



Open Letter to Victim Assistance Coordinators

T. Pitt Green (pseudonym)

Teresa Hartnett / Spirit Fire

This is a brief Advent reflection in gratitude for your work for survivors of abuse by clergy. Little seems to be said about the good work of women and men who, like yourself, are committed victim assistance coordinators, or survivor ministers.

People outside Catholic circles are unaware of reforms the Church has been advancing to right its wrongs, so it's no surprise they have no idea of your role in the healing underway in various places in our Church. A bit surprising is how many Catholics are unaware, too. I wonder if, among those Catholics who do know of something of the reforms, you like I encounter intellectual rebuttal where evil has cast its shadow. I avoid those debates, having staked my recovery, indeed my life, on the Cross as the only antidote to the impact of evil has had on me.

As a minister to survivors, you seem, to me, to have taken the path better than intellectual defense. You have found courage not to deny the suffering and evil of the Cross. In that way, we are connected, you and I, in our uncommon knowledge of the violent and random and life-altering nature of child sexual abuse.

As a survivor, I have been compelled to grapple with this reality. It was not my choice. Yet, you have chosen to venture into our difficult paths. You are often the first Christian witness to our suffering, past and present. Or, the first witness within the Church.

Your witness extends to wounds within families and among friends. Your witness pours you a sometimes large portion of our darkness and pain. It can't be easy to return daily to your own life where our realities are thankfully not commonly comprehended and unfortunately largely denied. I've notice that, in seeking to offer us spiritual companionship, you have accepted a degree of spiritual isolation.

But, you do more than *not deny* the Cross. You affirm the Cross. Recovery books encourage survivors to live by affirmation. These, while helpful, pale by comparison to what you affirm. The Cross

has singular healing impact, as hinted the seraph in the desert. You have chosen to hold this healing affirmation up for us.

There can be no doubt there is a price for you, driving your own faith into deeper challenges. The decision to accept this challenge is not one easily understood. By contrast, I quite improbably survived darkness in youth, so I have first-hand knowledge of my absolutely dependence on the triumph of Christ over suffering and evil. My being a survivor affirms the Cross without my speaking a word. Yet, had I been given a choice, I would have chosen comfortable ignorance or denial. You did not. You opted into this darkness. After over a decade helping other survivors, I consider your decision and am still moved to wonder. And, wonder reminds me of Advent.

Advent has me thinking about how darkness, in revealing the nature of our faith, also reveals the uncelebrated gift you bring to the manger.

Darkness is most often seen as the loss of light, even the triumph of evil. It is in darkness we most often lose our way. Darkness is like the ignorance of people who could not see the King born to them. How is it you bear unique witness to the King born in the manger? You have chosen not to look away from the Cross. You have chosen to witness pain somewhere where even the Church can hesitate to look with confidence.

Your – and my – reward is that Jesus defeated the darkness. We are certain of the Light of the World. This is true in particular for survivors who often find holidays painful. The wood of the manger may remain the wood of the Cross for us – and so for you. You opted in, to wrap our suffering in your prayer and your daily activity. Meanwhile, our survival is a testimony to His saving graces, one holiday after the next, one dark episode after the next. Even as I write this, I know it isn't as prettily lived as it is written or read, but it is true in any event.

Into a cold and bitter and unknowing darkness God sent His Son as a child. The Son of God humbled Himself simply to reach the best of humans through the vulnerability of an infant. This is a discomfoting idea for us, for vulnerability was – even is – a state of danger.

Gazing on the manger, I can feel the danger Jesus faces. Survivors know acutely how not all adults are safe. We, quite reasonably, have cultivated a high level of distrust and even complex defenses to avoid the choice of the Son of God at Christmas to let Himself be vulnerable. And, reasonably, we eschew the invitation to be vulnerable even to God at times. But, then, receiving through faith and with trust the love of God defies reason, just like evil defies the intellectual debate.

Here is where your ministry seems, to me, to make its home. Like the Son of God, you opt into the encounter with our complexities to return, in some measure, the best of human kindness toward the wounded child within us. Many would wonder how reasonable of you that is. Any number of circumstances may make you wonder at times.

There can be no doubt that you, who have opted to serve survivors, are placing a very personal gift – from you to the Holy Infant – in the manger. As the drummer boy had in his meagre estate only a drum on which to play, you may reach into the spiritual poverty at the heart of your work and return to God an affirmation of the Cross and His sovereignty, as your service helps news of His Victory reach even into the dark spaces of abuse and betrayal. In the darkness of what has happened, every bit as much as the moon offers a beacon light of the sun, you are the Light.

So, thank you. And, while I have shared this Advent reflection with those of you in contact with me over the years, please feel free to share this with a colleague who may find it adds a touch of light, a tiny star in the wondrous darkness, to their Advent reflections and renewal.

May God bless you and your work.

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

This originally was a letter sent to many Victim Assistance Coordinators for the Advent Season. 2015 Copyright © Teresa Hartnett (Teresa Pitt Green, pseudonym). For conditions on which this may be reprinted and distributed for free, please see SpiritFire.Live/reprints. Individual copies for survivors of abuse, their family members, priests, sisters, deacons and other ministries may be made for free provided they are not resold. Page 3 of 3.