think of a sapling tree struck by lightning while so vulnerable. Think of it as a tree fully grown, decades later; a gash will remain as a pattern in the bark. The tree canopy, the roots and branches likely hint at the long-ago.

Let me close with a link to how powerful the story of the Exodus plays in my own recovery and it is also my own personal go-to story when survivors are just speaking to me about their own process. Very broad stroke, here, I see abusers as people who took my free choice and kept me from living spontaneously as a child; I saw that time as slavery. The years following abuse were a desert time, where I hadn't really yet broken from all the impact of abuse, but I was trying. Recovery work, all of it, my fifteen years in therapy, my thirty years in 12 Steps, my years trying this or that option for dealing with post-traumatic stress before it was even really a defined term .... I found truth in Scripture about this embattled aspect of my life in the lesser known part of the story of the Exodus.

That is, everyone knows about the desert journey. The desert experience is something survivors immediately appreciate. But the desert what was next? That can be a terribly hard time in its right. For me, my adult agonies after the desert were killers. In the desert, I could ignore learning how to live adult life with the added burden to respect and care for myself. You know that after God had revealed the Promised Land from the edge of the desert, the Israelites started to fight for the Land, which forged their identity. The parallel with therapy so

shocked me that, really, my first in-depth and continuous reading and rereading of Scripture was about this very time as I waded into early therapy, which was just an awful time for me. Some of the most difficult emotions we relate to you will arise during such battles. Some of our most annoying behaviors and unexpected moods will come from the same.

So I'll close by asking you to keep in mind how your spiritual guidance is helping your survivor become a full person freed from bondage and freed from the desert, and it takes a long time with many interior battles—and many life-changing ones too.

### **LIGHTENING THE BURDEN (Fr. Fiorelli, 20 MIN)**

Today we have spoken much about the heavy darkness that is often the lot of victims of abuse even into adulthood and even while in the process of healing through therapy, spiritual guidance and a return to the life of the Church with its Scriptures, its teachings, and its sacraments. We have already suggested some ways that might help to dispel their darkness or at least to lessen it. The particular focus in this reflection is lightening the burden of those we guide. What can we do in actual practice to scatter the darkness from their lives, or at least to lessen it?

First of all, never underestimate the power of your personal presence. ***A burden shared is always a burden lightened.*** Whether you have the right word or are able to suggest the best practice or reading at a particular moment in their guidance is far less important than simply being willing to be with them at that moment in their journey and at that stage in their darkness. We know that spiritual guides are not meant principally to be “fixers” or “managers.” We are spiritual companions who walk with those we guide and accompany them on their journey. Together with them, we search for the Spirit and listen for what the Lord will mark out for us as the next step to take. Our presence is a help and a prayer. As such it is always a leaven as well. We have to trust that and find comfort in its truth.

There is a principle of grace with which we are probably all familiar. It goes like this: *grace presupposes, builds upon and perfects nature.* How can that principle possibly help us or the victims under our spiritual guidance? To answer that question, let's look at each of its elements.

First: *grace presupposes nature*. We are embodied spirits. Therefore, to be truly healed in the fullest and deepest way, we must make sure that we tend to the body in us. This includes our emotions and psyche as well. Things like counselling, therapy, the 12 Step programs and all that Teresa has just reviewed with us are the essential and hard ground work before grace can really do its work. We can do a service to the victims we guide in helping them to be faithful to that very hard work that many of them will be doing while seeing us for spiritual guidance. Some think grace alone can do the job. It certainly can but, precluding a miracle, God seems to prefer that we work through human agency. That's simply how he made us.

Second: *grace builds on nature*. The work of the medical, social and psychological sciences lay the essential groundwork for God's grace to build upon. Yes, God could do it alone, but that's not the way He prefers to work. To create Adam, He breathed his spirit into the mud that his hands had first taken and formed. He took an existing rib from Adam to form Eve. Thus, from the very beginning, and as a paradigm for all human effort, including healing, grace builds on nature.

Third: *grace perfects nature*. This goes back to our earlier affirmation: only God saves. Grace may presuppose and build upon nature but only grace perfects it. People are looking for access to that perfecting grace in coming to us in the first place. They look to us to show them the way to God and to the healing comfort and the lifting of the darkness that only He can give.

We will truly lighten the burden of victims we guide if we minister to them within the wisdom of this principle: *grace presupposes, builds upon and perfects nature*.

"Lord, teach us to pray." The earliest disciples asked Jesus for help in learning how to pray, that is, in learning how to encounter the living God. Those who come to us want access to God. Faith tells them that it is only with God that they will find the healing, the light, the love, and the joy that they are seeking and of which, because of the trauma of abuse, they have for too long been deprived. Prayer places them in the presence of God. In that presence, they are transformed, changed from within, recreated anew. They want this. They deserve this. You can give them this if you teach them how to pray. God will do the rest. He will speak directly to them of his love for them. They will learn from Him what they are to do. And they will obtain from him the strength to do it. After you teach them how to pray, you will, in an

ongoing way, help them hear the Lord's voice and discern his will. But the heavy lifting will be done by God himself. The spiritual guide is, like Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, not the Lord Himself.

In conclusion, I would like to give you one final story from the life of St. Francis de Sales. One of the workers in his episcopal home was a young deaf man who was also mute. His name was Martin. Martin had never received Holy Communion because no one knew how to teach him what the Sacrament meant. As busy as he was, Francis decided that he would teach Martin the meaning of the Eucharist. He actually developed a sign language to do this, and after teaching Martin that language, taught him about the True Presence. Martin was then able to make his first holy communion. He was devoted to Francis for the rest of his life, sobbing uncontrollably while clinging to his casket on the way to its burial. Because of this incident, Francis de Sales is now the Patron of the Deaf.

Why do I bring this up? If we are honest with one another, the challenges of spiritual guidance in general are difficult enough but those associated with the horror and darkness of abuse are greater still. Like Francis, we may encounter someone who is so wounded and broken and in such darkness that we are at loss as to what to say and how to help. We may need, then, to be just as creative as Francis was with Martin, and just as willing to embrace the particular challenges of the person before us as he was. Francis was a busy bishop, a sought-after preacher and spiritual guide. In the eyes of the world Martin was a nobody, neglected and forgotten. In the eyes of the saint, though, he was a precious son of God who needed help to find, first a language, and then a lesson that would lead him to the Body of Christ. Francis first created the language and then taught him the lesson and finally gave him the Body of Christ.

No matter who is before us in spiritual guidance, we will, with God's grace, find the language, teach the lesson and give them Christ. God will do the rest!

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**Teresa Hartnett** founded and works with Spirit Fire, which promotes 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.