



BOOK REVIEW

Saints and Healing from Abuse: When Help Doesn't Help

By T. Pitt Green

My Peace I Give You: Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints, by Dawn Eden. \$16.95, 256 pages, 2012. Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame IN.

My Peace I Give You: Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints, a book by renowned author Dawn Eden and published in 2012, can serve a new generation of Catholics who are responding to the revelations about former-Cardinal McCarrick by demanding answers and further reform from the institutional Church, and by looking for ways to help victims of clergy abuse. It is only natural that, as these faithful Catholics rely on saints as patrons for help and healing, they seek patrons for victims. For that purpose, here is a good resource.

In ***My Peace I Give You***, Eden profiles saints and others who endured and survived diverse kinds of abuse or betrayal by the Church. The selection of stories ranges broadly. It is a reminder of how many others across the centuries survived abuse within the Church setting.

However, a red flag must be raised: Before offering this book or suggesting any of its profiles to any victim of clergy abuse, it is critical to understand how wounds inflicted specifically within the Church pose unique challenges. Absent that understanding, Catholics are likely to hurt those whom they seek to help.

Clergy Abuse and a New Generation of Catholics, originally published as *Abuse Victims Who Are Canonized*, by T. Pitt Green. *The Healing Voices*, May 10, 2018. Copyright © 2018, 2025. All Rights Reserved. This article has been revised and rewritten. Photocopies/distribution without charge for free, provided this citation is included. For anyone seeking more info and many free resources, please visit SpiritFire.Online.

Helping victims of any abuse is not easy. That is no surprise. Recovering from abuse is difficult for every victim. Many turn to their faith and their pastor or parish for support and grace. For those abused within the Church, however, those options can be, at best, fraught with difficulty. What most Catholics take for granted, these individuals experience with unease, having known danger or cruelty in association with what is holy for others.

A sense of discomfort with the holy is experienced by many different victims. There are the many victims abused by clergy, but there are also those abused by other authority figures in the Church or by a parent or guardian who was psychologically dysfunctional in their religiosity. For these victims, what is holy has proven, at least at one point in life, to be dangerous. Anything to do with Catholicism may now be a source of distress and not peace. More victims than most Catholics can imagine feel anxious inside a church building, despite attending Mass weekly.

Any Catholic drawn to help these victims will encounter, up close and personally, the Church's capacity to inflict grievous pain. Quite often, this encounter can lead to a faith crisis for a helper. At this unexpected and painful juncture, a helper not uncommonly activates to secure quick relief. A book is gifted to a victim. A saint is mentioned. The prayer for cure is promised. Release from enduring the misery is achieved—for the helper. The victim still faces a process that defies hurry. Confusing one's own personal reaction to an abuse story with the victim's experience is a common way victims end up harmed by those who want to help—and how those who want to help end up wounded vicariously to an unhelpful degree.

Make no mistake. Helping victims also has many rewards for Catholics who persevere. Nothing uplifts one's faith like the example of the victim who dares to face distressing triggers and psychological static just for the chance to reconnect safely with sacramental life. Importantly, there are ways to help without hurting. Victims often are still pariah in parishes or their families. They need a stable connection for a return to the safety of the sanctuary. They need an anchor like a fellow Catholic who knows how to offer support without adding pain. This is no time to wing it or to reach for quick fixes. No matter how inadvertent the mishap may be, however, it often is the last time a victim dares to return. And that brings us back to Dawn Eden's book.

My Peace I Give to You models some healthy ways to interact with victims but also poses a temptation to suggest a quick fix. For example, Eden opens with an account of her conversion story. She describes being raised by her divorced mother in New York City. She refers obliquely to instances of abuse as well as to prolonged exposure to hypersexualized social situations. This

minimalism protects all victims who are readers. It protects them from unexpectedly reading details of crimes perpetrated on others; it minimizes the chances of an involuntary reexperience of difficult memories. Eden sets a good example for helpers in how spiritually supporting recovery does not dwell on details of abuse. A victim can connect without exposing the deepest wound. Help should avoid analysis and stay close to God and His Word.

Eden's story also creates ease, so sharing her book may also be a gift of ease to some. Many clergy-abuse victims find a rupture in their trust for God more difficult than exile from the Church. Eden describes an early agnosticism and an ongoing restlessness. Her career is ever-changing. She shifts from being "born again," to converting to Christianity, and, soon after, to embracing Roman Catholicism. Recovery for most victims is driven by such restlessness. It often includes "trying on many things." For each victim, it can be a conversion story that moves from darkness to light, from confusion to clarity, from unhealth to flourishing. Along the way, many options prove inadequate, and many disappointments must be endured. It may be very difficult to sustain hope, but Eden's story identifies a sure and reassuring end point. It is the same as where the restlessness of St. Augustine led him. It is the rest found only in God. ***My Peace I Give You*** holds up the promise for those who persevere in the struggle. Assuming the Catholicism to which Eden turns is not a trigger for difficult memories, this promises to focus readers on God as the hope of struggling through recovery.

Victims at ease in Catholicism will likely find much help in ***My Peace I Give You***. Beyond her own story, Eden draws on all Church history to identify possible patrons and healing reflections. She profiles saints (e.g., St. Ignatius of Loyola) who suffered grave mistreatment or abandonment. She adds historical figures and saints who have important things to say about her themes (e.g., Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux). None of these are victims of abuse. The implied invitation is to see abuse within a greater whole—within the full communion of saints.

Eden also includes a widely referenced group of martyrs who were sexually abused (e.g., St. Maria Goretti, St. Agnes).¹ The problem with these names is the widespread sense—even the confidence—that canonized victims of sexual abuse will help living victims see how they, too, can be saints. It is a temptation to offer one of these saints as a quick fix to what a victim of clergy abuse may describe, but these martyrs for virginity will not uplift all victims of clergy abuse. Suggesting them as patrons can be quite distressing. Why?

Consider how saints reflect myriad pathways to sanctification and heaven. Now consider how many saints who were sexually abused did not survive the abuse. In fact, some chose to be

martyred, refusing sexual violation. That pathway is quite different from that followed by a victim of abuse who must grapple with surrender to abuse. First, they are still alive; they did not choose death. They were violated because almost all abusers eventually threaten some kind of harm and have the means to deliver on their threat. Victims often blame themselves when they had no power to avoid or end the abuse. To recover is to acknowledge that survival is not a failure or a fault but an achievement. Meanwhile, the Church in holding up the martyrs' lives as examples can be seen as saying the opposite. It can feel like a rebuke to survive from the same Church that enabled the abuser. Catholics can rationally dispel this misunderstanding, but neither abuse nor recovery is an entirely rational experience. Responding otherwise is to work contrary to a healthy recovery effort among victims.

The point of these martyrs for virginity is that they all forgave their abusers. Linking forgiveness to sanctification after sexual abuse creates an impasse for most victims. No one involved likely denies that forgiveness is part of holiness or recovery, but victims of clergy abuse must square that with bishops having forgiven predatory priests who were then reassigned. Victims have experienced firsthand how forgiveness enabled abuse. Forgiveness can have a neuralgic effect. Offering a suggestion of any of these martyrs may seem like an inspired starting point for the giver, but for the victim it can look like the Church is adding pressure to ignore abuse.

The next question is how to know when to mention a saint profiled in ***My Peace I Give You*** or if it is safe to give someone a copy of the book. The answer is simple but not always easy. It is not a fast solution, and it involves an investment of self. That is, the answer is to listen well. Only knowing each person individually can create a safe relationship along the lines of what Carl Jung observed: Victims need relationships to heal, because in relationships they have been abused and wounded. It takes many different relationships to rebuild a healthy life. Each victim creates his or her patchwork of support with therapists, physicians, colleagues, mentors, friends, family, faith—and God. Catholics in parishes or other settings can play a role in that greater network, but no one person is the solution. No one saint can circumvent the process.

With this caveat, ***My Peace I Give You*** can help many, including victims of abuse, even clergy abuse. The book may help at the right time. Stories of martyrs for virginity may enlighten a stubborn darkness. Examples of victims' forgiveness may inspire at some point. What is important is that recovery from abuse is not a problem to be solved. These gifts must occur in a milieu of trust. It is a safe relationship which may start between people but, one hopes, can lead gently toward a new trust in the protection of God. That requires Catholics, who have not been abused within the Church, to realize the grave harm of which the Church is capable. For solace and insight for them enduring that wound, it may be those Catholics who help victims who will find Dawn Eden's ***My Peace I Give You*** may be most helpful of all.