

# I Was Sexually Abused by a Catholic Priest. The Church Must Listen to Victims.

The pope should drive abusers and their enablers from the ministry.

**By Mark Joseph Williams**

Mr. Williams is a survivor of child sexual abuse.

Feb. 21, 2019

There is no greater pain than shame. I know.

When I was a child, I was sexually abused by a Catholic priest. Trauma is the devil. It stays in the core of your being. My tears waited nearly a half-century to stream from my eyes. Many victims go to their graves never revealing what they endured. Some take their own life, like one friend of mine. I suffered the pangs of addiction, the subsequent lies, and depression and suicidal ideation, along with bankruptcy and the loss of my job and home.

A childhood lost. The isolation was real. My father had died at only 40. My mother, lonely, drank, fell into rage, and was largely absent. I was prey, vulnerable to being groomed by the priest. The line was crossed.

My sexual development was stunted. I was afraid. I did not know how to break away. Trust was broken. My own brokenness took root.

Sexual violation is at the heart of the church's crisis today and threatens its sacredness. It is not about priests who are straight or gay. Rather, it is about a void of intimacy. The predator lacks true friendship. His yearning for it takes on unfathomable proportions. He tries to figure out what is missing by violating another — a child.

This was tolerated and covered up in the church for far too long. Truth didn't seem to matter. Clericalism ruled. Secrets abounded. Files were concealed. Grand juries were never a part of the lexicon. But victims never forget.

This week, Pope Francis is gathering church leaders at the Vatican for an unprecedented global summit on clergy sexual abuse. People are leaving the pews in droves. No longer will the faithful embrace a hierarchical church if those appointed to lead us fail to hold themselves and their

fellow cardinals and bishops to account. Abusers, regardless of their rank, must be removed from all ministerial activity.

The pope should encourage healing and offer forgiveness — however contrarian this sounds — but he cannot exonerate his brother priests who committed and covered up this sin. The defrocking last week of Theodore McCarrick, the former cardinal and archbishop of Washington who was found guilty by the church of sexual abuse, sent a hopeful message before the summit. His removal was so right. More must follow.

My own abuser died a long time ago. On the day he would have turned 100, I knelt at his grave. I asked why. I told him he was wrong. But I had to forgive him to start feeling free.

Today, despite my experience, the real church, the living faith community, has never been closer to me. It is the mystical body of Christ. It is his flesh. Being abused brought profound pain. Over time, my life was restored only through God's grace and my active acceptance of his grace. Gratitude has entered my soul. People who were abused as children can heal, and the healing of this scandal must be woven into the fabric of today's broken church. The church should unleash the voices of other survivors.

Nearly 50 years removed from my abuse, I realize that God never left me. I needed to hit rock bottom to face the darkness, to find and feel his light. Sober, naked to the truth, I found the only path to an authentic life. My journey, and the journey for victims everywhere in the church, will be made easier when actions are taken that condemn those, especially prelates, who took our innocence away.

My fervent prayer is that grace pervades a papacy in the spotlight during this week's summit. The pope and his bishops must take bolder steps to rid the church of the horrid stain of clerical abuse once and for all.

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Pope Francis opened a historic summit on child protection and the Catholic Church's sexual abuse crisis, saying, "We hear the cry of the little ones asking for justice." Photo courtesy of Francesco Piva