

# Learning How to Listen

How to Listen, How to Heal

By Teresa Pitt Green

## Introduction

This written work accompanies on my presentation during *Tutela Minorum's* June 2021 virtual conference entitled *Developing a Culture of Healing* to consider the impact and hope in listening and responding to those who have been abused. It is an honor to be included in the proceedings and offer my story to help you better know for what you are listening. I offered my presentation, *Learning How to Listen*, as a reflection on the many dimensions to a trauma-informed pastoral ministry of listening, especially in a worldwide multicultural Church.

This presentation is offered from the perspective of a survivor of sexual and other abuse by a series of priests from when I was about six years old until I was nineteen. I grew up in a parish where many abusers were assigned. To escape I had to leave behind my parents and family home. It would be years before I reconnected, and only after much healing on my part.

Many traits are ascribed to us, survivors of abuse, by the learned. Distrust. Anger. Overreactions. Disrespect for authority. What I would like you to know is that, as a victim, during the worst years of active abuse, the time between instances of abuse were hell. We victims have a lot of time to feel constant insecurity, danger, anxiety. We are caught unawares by the abuser, and we do not know when the abuse will occur next. This is true for child victims, as it is true for adults whose relationships with abusers leave them vulnerable. One of the most vulnerable adults is one who has already been abused as a child. We are left like weakened members of the herd for the prowling predator – easily identified, easily picked off.

It becomes rational to distrust. It is rational to believe all authority is powerless to protect or intent on harm. It is reasonable to scrutinize every gesture from afar. Rage can be a sign of surviving life force. These and other traits among survivors are signs of a sane response to the evil perpetrated upon us.

My survivor's perspective has been forged in such a hell over a period longer than a decade. Yet, that was only the beginning. There have followed forty years of the aftermath of abuse. There were my recovery processes, over five thousand hours of psychotherapy, over ten thousand hours of peer group support, and years of reading (and participating in publishing) the finest in trade and peer-reviewed recovery literature. It is an expertise to which no other study can compare. I really am the expert in my own story – and healing.

Yet, after achieving more and more of this all-consuming recovery, I faced a defining shock. After the arduous and necessary and painful decades in therapy, after group support, after study and learning, after years of medical and alternative care for illnesses related to abuse, after all reconciliations and agonizing breaks from the past, after all the conscious rebuilding of a healthful life on the ruins of abuse, after all of this has been done relentlessly and well:

I still needed a Savior.

Most of us will agree that a significant minority with power in the Church disastrously compromised the trust with which people in need of the Savior must be free to approach the Church. For me, then, I had nowhere to turn.

My concern is that, as a result, most in the Church have lost the confidence needed to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the

brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners (Is 61:1). Yet, the many victims of abuse remain afflicted psychologically, physically, emotionally, socially, and in so many other ways. All are brokenhearted; indeed, all Catholics who are aware of the reality of abuse are brokenhearted by what has transpired within our Church.

Victims are functioning in full sight of families and friends and communities – and parishes – still privately captive in the prisons of lies and false narratives created by abusers and the enablers of abusers to silence them. It is to this grave need for trauma-informed Christians, who have done the needed work to be safe in their efforts, I address my comments today.

So many people today suffer from a worldwide trend, including porn, of sexualized violence and violent sexuality. By some estimates in the United States, one in four women have been sexually assaulted by the time they are 18 years old, and one in six men. From working in efforts to combat human trafficking for five years, I can affirm that percentage is increasing. What this means that every Mass and parish has a significant number of adults and children who need the kind of listening and sensitivity that you will develop in learning to listen, welcome, and care for us survivors of clergy abuse. It is among many, many gifts we have to offer you.

Here is the blessing from the darkness of my story. Here is the testimony I can offer to you here. As for me and my story, I know first-hand that my Redeemer lives, and that He has been raised up over all the earth as Victor over the evil that seemed to win in my life, over the lies and manipulations of the powerful in their conceit, and over the psychic death sentence imposed on me by the abusers and all their

enablers who were too cowardly to overturn the tables in the house of God.

There are basic qualifications for anyone who is drawn to this work. You must love God above all and be willing to let Him transform you radically as you listen. You must be willing to set aside all your biases and, further, willing to face (sometimes day after day) your own wounds. Eventually you may be able to bring those wounds to shine healing graces as survivors have. Beware the impulse to demand expertise or training. This is knowledge acquisition which is important, but nothing beats formation in discipleship.

And how do you listen? You listen by creating safe space. This requires something of you that other ministries do not. You will need to learn to lean on God with all your weight of whatever you feel, because no other will do when processing this evil within our Church and in the world.

You, too, must have done similar work on your own darkness and suffering in some way, so that you may bring a settled interior peace to this dialogue. Many people bring an unacknowledged personal need to this dynamic of listening. They benefit, for example, by feeling strong where they help another who is weak. Such dynamics work to keep the weak, weak. It is another way in which victims are victimized. It is important that you are able to work with your spiritual director and others who are knowledgeable to be vigilant about what you take away from this work at the end of any day or week. Anything less risks that you will, as so terribly often happens, re-wound a victim at a juncture when a next, brave step in trust and faith is being ventured. This is not an area where you are free to “wing it” or to have a steep learning curve.

## DEFINITION

it is important to begin with a definition. For a formal definition of “child sexual abuse,” I refer you to Church documents for definitions of child sexual abuse and what defines the age of consent. Another source for defining the rights of all persons, including children, is found in the United Nations *Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Person*. These are the only two worldwide organizations whose definitions have any hope of global impact.

The effort to assert a definition of “child abuse” or “child sexual abuse” can be impeded by local differences. Different cultures and societies define “child” and “abuse” vastly differently. (The work of the Centre for Child Protection with Fr. Hans Zollner, SJ, and his colleagues is done in dialogue with all these variations, asserting a God-given moral good that challenges many.) In many legal jurisdictions of the United States, “child” and “abuse” and “victim” definitions vary among, and they do not always sync with definitions used by social services. So, it is important for you to understand definitions within your local church, which will also incorporate what is required in your jurisdiction.

These diverse definitions all share one problem. Definitions of child sexual abuse – legal, medical, etc. – define a heinous act from an *adult’s* point of view. To serve victims, you need to shift to the victim’s viewpoint so you can hear better as you listen.

Adults define “child sexual abuse” as an adult’s sexual perversity. There are categories based on preferred ages of victims. This definition may be important, but it is one-sided. It has minimal impact on a victim who seeks to make sense of their experience. This commonality reflects how infrequently victims of abuse have been consulted when defining abuse.

Here is a victim's definition of "child sexual abuse." Child sexual abuse is violence. It is violence by sexual means. It is domination. It is the domination of body to effectively dominate and own the person. As Catholics we view the person as whole and multi-dimensional. The wound of that domination remains on all dimensions of a whole person who was de-humanized and used as a thing, not a person.

In a quest for domination, abusers isolate their victims directly. They control the narrative before and after and in between the abuse. I learned early to believe my first abuser that there was no one who could help me, because the priests controlled what people believed. No one would believe me.

The abuser's appetite for power does not end with victims. The drive to dominate is not limited. Most of my abusers got a thrill from how they manipulated the adults. The abusers excelled in lying because they were drawn to the power that those lies secured. Some took pleasure seeing me flinch when they walked into a room, as we both knew I had nowhere to turn for help.

Abusers took advantage of the hospitality offered by my parents – and the trust afforded them – to secure a perverse sense of superiority over my parents. They either manipulated or squelched teachers and other parents – even chancery staff and bishops to whom they no doubt were lying when early accusations were raised and dismissed. Their perverted forgiveness into enabling, perverted mercy into a license for repeated offense.

You will be able to hear what the victims share better if you understand what child sexual abuse is from the perspective of a victim, and if you do not underestimate the capacity for abusers to be skilled

predators seeking to establish their superiority by dominating the narrative shared by whole groups of people.

## **RELATIONAL HEALING**

Carl Jung explained that we are wounded in relationship and in relationship we must heal. This is the cornerstone of an approach I have been helping people take for years. I have said for years what I will say today: Abuse is a relational harm.

There has been a social focus on the victim only, that is, the victim in isolation. Psychotherapy has inadvertently played into that, because it is particularly useful at examining oneself to discern how abuse has hobbled or scarred one's personality. It also offers a range of models for recovering the wounded self, for piecing together an accurate story to replace the lies of the abuser, and for understanding abuse and survival and how to move forward. One problem is that psychotherapy can, for individuals, become stuck in a self-focus over time.

Progress in psychotherapy is not found in isolation or in giving license to a self-absorbed person who, in turn, may feel entitled to expect contemporary friends and loved ones to compensate for past harm. This is a scenario where the ruined relationships of the past are recreated in the present day. You will want to listen for how far along victims have gotten piecing together their stories, and in the capacity to have healthful relationships. These are bellwethers.

My relationships in my family were all wounded by abuse. I could not longer believe in my parents' ability to protect me – or to love me without conditions. My connections to my sisters were wounded. I had to hide in shame from them. This is not a one-way wound. My sisters



and my parents lost a spontaneous connection with me, and the family that might have been suffered with unspoken, broken bonds.

The concentric circles rippling out from each act of abuse in my life affected others. Many children from the same school and parish were similarly wounded. The parish was wounded. The clergy who saw parishes and families wounded were wounded with them. These wounds have not healed, but they last for a lifetime.

In offering pastoral care, you may be listening to someone who is not a direct victim of abuse but who is suffering terribly. It is important to understand this fact. It is very common. More than half of the calls I receive in any year are from family members. Their journeys toward healing are complex, too. Their wounds bear many of the same marks as those of victims – betrayal, manipulation.

Healing from abuse is not a one-way process. Families must heal. Parishes must heal. Clergy and religious must heal. You may encounter a family which seems to have remained intact during the time when abuse was underway, but it becomes fractured after someone speaks the secret long held in silence. This, too, is a common event, and something you may hear about from victim and all other members of a family. Confronted with the fact of abuse, some families stay unified, but some unify behind the abuser and scapegoat the victim. The price of speaking truth can be very high for victim or family member. All these wounds in ruptured relationships can find the same solace and healing in Christ.

## **THERAPEUTIC NARRATIVE**

The core of recovery is found in the process of finding our stories. The abuser destroys the trajectory of childhood both for child and for

family. We see abusers and their enablers destroy the story of parishes and the Church, too. As noted, abusers and enablers controlled the narrative and left no room for the lived experience of victims. Often victims can feel “crazy” in a process of “gaslighting.”

Recovering the true and accurate story is not, sadly, erasing the impact of abuse. That will never happen. We do not get over abuse. We integrate the experience into a fuller life. We write a better ending than the abusers created. In finding the true story, we can begin to see our courage, resilience, creativity, and beauty. From the ashes of the past, the Lord helps us see the beauty that remained untarnished if hidden.

It is important to understand the therapeutic narrative and its central contribution to healing. To offer trauma-informed pastoral care, it is important to understand how to work in parallel with – not in opposition to – good therapy. Culturally, however, access to therapy varies. Moreover, what working with victims of human trafficking from many other cultures has taught me is how deeply some cultures recoil from Western therapy, but there are always alternatives. And you cannot provide the full need for talking through – and reconstructing – a story.

Some therapeutic processes reflect some things you need to do also. Good therapists will not pretend to help victims create their stories. They help victims unbury facts to be pieced into stories. They help victims identify what is true. That takes a long time because we remember in pieces. Therapy is like a sorting process where victims create a truth foundation for a well life. In therapy, lies are a sign of ill mental health.

Therapists also help victims regain the ability to make better and healthier choices about our future. It is hard work doing this, and even

harder work integrating that new level of personal responsibility into daily lives. Make no doubt this work is crucial. Without it, victims and others can inadvertently create harmful relationships based on unresolved and unacknowledged need.

## **NO HARM**

Listening to victims as they talk and share bits and pieces of memories and impressions helps victims hear what they are saying, too. When you walk away from listening to someone processing trauma, you will have heard what they said and you will have felt also part of what they feel. Both aspects of this experience are part of the act of listening.

Some psychotherapists call this “transference.” It is important to understand the dynamic. There is a risk that, in “countertransference,” your reactions could wound the victim or you. The psychoanalysis Alice Miller sees this exchange of subconscious feelings or reactions as a very creative way that the victim tells a full story, including what cannot be articulated in words. It is a way to “tell” you feelings.

In any event, you will often feel the burden of the victim on your chest, in your heart, long after the dialogue has ended. That burden is not like any other grief or sorrow or state of being out of sorts. It cannot be managed by ignoring or soldiering onward. That which you feel is part of the wound you have assumed, and you must permit time to surrender to God. There is no other way.

## **NETWORKS OF SUPPORT**

One of the pillars of trauma therapy is peer support, that is, relationships and connections with people who have suffered similar abuse and, importantly, who share a wish or a commitment to recover responsibly. Peer support groups are offered within dioceses and by

therapists, as well as in many other therapeutic settings, such as Spirit Fire restorative justice events and learning events like retreats or workshops. What matters is that peers hear peers differently.

As you listen to victims, it is important to understand the limits on how much you can appreciate. The differential between what we have suffered and what you can experience is helpful. It is critical for you not to become enmeshed in the suffering of a victim.

The chasm of experience can be healthy. This reinforces that the story being unburied and told is entirely another's person. This is not a co-creation for you and the victim. It is a co-creation for the victim and God. You are witness and servant.

Whenever Spirit Fire hosts an event with multiple survivors, such as a panel or group dialogue, we work together to ensure all survivors have a fully activated and aware network of support. This refers to each person's "team;" e.g., mental health care professionals, support group members, mentors, family and friends, and clergy or spiritual director. It means that each survivor is ready to reach out to their full team for support if, for some reason, the event triggers old pain. We have each other at the event, and we all have a failsafe safety net, too. The same was at events we held for victims of human trafficking, but they would have a different mix of roles present. Nevertheless, recovery is associated with diverse and safe support.

Remember: No victim is responsible for being abuse. All victims are innocent of the harm done to them, yet we are left accountable for choosing to heal or not. It is the deepest injustice perpetrated in abuse, that we are left to pay such a price for so long to overcome to some degree what we did not deserve. Yet, until we have done the work of recovery, we remain hurt people capable of hurting other people.

## **SAINT JOHN PAUL II**

Despite the physical nature of the abuse, victims are wounded on many dimensions. Healing involves integrating care, that is, creating an integrated network of professional and casual support to address all different aspects of the wounds of abuse.

By contrast, often “healing” has been delegated entirely to psychotherapy. Even in rare cases victims when opt for faith-based therapy, there is no substitute for pastoral care in parallel. Often the crisis of abuse has turned to legal or media options to secure justice in courts or public forums. Even where this extreme option has been required, there is no substitute for the justice of restoration among all harmed by the victimization of one.

The idea of healing psychologically, emotionally, physically, and spiritually is common in (secular) recovery literature. For you, one way to understand integrated healing is found the Theology of the Person as envisioned by Saint John Paul II. Here, psychotherapy helps many dimensions of the human person, but includes ideas of virtue, moral agency, free choice, and freedom.

This totality could be overwhelming for victims. You must be careful to work from where the victim is. He or she may be focused solely on finding a safe place to live, or on not continuing in self-harm. The ideas of integrated healing or full personhood will have no bearing at this point. But, in prayer and in quiet vigilance, you can bear witness to the full wound, full resilience, and full hope for the full-person recovery.

You must keep humble and relentless practice of self-examination is crucial: Are you trying to control what someone else is doing or what

someone else needs to align with your views, timing, and goals? Here is where having mentors is crucial. They can see what you cannot in your impulses to criticize.

## **DIVERSITY**

I live in one of the most multi-cultural areas of the United States. I have worked in this Spirit Fire pastoral care for survivors of clergy abuse twenty years now. For over five years, I have also worked in the human trafficking arena. What I have learned is that different individuals from different cultures each have very distinct ways of creating, sharing, and integrating stories. Some are cultural or collective. Others are very individual.

When I work with Native American survivors, I am struck – no, humbled – by their cultural approach to telling a story. I cannot easily describe the style, but it is born of a tradition steeped in oral histories. It is well suited for how survivors recount abuse. Indeed, the Native Americans have stories of abuse by clergy and, before that era, stories of cultural and social oppression. The Native Americans have not had people willing to listen to the stories in the ways they need to be told. This is true for all survivors of abuse by clergy – and others.

One of the most striking – if small – earmarks of therapists who work with cultures other than the most Western groups. They go out into the community, meet individuals over coffee or in parks. Therapy is not a session by regular appointment in a set room. Therapy happens in the open, in a mentorship or kind of sponsorship, and may even interact with families – not as formal family therapy, but as one meets in passing all the characters in a story. The therapist sees the neighborhood, the home, the church where the person is living. This would not have worked for me.

When I started therapy, I was mostly isolated from family and from everything familiar, but in immigrant and first-generation groups the relationship has a way of integrating not isolating the individual from a greater network of support. That is a very important image for those who seek to offer pastoral care from parishes and churches, because you are already there, and you are already listening to the communities.

Your goal is not to become a specialist in all cultural differences. It is to listen well, and to ask questions about what makes a victim comfortable. It is to be willing to humbly set aside your assumptions about how things are done and how stories are related. It is to let the victim lead. It is to follow this lead even as you continue to follow Christ during the encounter.

## **SILENCE**

Silence is crucial for the healing story to emerge. To listen we are silent. This seems obvious, but are you silent while you listen?

Listening is an act of humility. It means you surrender all your own answers and ideas to serve another person finding the answers and ideas God wishes to give to them. This may sound obvious, even easy.

To add a hurdle of our own expectation may be to drive a person away. Abuse does not discriminate, so neither can any expectation we have of a victim discriminate, for example, between the “nice” one who is easy to talk to and the “difficult” one. Between the high functioning and articulate person, and the devastated person rejected by family. The person who fits some qualification you have in mind, and the one who does not. If you cannot be emptied of your expectations, you are not yet ready to serve the abused and traumatized.

The silence of humility takes us each out of the equation. If we seek to listen to insert ourselves – or to gain in any way – we have already opened the door to harming a victim again. When we harm a victim now, we also harm those who love them by one degree of separation. You are no more than a stepping stone toward God, who is the source of all healing.

## **NOISE**

The world is not a silent place. Neither are our minds or hearts silent typically. Listening requires knowing how to tune out noise and how to create a silent, safe space.

One way to offer safety even in a noisy or crowded setting is to offer a practiced expression that does not reveal your own reaction or your anxiety about not being the “right” place. Another way is to know how to pray publicly with a sense of privacy. We must be a person who can offer safe haven. This is what victims lost when abused by those intended to keep them safe – in particular, clergy who were to keep them safe in the sanctuary.

The victim will bring plenty of noise and static, internal and external. The more noise and static, the more likely the victim enduring a period of acute pain. Yet, there is always hope. God created us to heal. Difficult behaviors can be signs not only of wounds but also of hope for recovery. As victims challenge the dysfunction in the status quo, we create static and resistance and blowback. We may be upset from resistance to our growing and healing.

One natural impediment to listening is our own internal noise. You have a day filled to the brim with demands and deadlines, and a victim shares the fact of their abuse out of nowhere, suddenly. They



may seem in grave need, or not. You know it was a very courageous step into hope for them to say anything. You need to try to step up to the need here, but that is not the same as believing you are the answer they seek, the relief they need, the justice the desire.

Be vigilant about this internal noise. Struggling as you listen to think up the “right” response is its own noise. It distracts you from the moment. It is perfectly fine to be silent when the victim stops speaking. You do not need to be ready. You need to be listening.

*Be willing to hear criticism.* Victims may be stressed and speak roughly. The important thing to hear in this criticism a need – a courage in expressing need. You will learn from criticism quickly and gain trust in listening. It is a test at how well you de-personalize what you hear as you listen.

## **FIRST RESPONSE**

The moment when a victim first tells you – or even hints – that they have survived abuse is an auspicious moment. They have stepped out of a comfort zone and bravely spoken, breaking the taboo of truth and fighting back the false lessons that teach victims to be shamed and hidden from view.

This moment cannot pass without a focused acknowledgement. The first thing to do is turn off the external noise of the day. This does not necessarily mean you cancel everything, but it does mean you cancel the static and anxiety of such a day in this moment. Here is where speaking is critical. What you say needs to address the shame the person feels and to offer a radical respect for what they have endured. You can, then, suggest meeting at a later date that is more convenient, or offer to go to a coffee shop. First, acknowledge.

You may feel pressure from yourself or from the victim to speak and to have an answer, to have a consoling word, to respond in some just way. That is a discomfort that is part of listening, especially as you learn to listen. Here is how you need to lean on God more than you could ever have imagined. All answers, all consolation, all justice will come from the Lord. You may be His instrument in helping the victim find some of this, but do not get ahead of yourself. Be very careful of your impulses in these moments. You may want to fix the problem, but abuse is not merely a problem to be fixed or undone. You may want to offer a solution, but recovery is a process and, unlike most solutions, is not linear and consumes a lot of time and energy.

Your goal is to receive with gratitude and humility. You are called to be what being Christian is, to be a witness to God's Love and Truth and Justice in this world, chosen for a relationship of some kind by a person who has been wounded terribly in relationship already. Let that fact quiet all other noise.

Remember: Simon of Cyrene may have helped Jesus carry the Cross at a pivotal time in the Via Dolorosa, but never once did the Cross become Simon's Victory. There was a moment when Simon had to place the injustice and agony of the Cross back on the broken Man's shoulder and step away. You need to understand that aspect of your role, for the safety of the victim, and for your own well-being.

## **PREPARATION**

Listening requires preparation. You need to prepare yourself to respond with a few approaches in advance. You need to do a little research. This lets you focus on what the victim is saying when the time comes, and how you are responding to what they reveal. You have one goal for this first – and possibly subsequent – conversations. Is this person safe right

now? Are they suicidal? Do they have a home to go to? Food? This is part of your preparation. For those listening in the United States, Spirit Fire keeps a list of 50 free help- and hotlines commonly used for victims, everything from suicide prevention and therapies for addictions, to support for families. Such lines exist in many countries under different guises. What matters is that you have your own list of help options which you can use to help if a victim is suicidal or homeless or facing eviction. In the United States, again, each diocese and religious order has a victim assistance coordinator who has a list that is focused regionally. When you create your own list, share it with others locally. No national list comes near how useful local networks can be.

## **CHOICE**

Listening involves choices. Victims have been denied choice. Indeed, I remind people that our concept of free choice was destroyed. Healing with the help of trauma-informed pastoral care is in large part rediscovering our free choice – and making new choices with a renewed mind which has been freed of the lies of abusers and the false approaches of enablers.

Free choice operates on many levels in a life restored to wellness. For victims, we learn that choice exists in what people and behaviors we accept in our adult lives, and which words and feelings we express openly and which we manage through other means, like therapy, jogging, or art.

Free choice operates for the listener, too. You will start to tune in to hear the meaning and not the noise. There can be a lot of emotional noise that surrounds the telling of a story over time. The emotions are very real and need a place in the story, but if they are not the full story.

Sometimes the upset or disturbance the story imparts to you is, itself, the victim's way of sharing the story more fully than words can carry. Sometimes they are distraction, even for the victim.

Your choice in listening is accepting responsibility for dealing with emotions and behaviors that can erupt as a victim's story is pieced together. It is not always neat. It is not always polite. One of the most fundamental ways to react is *not to react*. Here is where a fundamental principle is lived. You do not own this story. You can choose not to personalize whatever feelings happen, and some of those feelings and behaviors may be directed at you personally. While listening with humility will help you be open to valid criticism, listening with free choices helps you be a better witness.

Another choice is what to you do with the impact of the story – told all at once or in pieces as it may be – affects you. You are being asked to witness not just evil but also the impact of evil on a person or family. Early in recovery, personalities can be twisted from the pain of abuse or the difficult ways victims have adjusted to survive very dangerous settings. You can also find drug abuse and suicide. You will find ruptured relationships and alienation. There is only one place to bring what you see and experience – to the Lord.

Be very careful to remember that you have a choice. Not every victim who approaches you are you able to help. You may not have the skill or life experience to make you a good match for ministering to people who have been abused. You may be the pastor or administrator who cannot offer a consistent availability. You may be ill or dealing with your own memories of abuse or trauma.

The most important choice you can make in this work is twofold: Are you able, and, if not, how will you prepare to refer people to

others? You prepare by knowing what is possible and finding names, for example, of able people who can offer what is needed. You can also express what you can offer; for example, you say you would welcome the victim visiting you in a few months to let you know how things are going. Not every relationship has to be like a therapeutic one or spiritual direction, with regular appointments. You were chosen for a relationship which, to model health, needs to be what is mutually possible and good.

## **BOUNDARIES**

You may face difficulty setting consistent boundaries, particularly with those who minimize the impact of abuse. That is why clear boundaries are crucial, to sort through all comers. For their sake and for the sake of victims, it is important to remain morally clear on what is wrong. That “line in the sand,” as it were, strikes effectively at the lies of the abuser which continue to operate in varying degrees in the psyches of many victims. It begins the ministry before you may have even met the victim. Indeed, boundaries are going to be a crucial aspect of all your pastoral ministry with victims. Knowing how to define and to talk about boundaries is critical. Setting boundaries will get you in trouble, often with unexpected people; e.g., the family of the victim.

There may be many reasons for this resistance. You don’t need to know these reasons to maintain a boundary. It may be better if you do not know, lest you are tempted to rationalize making an exception to a boundary. Sorting out the issues comes second. Keeping the boundary is first. Stay kind. Stay firm. Without clear and consistent boundaries, there will be no healing for a victim, for a family, for a parish, or for the Church.

The primary boundary needs to be internal. Speaking can often be a way to fill the void of silence. Most people are uncomfortable with silence. Even the most peaceful person may find, on an anxious day, the need to chatter rather than open quiet space to feel freely. Speaking can be a defense against what is in ourselves. If you find yourself sometimes speaking on impulse, you may want to check your deeper impulse to fix or solve or to avoid feelings. This creates an internal noise that will interfere with offering care to the abused and traumatized. It may also signal your own personal need for care and recovery from unresolved pain which we all have from time to time. This anxiety is, as anger and other sudden emotions can be, a sign you do not know or are not honoring your own need for some boundary; for example, you are pouring in more energy than you have to offer.

External boundaries are also important. One thing you must speak about – and speak about often – are boundaries. This helps the victim cope with sorting through what was wrong about the past. It helps us, also, be empowered when we set our own boundaries. Setting boundaries on how people treat us or how others even touch us feel very intimidating.

When victims see how you set boundaries and are comfortably at peace with your boundaries is a great inspiration. Expressing a boundary is a radical act for someone whose most personal boundaries were trampled by abusers. Asserting boundaries also disrupts the status quo where the status quo is dysfunctional, so setting new boundaries can be scary and costly in personal terms. (Please remember that victims can seem like the disruptor to blame for family or group angst or pain, when sometimes it is resistance by a whole group to the victim's health challenging the status quo.) When you are

available, where you can meet, how long you can meet: these are all boundaries or guidelines to articulate clearly and comfortably – and then to abide by yourself as well.

## **LISTENING**

Listening has an image of us silent. Listening also requires us to know what to say. Experience helps us know how to say it, but no matter what certain key things must be said. With some reflection and over time, you will create your own list of a few things you communicate to victims who are trusting you – and you will share the points early and often in a way that builds a bond rather than undermines it.

For example, it is wise to anticipate the fast bond that develops when we speak with others who are re-learning what love is – and that love is not abuse. Additionally, victims can need time to reflect and practice interpreting compassion and affection as non-sexual. For these and many other reasons, physical boundaries are important. Nonverbal cues are usually enough in most relationships, but they are hard for victims to read having had little or no experience of them. So, it is important to find a way to talk about physical boundaries to be clear and to be consistent.

Moreover, I encourage those who offer pastoral care not to hug or show affection through touch. I know this idea falls outside some cultural norms. I know in the United States there are some who disagree with me, especially some outside the Church. There are important reasons to consider my suggestion.

Your goal is to establish this boundary in a way that minimizes the victim feeling rejected, judged, awkward or shamed. I usually suggest that, when it seems like a relationship is developing, you take the time

to explain explicitly some basic boundary issues, such as when you are available or how much time you have – and that you choose not to hug or show physical affection. You can explain that it was in such a setting their trust was abused and they were wounded, so you choose to create a setting that is as safe as possible, including no chance of a mixed signal or confusing cue. This is part of the gift you can offer the victim in their healing, but you need to mark the impulse to make exceptions even in the most innocent of moments.

## **WOUNDED HEALERS**

Carl Jung along with Henri Nouwen wrote about how, in healing relationships, sometimes it is the most wounded person who serves as the “wounded healer,” helping others. In the process of walking with victims, you will find yourself wounded. These may be old wounds that open afresh, revealing things that were never fully resolved. They may be new, vicarious wounds. One of the people most likely to help those wounds heal is the victim, not perhaps directly but certainly indirectly in the process of revealing God’s Spirit in all our healing as full persons.

Experts, who study the phenomenon of abuse which we who are victims have experienced first-hand, will correctly attribute to victims as adults many wounds and symptoms, but there begins quite inadvertently the basic caricature of the victim – damaged goods. The stories of victims which are told by victims, however, reflect also great courage, resilience, creativity, and triumph. Victims will have a hard time discovering that alone, but beware of the mirror society and, indeed, some experts hold up for victims to see their faces in these lists of negatives.

Who will witness the strengths, the wisdom, the great potential for compassion and peace? Who can possibly bear witness with



credibility to this person being created in the image and likeness of God? The Church needs relationships with victims of clergy abuse because of our unique capacity to witness the beauty victims have to offer us, personally, and to the Church and world.

## **WITNESS**

When you listen, you will need to consistently check your own impulse for resolution. This victim has chosen to trust you. It is an invitation to a connection, which may be passing, or to a relationship, which will transform you both. You are being asked to witness the questions that do not have answers, like, why me? You are not going to be powerful enough to help, except in certain practical ways. Your company will break the isolation, maybe even the alienation. But make no mistake. You are not going to have an answer, but for a witness – a Christian witness to suffering, confusion, longing, and hope. This witness will affect you deeply and can, if you will proceed prayerfully, bring you abundant grace and wisdom and peace. It will give you the freedom of humility, as you accept that your one role is not to save this person but to lead this person to his or her Savior.

## **CLOSING**

I am coming into my 20<sup>th</sup> year of working in this area of trauma-informed pastoral care. These years have taught me that God has not abandoned His Church, however errant leaders and others may have been. Yet, the challenge remains, and it is acute, for all Catholics. Until victims can be heard and seen without ambivalence or hesitation, there will remain a timidity within the Church about the efficacy of grace. The more the Church listens to our stories, the more the Church will be transformed by the grace that has saved us. The Church Catholic can, in ministering to her own victims, be transformed into a safe haven for

the grievous numbers of victims of abuse and trauma in a world that is increasingly traumatized by sexualized violence and other aggressions based on lies and the lust to dominate. Your willingness to learn how to listen as a Christian witness not only can help victims, family members and others find healing in our Savior. It can also help the Church heal.

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# Effective Pastoral Care for Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse or Trauma

by Teresa Pitt Green  
Spirit Fire

## DON'T

## DO

Don't talk.

Listen.

Don't know.

Learn.

Don't defend.

Acknowledge guilt of abusers and enablers.

Don't minimize.

Recognize the burden.

Don't intellectualize.

Permit strong feelings.

Don't launch a pep talk.

If it were possible, we'd be over it already.

Don't be impatient.

Remember healing is on God's timing.

Don't be directive.

Follow our lead and pace.

Don't be linear.

Appreciate healing as circular, repetitive.

Don't wing it.

Prepare and be knowledgeable.

Don't be goal-oriented.

Be God-oriented. His Presence is enough.

Don't judge or shame.

Offer radical respect for a humiliated person.

Don't talk to a diagnosis.

Talk to us about the diagnosis.

Don't own.

Respect boundaries on a person's burden.

Don't fix.	Accept healing as a process.
Don't assume this is past.	Care for need here, now.
Don't push.	Pace, go slowly.
Don't expect efficiency.	Simplify, repeat, confirm.
Don't expect reliability.	Expect no-shows, late arrivals.
Don't personalize.	Depersonalize errors and rough edges.
Don't take responsibility.	Set firm boundaries, softly.
Don't analyze.	Affirm mystery and grace in this life.
Don't shift into therapy.	Know how to refer for professional help.
Don't be manipulated.	Live the boundaries you set.
Don't go it alone.	Let the Holy Spirit do the heavy lifting.
Don't hesitate.	Pastor.

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## Biography

**Teresa Pitt Green** of Northern Virginia is a 30-year publishing entrepreneur. An internationally renowned writer and speaker, Teresa is known for the Catholic recovery book *Veronica's Veil: Spiritual Companionship for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse – A Christ-Centered Guide*, co-authored with Rev. Lewis S. Fiorelli, OSFS. She also chronicled her return to the faith through profiles of people she encountered along the way, entitled *Restoring Sanctuary*, which Francis Cardinal George, OMI, gave to his staff to read—beginning friendships in Chicago that would lead to the launch of *The Healing Voices* years later when Teresa, with other survivors, co-founded (and now edits) *The Healing Voices Magazine*, an online blog-dialogue among all Catholics promoting faith, recovery, and reconciliation; it also offers virtual discussion groups and annual prayer services. Teresa was a founding member of the Pontifical Commission's virtual Survivor Advisory Panel and has presented regularly for the USCCB, the CMSM, and other Catholic and Christian groups. She just completed her tenure as chair of the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force, which is a regional collaboration among federal, state, and local law enforcement, prosecutors, and social service providers. With Spirit Fire co-founder Luis A. Torres, Jr., Teresa offered her survivor testimony at the USCCB National Review Board and Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People and, in 2018, the USCCB General Meeting in Baltimore. Teresa will provide the keynote for the Mother Ursula Infante Memorial Lecture, Cabrini University, and accept its Cors Jesu Award on behalf of Fr. Fiorelli and her pastoral work with survivors and clergy.

**Spirit Fire** is a Christian restorative justice initiative founded and run by survivors of clergy abuse promoting trauma-informed care for individuals, families, clergy and religious, parishes and dioceses wounded by abuse especially in faith settings. At startup, it was awarded a prestigious grant by the Emergent Ventures fund of the Peter Theil Foundation and George Mason University/Mercatus Center as a socially responsible startup destined to improve the world. Spirit Fire has also been sponsored by the Catholic University of America and Virtus Online child protection programs. (SpiritFire.Live)

## Additional Resources

*Veronica's Veil: A Christ-Centered Guide to Offering Spiritual Companionship to Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, by Rev. Lewis S. Fiorelli, OSFS, and Teresa Pitt Green. *Imprimatur. Nihil Obstat.* Mother Cabrini Cors Jesu Award.

*Restoring Sanctuary*, by Teresa Pitt Green

*The Healing Voices* – An online, free magazine about abuse, recovery, and faith (thehealingvoices.org)

*Abuse, Faith, & Pastoral Care* - A Spirit Fire Global Broadcast (free registration for weekly links to broadcasts, spiritfirelive.org)