

JOURNEY TO PEACE:

Four Catholics Tell their Experience of Intimate Partner Abuse Recovery

WRITTEN BY MELANIE RIGNEY IN COLLABORATION WITH CATHOLICS FOR FAMILY PEACE

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INTRODUCTION:

Catholics For Family Peace Education and Research Initiative (CFFP) is always interested in sharing real but anonymous experiences of how Catholics have recovered from intimate partner violence. We do this to help others realize there is hope, help, and healing. Healing is possible for everyone harmed by the violence: the one who experiences and survives it, the one who witnesses, especially as a child, the one who initiates the abuse and violence and all of the loved ones who care for them. There is always hope for healing.

In September 2019, we arranged with blog writer Melanie Rigney (*Rejoice! Be Glad*) to invite any Catholic who had recovered from intimate partner violence to discuss her or his experience with her. Four people responded immediately. We are grateful to Melanie for her gifts of listening to these painful experiences and then describing them using a three point framework: the key points of the violent situation, role of faith as a resource or roadblock, and advice they would offer to others in a similar situation. Please note that the advice to others is the words of the survivor and does not necessarily represent what CFFP would advise.

Melanie was attentive to only lightly editing the retelling for clarity and length. Names and other identifying information were changed.

Reading these experiences reinforces the need for us as Church to do more for our sisters and brothers experiencing abuse and violence. It is the mission of our group to promote the informed and compassionate Catholic response to intimate partner violence. For more information, please visit our website at catholicsforfamilypeace.org or contact us at catholicsforfamilypeace@gmail.com. You are especially invited to join us every day at 3 p.m. as we pray (virtually) for all harmed by intimate partner violence.

Blessings,

Sharon A. O'Brien, Ph.D., Director
<http://www.catholicsforfamilypeace.org>

Catholics For Family Peace provides education and resources to people and dioceses seeking to create an informed and compassionate response to intimate partner violence.

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Peace and Respect in Your Marriage: A Domestic Violence Awareness for Marriage Preparation

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catholicsforfamilypeace@gmail.com.

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Four Catholics Tell their Experience of Intimate Partner Abuse Recovery
BY MELANIE RIGNEY

FIRST EXPERIENCE: ANN
wife – 7-year marriage

KEY POINTS:

I grew up in a very loving, happy Catholic family. When I went off to college, I fell in love with a man who drank, but I didn't realize just how much until after we married: he drank every single night.

Joe abused me for the entire seven-plus years of our marriage, from the time I was twenty-two until I had just turned thirty. The abuse began with yelling, outrageous demands, and demeaning put-down remarks and escalated to physical, emotional and sexual abuse. When I was eight months pregnant with my first child he pushed me to the floor and kicked me in my stomach area. I can still remember, fifty-one years later, the hot rage that built up inside me as if a switch had been turned on. Twice I called the police when he was extremely violent. The second time the police said that if I called again they would be forced to put my three children in foster care. That terrorized me so much that I began to plan my escape and filed for divorce. The judge granted me permission to leave the state to be near my parents and many family members.

ROLE OF FAITH:

I taught my oldest daughter to make the sign of the cross when she was about four years old. When I asked her to show Daddy what she learned, he growled, "What are you doing, swatting flies?" The second thing was the time I found my beloved wooden plaque of Jesus that I have had with me since I was born (it was a baby gift) in my Kotex box. His disrespect for my faith was insidious.

ADVICE:

Tell someone in your family or someone you love and trust. Understand from the beginning that if a spouse is abusive in any way because of drugs or alcohol, the chances are almost certain that the abuse will continue no matter how contrite they are after each abusive incident. Insist on marriage counseling from a bona fide counselor, not just a Catholic priest. Document the abuse (that will be helpful when seeking an annulment). Know that raising children as a single parent is infinitely better than raising them in a violent home where abuse becomes the norm. Praying daily is imperative. But most of all, the non-offending partner must act to preserve the peace, harmony, emotional support, love and laughter that children are entitled to during their growing-up years.

SECOND EXPERIENCE: JOY

wife - abuse started on first night of marriage

KEY POINTS:

My ex-husband began to abuse me emotionally on the night we were married. I was thirty-four years old and in love with this man who had presented himself as a gentleman during our dating period of nine months.

I was not Catholic before our marriage, but always wanted to convert. After a [religious] sister at the parish asked if I wanted to become Catholic, I was confirmed within eighteen months. Being Catholic is the best thing that I have ever done for me and it was only through God's sweet love that I was able to stay in the marriage as long as I did. I took my marital vows seriously and yes, being Catholic did have a bearing on my not walking out a lot earlier. There were also financial considerations, and of course our three sons. The mental and emotional abuse also left me feeling as though I did not have the right to leave. Abuse is a horrible thing... just awful.

I once called the priest at our parish and left a message for him, giving some information regarding the physical and emotional abuse, telling him that I needed to come see him. That phone call was never returned.

ROLE OF FAITH:

I was receiving spiritual direction from a priest about the abuse. He said it was about my ex-husband's culture—and told me I should pray for him.

Many years later during Adoration, I heard God speaking to me: "Do you trust me?"

I thought, "Yes, I trust you, Jesus."

"Do you trust me?"

I thought, "Am I St. Peter?" And then responded, "Yes, I trust you Jesus."

"Put on your big girl pants."

About six years later, with Christ's help, I left the man who had abused me for nearly thirty-three years.

ADVICE:

You cannot change your abuser. You cannot make him or her be nice to you ... but you can be nice to yourself and leave the situation. There are many resources; however, the best resource is Adoration and loving Christ, knowing that He is in your corner and He will bring people into your life that will help you navigate the way out.

THIRD EXPERIENCE: MONICA

wife – short-term marriage, abuse started on honeymoon

KEY POINTS:

I was abused by my former spouse. The physical abuse, while minor in the scope of the abuse, began on our honeymoon when he grabbed my arm and pulled me down the stairs so I would fall into him. He would hit walls near my face. He would physically stand over me as a way to control me or to block my movement. More insidious than his physical abuse were the way he tried to create and enforce a barrier between me and my family and close friends and the mental games he would play with me. I was married to this man for six months before I asked him to leave the home that was a benefit of my job. Once I asked and took back his key, he broke a window in the back door right above the lock.

ROLE OF FAITH:

My faith helped me because I knew enough to remember that God is always with me, whether in darkness or light. I recognize what grace feels like. I was able to quickly recognize that the marriage I thought I had entered into was a false representation. It was my faith that assured me that God had not created me to endure abuse at the hands of anyone.

I was challenged in my faith by three different women within days of deciding to end my marriage. They wanted to make sure I had prayed for my husband and for my marriage. I was too upset to really answer one of the women, but was clear enough to say to the others, "I was not created to endure any kind of abuse from anybody. Prayer does not heal abuse."

Because I did not publicly share why the marriage failed, it appeared to some that I had just changed my mind. I once crossed paths with a priest who said, "Oh, you're the Smith girl, the Smiths who are really active in their parish. The one who works in ministry and who went to Catholic school. The one who got divorced after less than a year. That's you, right?" I would like to say that I responded in a strong way, but really what I did was say a silent prayer not to cry as I tried to walk away.

ADVICE:

Processing and grief, joy and tears are not linear. There is no straight line to surviving a situation. There is no straight line in how the people you love the most will respond. You owe no one anything. You are the only person who knows the full scope of what you are enduring. You were not created to be anybody's punching bag, to be their receptacle for garbage words. You were not created to heal the hurts they suffered in early life; that is what therapists and counselors are for. Find yourself a good therapist. Say a prayer when the mood strikes you. Let yourself be in the sun. Let the rain wash over your face. Let yourself cry.

FOURTH EXPERIENCE: SUSAN

witnessed father's abuse of mother

KEY POINTS:

I never completely relaxed when I was a child. There were five of us kids, the last one a surprise, and my father was a laborer. He worked hard, drank hard, and talked even harder. You never knew what you were going to get: the dad who played board games and cards with us... or the dad who would keep the house up all night with his talking, often including forcing Mom into the closet in the bedroom where some of us kids slept, trying to talk Mom into having sex with him.

When he was sober, we still lacked peace. Dad was bitter about having lost his opportunity for a college education, and constantly challenged me as the oldest to “contests” to show he could solve math problems more quickly, remember more of a poem I had to memorize, and spell lengthy words out loud backward and forward faster than I could. These may sound like small things, but when you are eight or nine years old, you dread going home because you’re never sure what awaits you. My main coping mechanism became disappearing into the world of books. *Little Women* often was my comfort during his tirades; I thought an absent father like Mr. March would be wonderful.

ROLE OF FAITH:

In that home, faith consisted of the kids going to Mass on Sunday and CCD during the week, and a Blessed Virgin Mary statue in a nook in the dining room. It never occurred to me to try to talk with a priest or a sister; Dad’s behavior was something we didn’t share outside our immediate family.

It also never occurred to me to pray for relief or change. Life just was what it was, and I didn’t think Jesus or anyone else could help me.

ADVICE:

Find community. Even if you aren’t comfortable sharing your story with people, seeing functional relationships can save your sanity and help you learn how to model positive behavior. You can’t change the person who is physically, emotionally, or spiritually attempting to abuse you. But like Jesus on the cross, you have the power not to let that abuse take away your dignity, your core being. Crazy *can* stop with you.