


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Glimpses of Hope: Reflections on Journeying with Survivors of Clergy Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

Drawing on Roman Catholic and ecumenical expertise, this article takes an honest look at the experiences and hopes of those abused. Many in the churches assume that victims seek financial compensation or legal redress. However, research indicates that many victims primarily seek truth and justice as a means of closure and that their struggles with church leadership arise when truth and justice are repeatedly withheld. This makes forgiveness near-impossible and often results in the victim being re-traumatized by the systemic re-abuse they experience. Ultimately, there is no substitute for full and genuine meeting with victims, which requires the church to lay aside its power and authority and engage with humility and proper deference to the victims abused at the hands of the church. Without such openness, the victims cannot move on, and neither can the churches.

Keywords: Forgiveness; justice; power; Roman catholic; sexual abuse; truth; witness

This essay has been co-authored by a victim-survivor of clergy sexual abuse, Mark Joseph Williams, who serves the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, USA, as Special Advisor, and by Father Hans Zollner, a Jesuit priest in the Roman Catholic tradition who is the Director of The Institute of Anthropology – Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care (IADC), based in Rome, Italy within the Pontifical Gregorian University – an organization committed to ‘Safeguarding’ throughout the world, in and out of the Church. We are honoured to contribute to this special edition of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* in memory of Bishop Alan Wilson, who was known across the Anglican community and beyond as “a tireless campaigner and advocate for people who have suffered abuse and those on the margins”¹ – and in his life and ministry was, beyond any question, an extraordinary witness to hope, even in the face of much resistance and darkness.

¹<https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/bishop-of-buckingham-was-true-friend-who-will-be-so-rely-missed-say-abuse-survivors#:~:text=Throughout%20his%20ministry%20Rt%20Rev,weren't%20being%20listened%20to> (Accessed June 28 2024).



On 27 April 2019, I (HZ) received this email: ‘My name is Alan Wilson, and I am area bishop of Buckingham in the Anglican Diocese of Oxford, UK. (...) I have a special interest in the way the Church treats survivors of abuse, which I have pursued in close collaboration with my colleague and chaplain, Canon Rosie Harper. (...) We recognise many common themes, interest and experiences between our context and that of the Catholic Church’s. This was how we got to know each other. Subsequently, Alan participated in a European Conference in Zagreb on ‘Formation and Prevention - Power as Service’ in September 2019 and, together with Rosie, came to Rome a few times to teach our students in the residential Safeguarding programme at the IADC in Rome.

In the meeting of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission in Canterbury at the end of January 2024, I (HZ) was invited to deliver a presentation on ‘Safeguarding - Theological and Pastoral Perspectives’ to nearly 60 Anglican and Catholic bishops. *As in all my presentations, the voices of victims and survivors of clergy sexual abuse are not only quoted, but they are also incorporated in the way they have influenced my feelings, reflections and activities, which are my focus in conferences, workshops and papers.* In this article, however, I am going to focus on the encounter and journeying with those who have been affected by clergy sexual abuse and who have shared with me. Their experience and expectations and my own reflections on them have been changing over the years and surely will continue to do so. And having the witness of my clergy abuse survivor friend, (MJW), with whom I have been blessed to journey together, will add to the inherent message of hope in these pages. As MJW wrote in an article:²

My witness is simply this: Listen to the voices of victims and survivors. By listening we all walk together; along the route of life we must encourage forgiveness but not exoneration. As the recently deceased Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa wrote in the *The Book of Forgiving*, “Forgiveness feels as if a weight has been lifted off you and you are free to let go of the past and move forward in your life. It may not be found in a single act of grace or a simple string of words, but rather in a process of truth and reconciliation.”

On the one hand, this reflection is intended to provide some points of reference for those who live and work with those affected by abuse in church and society. On the other hand, we want to signal to victims-survivors *the internal experience of non-affected people when they meet victims.* It is important for us to emphasize three points that apply to the entire report.

First, just as each person is unique, each person affected by abuse has their own history of abuse and their own experiences of the personal, social and religious impact of abuse. Equally unique is the experience of how the people around the survivor, church representatives and the church and social environment react to the abuse or to speaking up, reporting or denouncing abuse. Therefore, the use of phrases such as ‘the victims want ...’, ‘... demand ...’ or ‘... have

²I am an abuse survivor. I believe the synod will teach the church how to listen’, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/03/11/catholic-sexual-abuse-synod-242529> (Accessed June 28 2024).

experienced . . .’ should be treated with caution. On the other hand, generalizing statements cannot be completely avoided.

Secondly, what those affected by abuse expect in terms of attention, care, encounters, support and financial compensation is also very different. The German word ‘Aufarbeitung’, which is used to refer to the proper handling of past and present crimes, has six different nuances of meaning.³ An important reason for the disappointments, misunderstandings and tensions between victims, secondary victims, the general public or the media on the one hand and the church leadership or quite a few believers on the other is that the various aspects of ‘coming to terms’ – including recognition that a crime has been committed; financial and/or psychological and/or spiritual care and support; learning processes and structural changes – are not recognized or that it is assumed that the other side has the same terms and the same ideas of what ‘coming to terms’ entails. Recently, a victim from Germany wrote to me (HZ) to say that, after a long struggle, they had been awarded an exceptionally high amount of compensation by the diocese responsible. They were happy about it because they can now grow old with more peace of mind. But it was not the money they expected and needed most; for them, honest and empathetic ongoing support from those responsible in the diocese would have been much more important.

For me (MJW), the journey was never about the pursuit of a monetary settlement but rather about discovering interior peace in the same Church that brought so much hurt. In other words, the Church that hurt me is the same Church that has healed me, in the sacramental grace of the Eucharist. The truth does set you free. Hope is real. Hope is Christ. We all live the paschal journey, especially the abused in the Church. Victims can truly become survivors of renewed faith when they feel accepted and loved within their respective congregations.

Third, we make no claim to completeness or comprehensive inclusion of all aspects and all points of view that would be possible for our topic. We do not wish to offend anyone, but we would like to honestly describe what we have discovered individually, in dialogue with each other and with many victims of abuse, and what we consider important when it comes to meeting victims-survivors. When it comes to abuse and its cover-up, no one is neutral. You cannot *not* communicate (cf. Paul Watzlawick): silence, repression or denial are also ways of reacting and communicating the personal or institutional reaction.

How do those Affected by Abuse Experience Themselves and How do They Express their Experience?

Every person is, feels and experiences things differently. Those affected by abuse often experience the uniqueness of every human life as an irreversible isolation, as if

³Cf. the English translation of HZ’s article on *Aufarbeitung*: ‘What does it mean to Come to Terms with Abuse? Some Suggestions, in: *Concilium* 59 (2023/4), N° 402, 119–127’. ‘*Aufarbeitung*’, in that article, was translated with ‘coming to terms’, while in English-German dictionaries a number of proposed translations are mentioned: ‘recycling, reappraisal, rehabilitation, regeneration, overhaul, reconditioning, reprocessing’ – all of which are implicit in the German expression and can find appropriate meaningfulness in regard to ‘working through what has happened’.

they were living all alone on an island and no one is able to come to this island or to understand the living conditions on their island and make themselves known to the inhabitants of other islands. How victims-survivors talk about it is strongly influenced by how much shame, reticence or insecurity they feel. This can include fear or mistrust of themselves, of relationships, of the world itself and of God. This is why it is so important, when meeting those affected by sexual violence, to visit them on their 'island' and listen to the story of the abuse – if they want to talk about it – and its often lengthy and complex consequences.

Genuine, authentic listening with heart and head, with the willingness to listen to incoherent or redundant stories and to stay 'with it', even if anger, sadness or other emotions are strongly expressed. The range of feelings and emotional expressions of those affected by abuse is very broad: from deep depression to violent aggression, from childlike trust to hostile mistrust, everything can be represented. Aggression is often only possible after a long time, because only then can it be allowed.

The more the church and clergy have been glorified, or the more the victim has identified with the church or the ecclesiastical context, the more violent and expressive it can become. Isolation and the feeling of the inevitability of one's own suffering are elements that often lead to behaviour that is reminiscent of a fatal competitive situation. 'My suffering is more severe than yours' and 'I can speak for victims better than the others'. This is expressed in many different ways: Adults versus children, women versus men, the publicly known victims and the hidden ones, those affected in the ecclesiastical or spiritual versus victims in the non-spiritual and non-religious sphere. From the outside, it is sometimes difficult to understand and hard to bear how survivors may even inflict further wounds on each other or that there are rifts and hostilities between many victims' initiatives. This danger seems to be even greater if there is no (longer) a sufficiently large, unifying interest, such as the fight against a perpetrator, a cover-up, an institution (diocese, religious order, school, etc.) or the struggle for financial recognition or other support. The extent to which this is connected with being affected by abuse and the extent to which this has to do with the respective social and societal circumstances remains an open question. A lesson from addiction recovery, embraced and lived by MJW for the past twenty years in Alcoholics Anonymous, holds weight to this discussion: 'Identify, don't Compare'; just as persons in recovery have different stories, so do victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse. What is most important is the commonality between persons who have been sexually violated in the Church, not the degree thereof. This common ground achieves connection, encounter and the opportunity for shared healing.

The dilemmas may persist for a lifetime and cannot be resolved once and for all. This may include loneliness and longing for love and partnership; clinging and fear of being abused again; mistrust of and continued idealization of people (often also clergy); abhorrence of the perpetrator and the institution and at the same time the feeling of permanent attachment. *It may also include* the feeling of being constantly at the mercy of others, self-definition as a victim, a survivor or a person affected by abuse (here too there are different preferences among those who have been abused) as well as the claiming of victim status. At the same time may be the desire to be treated not only as a victim but also to be respected and included as a whole person with personal, social and professional competencies.

What Should Be Considered When Meeting Victims?

Human encounters are based on trust, which is often noticeably thin and fragile in encounters with victims when it comes to dealing with representatives of the institution where the abuse took place. In addition, there is always a risk of re-traumatization: a word, a gesture, a look, a sensation such as smell or a perceived change in mood or attention can reopen the traumatizing event – and the person affected finds themselves in the same state as at the moment of the crime: helpless, overwhelmed, alone, confused and frightened.

For all those who work with victims, the most important attitude is to engage in a process that is open and unpredictable in a particular way, without preconceived expectations. In other words, it is about constantly practising new attentiveness and willingness to change and recalibrating closeness and distance, knowledge and new learning, listening and always listening anew and ‘freshly’. The key here is to be prepared for a constant review of reliability and trustworthiness. This is more than understandable for the person concerned but can be a difficult test for the counsellor. It can be perceived as excessive if it is carried out or communicated too strictly, too often or too abruptly. Even if the counsellor thinks he/she has done everything right or ‘everything the same as before’, massive mistrust can be triggered, which may even lead to the relationship being broken off.

From a depth psychology perspective, particular attention should be paid to countertransference: How does a counsellor (or family member, friend or colleague) perceive and differentiate which of the feelings expressed or experienced including anger, rage, euphoria, speechlessness or hopelessness are their own feelings and which are being projected onto *them* by the person concerned? How does the person providing support deal with the fact that previous experiences and expectations always play a role in every human encounter – the more “original” (stronger, earlier) they are anchored, the more intense and unfiltered they can be felt today – and how can they understand this, accept it appropriately and process it within themselves as far as possible?

In counselling and working together, the question arises as to how a good balance can be developed and found between empathic and appropriate – neither too distant nor too close; neither too cool nor too intense – encounters in which there is room for honest and transparent communication.⁴ For many people who work with victims, it is challenging to know how to be particularly sensitive and attentive to the situation of victims and their experiences, how to empathize with them and how to give the kind of feedback that they would give on similar occasions to other interlocutors or colleagues who are not victims of abuse. It takes sensitivity and courage to avoid unintentionally treating victims in a paternalistic manner, as if they were not adults who are responsible for themselves, for fear of hurting them. Thus, this question becomes paramount: ‘How can you be sensitive to victims and at the same time not be overprotective and dishonest?’ One facet of this can be seen in the direct encounter with victims after they have described their suffering and horror, in

⁴Cf. C. Barker et al., The truth project- paper two – using staff training and consultation to inculcate a testimonial sensibility in non-specialist staff teams working with survivors of child sexual abuse, in: *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, published 2023-07-04, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1177622> (Accessed 2024-06-28).

the need to react with verbal and non-verbal empathy on the one hand, but also to bear the unspeakable and ultimately inexpressible in an 'empathic and close' silence.

The great challenge associated with this relationship for both sides – victims-survivors and their caregivers – can be described as endurance: enduring the almost inevitable mutual disappointment that arises from the fact that different worlds of experience and expectation have to be adapted to each other or reconciled in a constant learning process. This is due not only to personal idiosyncrasies, as in any relationship, but also to the lack of a protective layer around the self, which has often been massively and permanently disrupted or injured by the abuse in those affected.

In this respect, the attempt at togetherness can be compared to the task of a bridge builder who, even in rough seas, strong winds and other adverse circumstances, tries to drive pillars of trust into the ground over which a bridge to the islands can be built and which, even if the connecting elements are torn away by storms or floodings of mistrust or disappointment, are so firmly anchored that connecting elements can be placed over them again and again and the bridge can be rebuilt. For many victims-survivors, it is one of the most important experiences when they realize that at least now and then they have the feeling that they are not desolate and alone in their suffering and loneliness on their islands of life, but that at least now and then visitors share their lives with them and begin to understand more their needs, their rhythm and the fragility of their trust.

What can Joint Action Look Like?

There is a widespread perception among churches (but also other institutions) that victims are seen as troublemakers and polluters who provoke scandals and destroy their image. It is true that there is more and more attention and a willingness to open up to those affected by abuse. This is expressed in phrases such as: 'We must see victims', 'We must hear survivors' and 'We must keep an eye on those affected by abuse'. However, the consequences of sexualized violence are still often individualized and those affected are viewed in terms of pathologizing. The fact that this reduced view has long since ceased to correspond to the developments and experiences of at least some of victims-survivors is hardly recognized by the general public, the church or academic research. The processes of victim participation are therefore still often insufficiently defined, coordinated and evaluated. Both victims of sexualized violence and institutions have had little systematic experience of issues relating to victim participation from their respective perspectives.

Victim participation will be more precisely defined if victims and survivors are involved as experts with a wide range of experience, reflective and professional knowledge and are also involved in other contexts such as pastoral, spiritual or liturgical planning and processes. The expertise of those affected by abuse is diverse and includes factors such as gaps in the protection and support system, the development and implementation of guidelines and protection concepts and their evaluation, research into violence and the consequences of violence, the educational and training content of pastoral, educational and medical professions, victim-friendly justice, funding requirements for counselling and support *for* their provision.

Before the start of selective or longer-term cooperation projects, it must be made unmistakably clear that this is not about a given therapy or particular self-help groups. The participants must know what they are getting into, personally, methodologically and institutionally. The goals and tasks of the project (e.g. support for prevention and/or reappraisal, awareness-raising campaigns, public statements and impetus for structural changes) must be clearly stated. Those involved must be clear about their role, their workload, their rights and obligations as well as their remuneration and other benefits (such as supervision).

It is not just a matter of peripheral and occasional involvement of victims-survivors, but of their continuous engagement in decision-making processes. There needs to be structural anchoring, guaranteed independence and adequate human and financial resources. Only when all those involved are psychologically rooted in the desired level of autonomy and influence of those affected by abuse does the participatory attitude begin. Since those not affected by abuse have a different understanding of many social-emotional life situations, the necessary work of persuasion about what participatory thinking ultimately is never ends. Structuring individual and collective changes in attitude and thinking will, if taken seriously, accompany the work process in the long term. To ensure that this does not overlay the work, process support such as supervision and/or other forms of activating competencies must be included as a qualitative component (not only in the event of conflict).

Conclusion

Many statements such as ‘I am very sorry (about the abuse)’ and ‘we very much regret what has happened’ ring hollow if the concerns of victims and survivors continue to be ignored and if those who have failed to fulfil their moral and legal responsibilities duck away. It is probably also due to the fact that people are still reacting to individual cases and no systemic consequences are being drawn. Many in the church – and not just ministers – do not yet realise that a few marginal corrections are not enough. We believe that the expectation of very many within the church, as well as from outside, should be a piercing analysis of the roots of abuse and cover-up. To date, not enough discussion has taken place and essential change is far from complete. The mentality, attitudes and structures that promote or cement a sense of prestige, an over-identification with the institution, an uncritical relationship to authority and power and an immature sexuality can still be discovered in every nook and cranny.⁵ Of course, there are also other experiences and the message seems to be getting through to more and more people in positions of responsibility. But overall, the perception remains that ‘the’ church is first and foremost concerned with itself. Genuine repentance, credible remorse and effective satisfaction look and feel different. Epistemic trust is based on sincerity, transparency and competency.

⁵Cf. Hans Zollner, Faithful and True? The History of Mentalities and the Catholic Church’s Response to the Sexual Abuse Crises, in: Stefan M. Attard/ John A. Berry (Eds.), *Fidelis et Verax. Essays in honour of His Grace Mgr Charles J. Scicluna on the tenth anniversary of his episcopal ordination, Malta 2022*, 601–620.

Today⁶, the participation of victims and survivors is seen as the standard in reappraisal and in many research projects. At the same time, however, we have no *specific* standards and far too few resources and support options that actually enable victim participation. In order not to allow participation to degenerate into something rote or perfunctory, and to prevent victims who have already been exploited in a relationship of dependency from being manipulated and exploited again, it is important that victims are empowered for their involvement and supported in the burdens that arise. This concerns not only financial compensation and the creation of legal regulations that effectively enable such financial recognition payments but also the generous provision of supervision and coaching opportunities for victims-survivors. And in the spirit of the Gospel, the doors of every Church across the world must always remain open for victims-survivors to feel welcomed and experience God's love and mercy like all pilgrims of faith journeying the human path.

Perhaps the lasting spirit of Bishop Alan Wilson provides the true north star for this participation we speak about from the words of one survivor who reflected on his passing: 'He always put the needs of those who had been abused, marginalized and discriminated against above the image and reputation of the Church'.⁷

Instead of speaking of the 'teaching ministry of victims-survivors' and thus exaggerating the role of those affected by abuse, churches should set an active example of support from which society as a whole can learn, so that we can actually benefit and learn lessons from the expertise of those affected by abuse that positively change the quality of our institutions and our projects.⁸ At the same time, these processes of inclusion must always do justice to the dimension of necessary recognition of suffering and injustice.

In essence, it is about our openness to the experience, the concerns and the actual needs of victims and survivors. Concepts as an end in themselves or guidelines as mere fulfilment of requirements help nobody. Concepts and regulations need the participation of those for whom they are made. We continue to walk together as friends: a victim/survivor of clergy abuse and an ordained clergy in the love of our Lord and Redeemer. This makes the difference and fills both with life. Then, and only then, faith is real, healing is a true possibility and glimpses of hope are alive.

⁶'Fazit' (p. 48f) *from*: Jörg M. Fegert/ Wolfgang Stein/Hans Zollner, Herausforderungen bei der Betroffenenbeteiligung – Chancen und Probleme beim Einbezug von Opfern sexualisierter Gewalt als Erfahrungsexpert*innen bei Aufarbeitungsprojekten, Präventionsprojekten, Forschungsprojekten und in Umgestaltungsprozessen in Institutionen, in: forum für Kinder- und Jugendpsychiatrie, Psychosomatik und Psychotherapie 33 (2023) Heft 1, 34–51.

⁷Cf. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/bishop-of-buckingham-was-true-friend-who-will-besorely-missed-say-abuse-survivors?recommid=24e90c10d2560ca6daeb7abaad9d5c7f> (Accessed June 28 2024).

⁸Cf. Hans Zollner, The Catholic Church's Responsibility in Creating a Safeguarding Culture, in: The Person and the Challenges. The Journal of Theology, Education, Canon Law and Social Studies Inspired by Pope John Paul II (Warsaw), 2021, vol. 12, n. 1, pp. 5–21.

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