

Introduction

This book has been on my heart for a long time. It comes from the desire to bring the joy of communion to those living with the spiritually isolating effects of childhood sexual abuse.

Through the communion I have discovered, which is the Communion of Saints, my spirit has been transformed and continues to be transformed—gaining healing, strength, and comfort beyond what I ever thought possible. I pray that the following stories of saints' personal sufferings and triumphs will guide you to this same experience of joyful transformation in Christ.

But perhaps you are wondering what the saints could possibly have to do with healing from childhood wounds, especially those wounds that are most hurtful and least talked about. Explaining that connection requires me to revisit a time when my life did not have so much light.



I can still remember the first time I ever read a verse of the Gospel—perhaps because of the novelty of seeing something from the “other” Bible (my family was Jewish), but most likely because it made me cry.

The verse appeared at the end of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale “The Snow Queen,” after Gerda's innocent love rescues Kai from the Snow Queen's icy clutches. The girl and boy joyfully return to Grandmother's home, just as Grandmother is reading Jesus' words in Matthew 18:3: “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Reading those words filled me with an inexpressible feeling of longing, mingled with loss. I wanted with all my heart to be a joyful, innocent child. Instead, I felt as though my childhood had already vanished into thin air. It had disappeared before I had even realized it existed.

I kept looking at the page, but my gaze lost its focus as I became absorbed in thought. My throat contracted, and tears welled up. How could this be? Here I was, weeping inconsolably for my lost childhood—and I was only seven years old.

Now I know. The tears came because, even at that young age, I had suffered sexual abuse. What's more, for the previous two years, since my parents had split up and my mother gained custody, I had been living in an environment I would now consider to be sexually porous. I don't recall any clear boundaries; I was not well shielded from adults' nudity, substance abuse, dirty jokes, sex talk, and swearing.

Like many victims of sexual abuse, I identify with the words of the messenger in Job 1:15: "I alone have escaped to tell you." As far as I know, there is no other living person who admits to witnessing the evils that were done to me.¹ Certainly, my mother recalls things very differently than I do. When I told her of the incidents I planned to relate in this book, she denied several of them, including that her home was a "sexually porous environment" during my childhood.²

Placing myself back in the mind of that little girl who loved Andersen's fairy tales, I realize that, as dazzling as those stories were to my young imagination, nothing in them seemed more wondrous—or more out of reach—than the pure and uncomplicated childhood of Gerda and

Kai, surrounded by the love of their grandmother and the love of God.



By the time I was thirty-one, when I received the gift of faith in Christ, I understood more clearly how the Lord's words in Matthew's gospel referred to spiritual and not literal childhood. A few years after that, as my faith drew me into the Catholic Church, I discovered that the *Catechism* links this spiritual childhood with being "born from above" (Jn 3:7)—the new life of grace that begins with baptism.

Learning about the ongoing aid that grace provides in the moral life was encouraging, helping me be patient with myself as I began to "walk the walk" of a faithful Christian. As time went by, however, my initial confidence began to erode. My greatest desire was to have the blessing Jesus promises to the "pure in heart, . . . for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). Yet, even when I was doing everything I could to live in purity, I was unable to *feel* pure. I felt stained—because of what adults had done to me, or had bid me do, when I was a helpless child.

On an intellectual level, I knew there was nothing for me to be ashamed of. No child is responsible for what an adult does to her, or induces her to do. The sin of abuse belongs to the abusers, not their victims. Children depend on adults and have to trust them in order to survive. It is adults' responsibility to show children what is good, and it is in children's very nature to accept what adults call "good" as being truly good. One cannot speak of "consent" in such an unequal relationship.

As I began to read more about what Christians believe, I found that the Church Fathers and Doctors (“Doctor” being a title given to saints of the highest wisdom) said many powerful things in defense of victims of sexual abuse. St. Augustine, writing about the virgin martyrs of the early Church, lashed out at pagans who claimed that virgins who had been raped were no longer virgins: “What sane man can suppose that, if his body be seized and forcibly made use of to satisfy the lust of another, he thereby loses his purity?”³

Although I was aware of these things, try as I might I was unable to internalize the knowledge that I was innocent of what had been done to me. Instead, I felt like there was a black mark on my childhood, a blotch of indelible ink. The more I tried to cover up this feeling by repressing the bad memories, the more the pain, loss, and shame threatened to seep into every corner of my adult life.



After I entered the Catholic Church in 2006, my journey toward healing began in earnest. I learned an ancient prayer that opened me up to a new understanding of the workings of grace. It is called the *Anima Christi* (“Soul of Christ”) and begins with these words:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me
Body of Christ, save me
Blood of Christ, inebriate me
Water from Christ’s side, wash me
Passion of Christ, strengthen me
O good Jesus, hear me
Within Thy wounds hide me
Suffer me not to be separated from Thee . . .⁴

Do you notice how the prayer's perspective shifts? It goes from asking Christ to be within you to asking that you may be within him. More than that, where in Christ are you asking to be sheltered? Within his *wounds*.

Until I began to reflect upon that prayer, my faith life was entangled in a forest of questions: How could I believe in God's protective love, when my own family failed to protect me? How could I be a child to God when I never had a real childhood? How could I be pure when I never knew purity?

Those questions seemed pressing and deep, but in reality they were dead ends, keeping me confined in the solitude of self. The *Anima Christi's* intense symbolism inspired me to ask questions that would lead me out of that prison—questions like, How can Christ's Passion strengthen me? What does it mean to have him live in me, and for me to live in him? But by far the most important question to emerge from reflecting upon that prayer was, How can Jesus' wounds draw me closer to him? The answer, unfolding gradually over the course of the next few years, would change the way I understood my own wounds.



The disciples were convinced of the Resurrection only when Christ showed them his wounded hands, feet, and—for the doubting Thomas—his side.

In paintings of the risen Christ, the Sacred Heart is often depicted aflame with fiery rays. We see this most dramatically in the Divine Mercy image, based on St. Faustina Kowalska's vision, in which Jesus' heart shines forth brilliant streams of white and red light. I picture Jesus'

wounds as they appear in those images, radiating grace—a “glowing furnace” of love, as one prayer puts it.⁵ When praying, “Within your wounds, hide me,” I am asking to be hidden in those wounds, which are now glorified. I want to be surrounded and protected by their overflowing graces, the healing rays that extend to the ends of the earth.

Over time, as that image of the loving and merciful light streaming from Jesus’ wounds deepened its hold on my consciousness, I began to re-examine the times in my past when I had doubted God’s mercy. That in turn led to a conversation with God that I had been putting off for a long time—asking how I could embody his mercy toward those I found hardest to forgive.



New Catholics are eager to read stories about the saints, and I was no exception. But when I delved into the lives of those who had suffered the most—the early Roman martyrs—it gave me a bad case of TMI: Too Much Information. The ancient authors’ graphic descriptions of torture were more than I could handle.

That same discomfort surfaces when I read about people who suffered childhood abuse—even when I know their stories have a happy ending. In fact, because my own experiences have left me with post-traumatic stress disorder, I have to be cautious about my media consumption, as certain emotional triggers can cause me to flash back to the abuse. Knowing this makes me very sensitive to others who likewise, although wanting to know they are not alone in their experience, do not wish to relive their trauma. So, as I share in this book about my own journey

and those of the saints, I will be careful to avoid details beyond those needed to make the stories meaningful and real.

There are some topics that will not be shared here, not because they are unimportant, but because they are beyond my field of expertise. For example, this book is not intended for those who are currently in a sexually abusive relationship or need advice on bringing an abuser to justice, although some of the organizations listed among the resources at the back of this book may be helpful.

In addition, although I share my fellow Catholics' grief and anger over those who have betrayed their sacred office, I will not focus on the scandal of abuse committed by clergy. The reason for this is not out of any desire to diminish the very real and often devastating experiences of those who have suffered such abuse. I fervently hope this book will help them and those who minister to them. However, I am taking a more general perspective, based on my personal experience as part of a large population whose needs are not currently being met. By far the largest category of childhood sexual-abuse perpetrators are family members, who are responsible for about one-third to one-half of cases. After that (in descending order) come family friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers; only a small percentage of cases are committed by clergy. Given how many American adults report having been sexually abused as children—about 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men, according to the Centers for Disease Control—such painful memories afflict at least one person in every pew in every parish.⁶ If you are among those victims,⁷ I want you to know you are not alone, you are not forgotten, and you have more friends in heaven than you realize.