



LIVE JESUS

“HOMECOMING”

September 6, 2014 Survivors Retreat

Retreat Leader: Fr. Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S.

INTRODUCTION

A Reflection by Fr. Fiorelli

All Christians are invited to imitate Christ – or, as we express it in the Salesian tradition, to “live Jesus.” How Jesus lived his earthly life is the model for how we are to live our lives as well. How did Jesus live his life during his 33 years among us? Basically, he lived what he preached –that is, he lived the spirit of the double commandment. For he truly loved God and he truly loved others.

Scripture tells us that Jesus often spent whole nights in prayerful, loving conversation with His Father. And the following day he went forth to preach and to teach, to heal and to love. One saint expressed those nights of prayer in this way: Jesus was “alone with the Alone.” And at those times of prayer with the Father, Jesus was never “lonely”

or “isolated.” For him those times were, rather, moments of refreshing solitude. What will enable us, in imitation of Jesus, to invite God into our own lives so that He can transform whatever loneliness there is there into a holy and refreshing solitude? That is the question that this first part of our retreat today asks. And it attempts to answer that question, not in the abstract, but in the concrete circumstances of abuse and its aftermath.

For that reason, I would like to begin by reminding all of us that God is the complete opposite of the people who once harmed you.

Further, I would like to speak of the great good you can receive from God and, in turn, share with the world --not despite your sufferings but because of the hard-earned fruit that, with grace, you have been able to gain despite those sufferings.

First, let’s consider who has harmed you. Most of you have joined our gathering today because you endured and survived the trauma of being sexually abused as a child. Some of you are here as a support person who suffers by a degree of separation, that is, you might also carry pain from the childhood family setting where this suffering was unfolding or you may be a spouse or family member or friend of someone who has survived this tragedy as a child. Thus, all of you have been harmed by abusers in some real way. Sadly, many of you have also been harmed by other adults who either covered up the abuse or

denied it when you sought their help, or otherwise shifted the blame and stigma from where it actually belonged – on the abuser – to you.

It can never be repeated often enough: the abuse that you suffered was not your fault. Nor was it the fault of the person who cared for you or supported you, and certainly not the fault of any of your siblings or childhood friends. You were and are innocent of the terrible harm that was inflicted upon you. And, here, today, we seek to provide a safe setting where you may find ways to draw upon God's Provident care for you by name and to foster a growing sense of safety and well-being by inviting Him more and more into your hearts and lives.

Second, I want to thank you for all that you have taught me over these past years. Among the many things you have taught me includes that very special grace that usually comes only after many years of struggle and pain. This is the gift of forgiveness. Yes, you have taught me many profound dimensions of our shared faith, but none more so than about forgiveness. Let me explain a little about what I mean here.

In your lives, the notion of “forgiveness” was, I suspect, often used to enable abusers to abuse further. But the forgiveness that you model for me has come in its own time and only after much struggling, and in the end only with God's grace. As such, it is truly something authentic and incredibly rich. It is a buried treasure at last unearthed, a pearl of great price finally found.

Forgiveness is just one example of the many ways your courageous and tenacious efforts to move out of the pain of the past and into the present of hope have shown me the face of Jesus today. That brings home one of the questions that I hope you will ask yourselves during today's retreat: "What gifts do I have to share with the world --not despite what I have suffered, but as the hard-won fruits of my suffering --fruits gained with the grace and help of the Holy Spirit?"

So, I begin today's retreat by reminding you of two things related to what you have bravely articulated to me about your survival journeys. (1) The first is this: God will never overwhelm you when you are vulnerable or in need as your abusers once did. God patiently waits for you to welcome Him a bit further into your solitude, and into your relationships, and into your difficulties. He will never push or otherwise force you there. (2) The second is this: Surrendering to God will never mean harm or isolation as once surrendering to the abuser did. On the contrary, surrendering to God enriches us, heals us, and inspires us to become increasingly the person that we were created to be --- the person God wants to love more and more into being. With God, it is always as Jesus claimed it would be: the one who loses his life --in the sense of surrendering it into the caring hands of a gentle and loving God--is the one who truly finds life.

We have to choose to invite God into our lives. He wants to “win” our hearts; he will never force or compel them. He created us free. We must, therefore, freely choose to create a place for Him as we would for any friend. It is true that your experience of abuse likely adds additional difficulties because as a child you inadvertently learned many false lessons. Those lessons included a tendency to feel great shame, distrust, guardedness, self-doubt, and fear. These can be impediments to your inviting God to become an ever-more present friend in every aspect of your lives today. Yet, you will find that, as you more and more let God in, you will actually come more home to your true selves. As the great St. Augustine once expressed it, our hearts were made by God and they will be restless until they rest –finally and fully-- in God. That is why this retreat is about homecoming; it is about taking time to imagine new ways to let God into your lives, new ways for you to find your home in Him, new ways to find rest from a past that often seems to leave you running or at least avoiding the memories by being busy and restless. Let’s take time today to rest a little in God.

To that end, today we’ll explore ways to welcome God into our lives through *solitude*, through our *relationships*, and through *challenges* we must overcome, particularly those challenges related to our process of recovering from abuse.

FIRST SECTION:

Welcoming God into Our Aloneness

(Two survivors offer their reflections, followed by a reflection by Fr. Fiorelli.)

THE DESERT WITHIN

A Reflection by SLJ

When I was a little girl, I used to involve myself in a great many ideas and role-playing as to what my career would be when “I grew up” someday.

I’ll let you know when I grow up how that all turned out.

The one thing that I always knew, though, was that I was a writer. I knew when I was 8 years old and started my very first red spiral notebook of poetry, songs and lyrics. After my mom would turn the lights out in my room following our “goodnights”, I would scramble to find my pen, my siphon as entire melodies and full lyrics tumbled out of my head and heart onto the paper so fast I could barely write quickly enough to collect the leak of gushing creativity.

My life has been blessed with the many gifts God has given me to communicate, to compel to entertain and to connect with others through my creative talents. Maya Angelou wrote “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” For 24 years, without a doubt I used every vehicle for communication I knew to tell, what I have always believed to be, stories that need to be told.

But the past three years have been a stark contrast, for me. As a matter of fact, I struggled to find my voice to share with all of you today.

Why has this fountain of inspiration dried up?

Perhaps it was my time in the desert. The great allegorical irony for me in my journey to know Christ better as a Catholic is that the most inspirational and toughest of times have always seemed to correlate with the Lenten season: Jesus, parched and alone in the great desert with only temptation and his faith to guide him.

I was living on the other side of the country and living in the desert the first time I was assaulted. It was in that very desert, both a physical and psychological one at that point, alone and with very little support that I came to almost succumb to the choking isolationism. I felt lost and like there was no relief in sight. The canvas artwork a service team member had painted for me the year before felt like an ominous warning sign that I had missed along as it read “In the desert you face yourself, and I can think of no worse enemy and no better friend.”

By the time I had fled to the physical safety of Northern Virginia though, I could hardly eat. I couldn't hold a full-time job. I felt aimless in all of my attempts to accept and cope with the new pace of my everyday life.

What I hadn't realized was that it was almost easier to cope with the pain in the desolation of the desert because it made sense out there in

the barren wilderness. I could have never dreamed how immensely painful it would be to bring that very desert that was within myself into my new life.

One of my greatest struggles was trying to find some relatable aspect of my experience that I could translate creatively into one of my artistic mediums of choice. For most of my life, my ability to translate the pain of my experiences into art had been almost a second-nature response.

I felt heartbroken: I would sit down at the piano and write a song. I felt isolated: I would pull out that trusty red notebook (by then in its 3rd edition) and write a poem. If I felt lost: I would “write myself” into my answer. But this time things are different. This time, I required a creative partner.

Through coming to the Victims & Survivors events, I have been able to talk aloud in the way I would normally outline an artistic endeavor of mine. Whether or not you have realized it, your compelling, unfiltered honesty has been the most positive soundboard I could have ever dreamt of. As a self-proclaimed storyteller, it has been listening to your stories, which has helped God transform my loneliness.

Thank you for helping me to write my story today because I could not have done it without you.

INVITING GOD INTO YOUR ALONENESS

A Reflection by STM

First I would like to thank everyone for being here today, especially those who are here for the very first time. Every journey begins with the first step and healing is one the most remarkable journeys you will take in your lifetime. And I would like to thank everyone who has made this retreat possible.

Aloneness is a very deep abyss in the sea of survival. It can consume us, we can drown in it, we can try to stay afloat till we are at sink or swim. We can flail about, hoping someone will rescue us or we can learn to tread water, which we will do for awhile. Then we will learn to swim stronger to the top instead of letting ourselves sink further to the bottom. We will reach for the SUN, for the light, little by little, instead of letting the DARKNESS consume and control us. We will find meaningful life jackets that will keep us from drowning in our own despair. Little by little we will relinquish our dependence on others, and sometimes, reluctantly give in to the one who loves us most of all, to learn more about his WHY.

There was a time, a very long time that I felt I had no mouth, no voice, so my pen became my voice – a window to the feelings of being abused, betrayed and unprotected as a child and adolescent, a view of

my healing soul. So now I share this with you in the hopes that you will find courage, strength, love and ultimately peace.

We have been hurt so much and so deep

It is no wonder that God's angels weep

For you

For me

For our unseen destiny

A pain so etching

So perpetual

Always there

Yet

Denied

Stifled

Choked

A hole in the soul

So endless

Timeless

Findless

Covered

Undiscovered

Burning

And returning

I know
I've been there
I have lived there a long time
I have built steps, one by one
Rising to the top
To someday touch the sun

Yes, they have crumbled
Time and time again
Until one day I determined
It was finally my time to mend my heart and soul
So that complete and whole
I could finally
Once and for all
Climb out of this lonely empty place
Of my lost
Childhood soul

While you may feel like you are not loved, cared for and respected, I want you to know that you are, in ways you cannot even begin to imagine. I knew I would never find the nurturing and love I so longed for from my parents, my abusers so I took small steps in getting to know God, learning what it meant to be a child of God, worthy of His love.

It was about this same time that I grew to understand God is inside of me, just as He is in every living thing. I also grew to understand that by loving God within my soul, I was also learning to love myself. I discovered that I am worthy of love and acceptance, which opened my heart to the healing power of God, and ultimately to being able to forgive those who had caused me so much heartache and pain.

I don't think God needs an invitation into our aloneness, our abandonment, our guilt, our shame, our doubt, our anxiety, our pain and suffering; I think quite the contrary is more of the Truth. I think He is already there and has been from the beginning. I know He has a greater plan, one far greater than I could possibly imagine, even though, I have to admit, I have spent so much time resisting Him, thinking that it is my Will that is most important. I am reminded 1st Corinthians, Chapter 2 Verse 9 about THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND which HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."

What is God inviting us into? What has God prepared for us or perhaps the question should be what is God preparing us for? What is the Truth that He wants us to learn and know? How can we turn something so remarkably sad, violating and painful into His Goodness,

His Purpose, His Way, so we can Heal and help others on their healing journey.

We are His caterpillars of Resurrection, of Rebirth. Little caterpillars isolated in our own little cocoon, on this healing journey, never really sure of the outcome, but He knows, as He wraps us with His silken threads of Courage, Strength, Compassion, Understanding, Love and Forgiveness. He knows His plans for us when we finally come out of the cocoon of healing, ready to spread the wings of His Grace.

For those you who are at the beginning of your journey, I thank God that He brought you here. For those still in the cocoon of His healing, stand strong and know He is with you. For those of you who have blossomed and are spreading your wings, do not be afraid for He is the wind beneath your wings. And to the butterflies who have spread their wings in His Grace, God Bless You as you share your Nurturing Healing Wisdom with each and every one of us here today.

This is a safe haven for your wounded soul, a beautiful sanctuary to let yourself blossom and grow into the beautiful child of God that you are. God Bless You.

SOLITUDE

A Reflection by Fr. Fiorelli

In this first section of our retreat I'd like to share some reflections about inviting God into your lives. In other words, I would like to start our retreat by talking about creating sacred places in your lives.

Psychic and emotional isolation was helpful for some of you during the period of abuse. It distanced you somewhat from the pain and shame that was being imposed on you by others. Yet, it also tended to prevent you from engaging in the usual give-and-take of relationships within family and society. Sadly, even this distance was wise for some of you, because many family and social settings, including some church communities, were not safe either. Yet, here you are, an adult survivor, living an adult life, but at times still trapped inside that isolation despite being surrounded by many loving family members and friends.

Mystics and saints across the centuries have encouraged us to seek a quiet space apart from others where we may commune with God. Yet, for some survivors, the idea of a quiet space alone can be a source of anxiety. Many of you have learned that keeping very busy can hold “the elephant at bay.” Keeping busy lessens the ache; keeping busy helps you to forget the pain –at least for a time. Keeping busy becomes, as it were, a hedge against how unsafe “sacred space” can feel.

So the question of how to invite God into your aloneness is really about how to create a sense of sanctuary in your adult lives, a place where being alone feels safe. This may be very difficult for those of you who were abused within the Church, for sacred spaces may once have been very unsafe spaces indeed for you. Yet, a sense of safety is elusive for all survivors of abuse in varied and individual ways. Restoring a sense of safety is a fundamental step in learning self-care.

One way to invite God into your aloneness is to set up a sacred space in your home as a tangible step toward restoring a sense of sanctuary in your life. You may find it helpful to create a place into which, any time you desire, you can go and feel safe and secure while spending time with the One with whom you are always loved and safe. This space may be a little corner of a room or, if possible, a little room itself where one can go to pray or read or just be “alone with the Alone” for a little while, even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of a large, loud, and rambunctious family. That space can be very simply furnished with perhaps a candle, a crucifix, and the Bible. Or it can be filled to the brim with all those things that center us or comfort us or remind us of what is good and true and beautiful. Your sacred space may be in your garden or at a special juncture in your daily walk. One’s holy space is an expression of individual creativity, which is something you have already exercised in abundance by finding ways to survive your ordeal. From the

spiritual strength gained in this sacred space, you may deepen your reliance on God. In time, you may find it possible to rely on Him more broadly so as to expand your safe space to include more and more places and more and more people.

Communing with God is not limited to sacred spaces, however. One cannot always be physically in that safe and quiet place. For that reason, you might also rely on your creative imagination to design an “inner” sanctuary for when you find yourself in unquiet places. Your imagination can take you to this inner sanctum, or it may transport you back to the sacred space you have set aside at home. St. Francis de Sales used his imagination this way, retiring from time to time for a few moments during the day to the pierced side of the Lord, resting just beneath His Sacred Heart. He was renewed there in both body and spirit.

You might also consider the idea of the “cloistered heart.” It’s the approach of a Salesian group of lay people who lead very busy lives. They are totally immersed in the many different marketplaces of the modern world, places from which they cannot physically remove themselves. What they do is keep their hearts cloistered. That is, they commit to keeping their hearts quieted, stilled, and hidden, even in midst of the busiest of days, surrounded by the peoples, noises, and distractions of their many worlds of family, work, and play. This takes a certain mindful awareness and an ability to pray with confidence in very

brief instances. Yet, it is within the quiet stillness of their own hearts, despite the noise all around them, that they meet God and converse with Him. As part of your survival mechanisms, you may have created rich, interior, and hidden lives, away from dysfunctional settings. So this idea of a cloistered heart may be quite comfortable to you.

Jesus made an invitation to such a place when he invited his disciples to “come away by yourselves to an out-of-the-way place and rest a little.” He knew the importance of quieting down, of centering, and of just relaxing with the Lord. There, one is refreshed, renewed, comforted, and readied for whatever follows. Many good things happen when one is alone with God in a safe and sacred space. In that sacred space we are recreated, renewed and refreshed.

SECOND SECTION:

Welcoming God into Our Relationships

(Three survivors offer their reflections, followed by a reflection by Fr. Fiorelli.)

INVITING GOD INTO OUR RELATIONSHIPS

A Reflection by FS

Good Morning, I am ___. From the ages of eight through twelve, I was abused episodically by the family dentist. And, again, just once, on my sixteenth birthday, by a Marianist brother at a prep school where I

was a new boarder. No one knew of these happenings until I was 62; I am now 67.

I came to my faith journey through a remarkable series of grace-filled events. Four years ago, a friend urged me to go and just sit in Church. I hadn't been to Church in about 30 years. So I did on a beautiful Friday afternoon in September, right here at St. Agnes parish... for about three uncomfortable minutes. Then I got up and started to leave by the same door I entered, but it *wouldn't* open.

I spent the next 20 minutes walking throughout the church. And thinking. Then I went back to that same door and tried it again. This time it open —because I pushed instead of pulled. So, God *definitely* has a sense of humor.

I came out into a small memorial of about 100 brass plates each inscribed with the name of a baby who had died. My eyes focused on one —“Rose”— the name of my mother, then 92 and terminally ill in Chicago. After my eyes cleared of tears, I noticed 1 item in color on a shelf of pamphlets and brochures in the vestibule. It was the only item in color there.

It was the life of Father Chaminade, the founder of the boarding school where I was abused! There was only the one copy. I was stunned. Reading it, my tears turned into sobs. When I could see again, what came into focus was a small poster taped on the wall to the left of the

edge of the shelf where that Life of Father Chaminade had been propped up.

It was announcing a first-ever retreat for survivors of child sexual abuse, sponsored by the Diocese and facilitated by the Bishop. It was in eight days.

IN RELATIONSHIP WITH A SURVIVOR, AS A GIFT

A Reflection by ER

I was asked to talk to you all today about what it's like to be the significant other of a survivor, if I started at the beginning I would likely make it part of the way through the "A"s in the dictionary before I'd hit my limit.

I can only say this; every day I wake up I couldn't be happier. My life with my survivor is, in a word, extraordinary. It takes an incredible amount of strength to carry on as one does. Honestly, I'm inspired. I'm inspired to face my personal traumas and difficulties head on the same way all of you bravely carry on your lives as survivors or supporters of survivors.

There's the old saying that "it takes two". "It takes two to tango" "two peas in a pod" "two heads are better than one"; though when it comes to support there really is no limit; the more the merrier; as seen here today, there are many of us. As a support person I am not without

flaw, or struggle and strife. There is no rule book that dictates what happened before I met my survivor. Only that we are here and we are together.

However I am only one of many “twos” that supports my “one”. It is this, the strength in numbers game that allows all of us to carry on. We should never be alone. We are not alone. It is our faith then that binds us. That brings us together and keeps our internal compasses, our hearts, pointing in the right direction. Salvation.

How do we get there? There are no wrong answers, only the ones that work. The best way to continue to survive is to think positive and focus on the healing process and the good that comes from being here. Do I think about it every day? Yes, daily. I wake up and I tell myself, “Wow, I really love my survivor. They are strong, they are brave, and I am blessed to know them”. I am, however, charged with an important task, to stay strong and never let go. To focus on the future and to remind my survivor that I am here for them day and night, every day, every hour, every minute, every second, no one more important than the rest.

There are many ways that can bring us down, or cause us to doubt. It's easy to give up, to stop trying, to let the pain win. But why bother? We've made it this far. While life on earth as mortals is not eternal, there is light ahead. Eternal Life with the One.

RELATIONSHIPS

A Reflection by Fr. Fiorelli

In this section, I'd like to share some thoughts about inviting God into your relationships with others and to see that, by making those relationships sacred spaces, you can also heal them.

The first thing to note is this: in the abuse some relationships greatly failed you. Adults are supposed to protect a child, and it's natural for a child to depend on adults to do just that. Abuse broke --shattered!-- that sacred trust. Now, this brokenness may come about for many different reasons, including that parents themselves sometimes are victims of grooming by an abuser. The hurt of that failure may be short-lived for some, but may last a lifetime for others. For the child or young person, this is the terrible lesson that was learned in the moment of abuse: "Moving forward, *no one* can ever be counted on or trusted again."

Such a lesson often makes survivors very independent and self-reliant adults. These traits are valued in our world and can at times be very helpful indeed. But they may also create boundaries between friends, family members and spouses that can last a lifetime. Much of what survivors learn about being guarded and distrustful makes perfect sense in the unsafe settings of abuse, but as life permits you to have a safer life these defenses tend to outlast their usefulness.

In the usual order of things, as people grow older, they tend to rely on the memory of safety as children to help them build adult relationships with people who are now their equals. They have a rich well from the past upon which to draw when these people at times fall short or even fail them. For survivors of abuse, however, that well is not full of memories of safety but of danger, confusion and false promises. When, as survivors, people upon whom you depend fall short, it can be very hard for you to regain your footing again. At those times, it's natural for old defenses to shoot up and once again come into play. You are simply shifting back into a self-protective mode. In a word, shortfalls in relationships can rock your adult world and leave you feeling like you did as a child with nowhere else to turn but inward.

So, I'd like to point you to a relationship that will never fail you but will be, instead, a far more effective source of protection and reliability than any of us can ever manage. It is our relationship with God. We believe that we have been created in God's image. Jesus reveals that God is a Trinity of Persons, a "Community" of Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our relationship with God, then, is already also a relationship with a "community" of others.

By inviting God into our relationships with others, we potentially turn those relationships into a partnership with Perfect Love. In this way, our relationships with others can also become sacred spaces for us.

We begin by building and strengthening our relationship with our Triune God, however slowly that may be for some of us because we first must come to grips with the theodicy question: where was God *then*? Once that thorny question has been grappled with and successfully dealt with, our God-relationship can become the most reliable and the most healing for us. It offers insights and help in being ourselves as people who are created for relationships, first with God and then with others such as families, communities and Church.

As an image of what is good and holy, a relationship with God can also help survivors to grapple with broken relationships for which you must find your own unique ways of making peace so that you are able to move on to new, healthier and more uplifting relationships. God as Community is at the core of your efforts -- often through spiritual guidance and/or therapy-- to find, nourish and develop healthy and holy relationships with others.

As you enjoy a deeper relationship with God as Community, you will naturally find that God is always to be found in relationship with others: He Himself is a Community of Three Persons and he has always related in human history to other communities such as the people of Israel and, later, the Church of Christ. Once you find more about God-in-relationships, you'll discover others in relationships as well. That's why it is critical to begin any relationships with others as grounded in

your primary relationship with the Holy Trinity. With the Triune God as central to you every relationship, there will be safety, and hope, and grace. This will help you to begin to fill that often empty well of a painful childhood, and to replenish it with more and more healthy relationships as you grow out of a painful past and into a hope-filled life in the present.

THIRD SECTION:

Welcoming God into Our Toughest Times

(Two survivors offer their reflections, followed by a reflection by Fr. Fiorelli.)

ON FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

A Reflection by MJF

Q: What's the hardest part of my personal struggle?

A: Healing; the sense of hopelessness, the emptiness that opens me to feelings of fear, anger, betrayal, and lack of ability to trust

Q: So, given all the negatives, how can I ever hope to heal?

A: I have come to understand that If I can forgive, really forgive from my heart (not at arm's length, not at the end of the proverbial 10 foot pole), I will have come a long way in my healing process. And yes, I also need to accept and forgive myself.

Basically, forgiveness includes understanding where someone came from, but it is NOT the same as excusing someone for their behavior.

I think of Jesus during His ministry saying "love one another as I have loved you..." And I take a look at Jesus on the cross, saying "Father forgive them..." ...And then I put the two quotes together.

When I put love and forgiveness together, I "see" peace; the peace Jesus promised. While most of me wants to hold the perpetrators at arm's length, I think my peace will come when I can open myself to love them. I know I'm not "there" yet, so in the interim, I've been asking God to love them for me; I've asked Him to use me as His conduit; to send His love through me to them, and at the same time, open me up so that someday I too will be able to love as He loves.

Q: Have I succeeded? Did it work? Is it working?

A: I'm working on it. I'm not "there" yet, but currently, I'm more at peace; my flashbacks have decreased, I see that some folks like to hang around with me, they like my company; I can now joke, now laugh, and mean it; I'm sleeping better. As I said, I'm more at peace.

MJF'S SHOW AND TELL: (1) Wood carving of Jesus washing Judas' feet; "can I do no less?" and (2) Forgive & Forget by Lewis Smedes; a book I picked up in a bookstore self-help section years ago, and recently got the strength to start reading.

HOW SAINT BERNADETTE HAS ASSISTED ME

A Reflection by MC

Who is Bernadette? She lived in Lourdes, France and had Marian apparitions between Feb. and July 1858, when she was 14 years old.

Mary taught Bernadette how to make the sign of the cross. Later when Bernadette made the sign of the cross it made a big impression on everyone. So now, as part of my prayer life, I try to focus on making the sign of the cross in a thoughtful manner. I have found that this is harder than one would imagine. So I often redo the sign of the cross so to proclaim Christ's sacrifice for me.

Bernadette was a young teenager who had a learning disability, which delayed her receiving her first communion and confirmation. Her life example gave me a stronger sense of purpose, learning both by developing my prayer life and overcoming my own learning disability by reading more books.

Bernadette accepted the grace from Christ to overcome challenges that came with her mission that Mary asked of her. I wake up early each morning to say my rosary and focus my thoughts on allowing the grace that I need to be closer to Christ. This means that I am a servant to those I encounter each day. Every morning when I wake up my first thought is

to thank and praise God for this new day. When I pray I focus on how I am willing to offer all my activities to be uplifting and joyful.

Last, Bernadette was selected by Mary because there was no one else lesser than she. Daily I remind myself that it is more important to pray for the coming of God's kingdom than to feel abandoned. So, am I part of the problem or part of the solution?

CHALLENGES

A Reflection by Fr. Fiorelli

In this last section of our retreat I'd like to share a few reflections on how the challenges we face, no matter how daunting, can –with God's grace and hard work and much patience on our part --become sacred spaces in our lives.

Romans 8:28 says that “All things work for good for those who love the Lord and seek after His purposes.” Your efforts to recover from child sexual abuse and to explore ways to deepen your relationship with God are certainly instances of loving the Lord and “seeking after His purposes.” His purpose is for you to be in a relationship with Him, a relationship that saves you from all evil, including even the evil that befell you as a victim of child sexual abuse.

This scripture verse is often used to refer to how, even though God does not will the sufferings of his faithful people, He can nevertheless

use those sufferings to help them and others. As we heard in the survivors' testimonies in the prior section, there is potential for great love and beauty, even light, from the horror and darkness that they have endured. Their testimonies are just a few examples of God's Spirit at work in your lives, lifting you out from what has happened to you.

So, how do you cooperate with the grace that God is offering you in the midst of any current hardships that you may be facing? Well, many saints and mystics have embodied the answer to that question by practicing a prayerful quieting and inner calming so as to be better prepared to hear God's word. As we know all too well, your sufferings, your efforts to recover, and the hardship of life can be "noisy" or at least so full of commotion that it is very hard to become quiet and still within oneself. Ordinary daily life is full of challenges and "noises" of all sorts. Yet, we need God to face both the big and the little challenges of life. We may have, as noted earlier, a sacred place in our home or we may have committed ourselves to the nurturing of a cloistered heart, but what happens when the tumult of confusion and pain presses in and makes impossible the settling into a quiet state so as to hear God's voice?

The Scriptural incident frequently cited in support of this quieting is the story of God's appearance to Elijah on the mountain. The Lord did not appear to the prophet, as one might have expected, in the mighty wind or in the powerful earthquake or in the roaring fire but in "a still

small voice ... in the sound of sheer silence.” As you grapple with the fallout of abuse in your lives, you are likely to feel metaphorically the earth quaking under your feet or the buffetings of a mighty wind or the searing pain of a burning fire. At times, you might feel almost overcome by the winds and burning pain of difficult memories. Yet, even under these circumstances it is still possible to learn how to hear God when he speaks ever so quietly of his love for you.

What do we do in sacred space? Sometimes we sit with God, and sometimes we wait for God. Sometimes when we wait we are given peace, but often when we wait on God we are gripped with strong emotions or confused thoughts. Consider how, following the horror of the Cross, the distraught disciples gathered together in a locked upper room, frightened, confused, and uncertain about what to do next or where to turn.

This is not an unfamiliar state for many of you. Many survivors, even when they are with friends or family members, find themselves hiding from imminent harm. You may be hiding from the emotional storms that erupt when one or more family members begin to face the abuse of the past. You may be hiding from a sense of emotional danger that can occur when first confronting behaviors that run amok in your life. Or, it may be simply by speaking the hitherto unutterable truth of abuse that you feel the same dread and fright that the abuser once used

to keep you silenced as a child victim. In any event, in such quandaries, you lock yourself away in fear. The difference now is that you are also able to sense, even under those circumstances, that God is near and that you are in His presence.

Consider the disciples. The first one to break through the locked doors of their hiding place is the risen Jesus himself. He comforts them, lifting from them the heavy burden of their sins of betrayal, denial and cowardice. He shows them the meaning of the wounds of his Passion in hands, feet, and side: they are evidence of what he has suffered for them so that they will never be alone or abandoned, even if not being alone and not being abandoned looks and feels very different from what they imagined they would be like. Then, Jesus breathes upon them the Holy Spirit of his Shalom. Among all the many images of Jesus's rescue of human beings in hiding, here is one which you can imagine again and again. You have such a room or space to which you can withdraw whenever you are startled or triggered. You do not have to open those doors. You just have to wait for Jesus to come and be willing to let Him in when he comes.

When Jesus stands before the disciples, he doesn't stop at reaching into their deepest hiding and fear. He also commissions them to bring his healing peace and reconciling love to the world. Many survivors experience release from hiding and shame in a way that reveals the life-

giving work of grace that prompts them to want to help those around them with the precious and hard-won gifts that have come from their sufferings. This is not something the world easily understands, but, as many of you have found, it is something that the world badly needs. Indeed, *you* are very much needed. All that you have become from the suffering of abuse through the journey to recovery is a precious gift for the world. And as you further cooperate with God's grace in transforming your whole life into a sacred space where He may come and dwell, you will become more and more a fount overflowing with grace and blessings for many!

