HEALING GRACE:
A FRAMEWORK OF HOPE FOR SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

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There is nothing to glorify about Sexual Abuse (SA). The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions[1] is an intrinsically evil act, and perpetrators should be held morally and criminally liable for them. Countless survivors of SA walk among us unnoticed, doing their best to lead upright lives. Tragically, within them are deep wounds that can fester for decades if not addressed.

The phenomenon of SA among children and adults can be a complex pastoral challenge.[2] As a youth minister and community leader, a number of survivors of SA have thrown me questions like: *"How can I finally forgive?" "Why God?" "Why me?"* It is also painful to see individuals failing in their

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[1]United Nations, "Glossary on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Thematic Glossary of current terminology related to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) in the context of the *United Nations,*" United Nations, 2nd Edition, 24 July 2017, accessed 14 February 2023, https://policy.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5BSecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English_0.pdf 5.

[2]In the Philippines, the occurrences of sexual abuse increased by 264.6 percent (or 202,605 more reports) during the imposition of the "Enhanced Community Quarantine" from March to May 2020, compared to the 76,561 cases during the same period in 2019. (Save The Children Philippines, "Online Sexual Abuse of Children Rising Amid COVID-19 Pandemic," *Save the Children,* accessed 13 February 2023, https://www.savethechildren.org.ph/our-work/our-stories/story/online-sexual-abuse-of-children-rising-amid-covid-19-pandemic/.

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work and relationships because of their limiting beliefs of *"I'm not worthy,"* or *"I'm bad"* which were brought about by a radical SA experience. But I know there is hope.

It is possible for individuals who have been sexually abused to live normal and productive lives. It is possible that their stories are able to uplift and encourage others to open up their wounds so that it can heal in the warmth of the love of positive friendships.[3] I believe it is possible because God's healing grace is present and active.

This paper attempts to put together "Sexual Abuse" in the same breath as "Theological Synthesis." I do not intend to moralize or spiritualize the phenomenon of SA using theological categories, nor do I intend to fit the theological enterprise into a singular phenomenon. This paper aims to provide a "Framework of Hope" for the reader as they understand the struggle of the SA survivors, especially those who have lost faith in a God who is gracious, steadfast, and merciful. If desired, this paper may also be used in the future for ministering to SA survivors, or people with other patterns of brokenness.

This framework follows significant themes in Theology. I aim to answer the question: *"How is Grace real and at work in the life of sexual abuse survivors?"* In doing so, I hope to illustrate the presence of Healing Grace in different moments of the journey to wholeness.

The first part of the paper looks at the phenomenon of sexual abuse and its effects. This can only be understood in the light of God's "Healing Grace" which we propose as a

[3]An example is Bro. Bo Sanchez, who openly writes and preaches about the effects of his sexual abuse experience. He is a charismatic leader of *The Light of Jesus Family,* and has inspired countless individuals in their healing from SA.

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fitting image to God's gratuitous self-communication especially for people who have struggled with SA. The second part of the paper discusses the journey of Healing Grace in the life of the SA survivor: how they are awakened into it, and how they are deepened by it. Finally, we conclude the Framework of Hope with a personal testimony of hope.

The Phenomenon of Sexual Abuse in the Light of Original Sin

Humanity and all creation are created good because we come from a good God. This is also revealed to us in Scriptures when "God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good" (Gen. 1:31, NABRE). Two chapters after however, we encounter the story of Adam and Eve, the archetype of our human nature, being portrayed as desiring to "be like gods" despite being created good (Gen. 3:5). This resulted in "the fall" of humanity, and our "banishment from the Garden" (Gen. 3:24). Later on, this would be called by St. Paul as "Adam's sin," and juxtaposed with the grace of the "New Adam," Jesus Christ, who brings life to all (*CCC* 402). This loss of our original state of grace is taught by the Church as **Original Sin**: a deprivation of original holiness and justice, wounding the natural powers of freedom, inclining the human being to sin ("concupiscence"), and necessitating the salvation brought about by God (*CCC* 405). It is not personal sin, nor is it a passed-on guilt. Original sin may also be understood as the negative influence exerted on people by communal situations and social structures that are fruits of people's sins (*CCC* 408).

The effects of SA elucidate these "negative structures." Whether child or adult, the person who survives SA immediately feels broken. Countless negative effects can be *physical* (chronic fatigue, disease, or self-harm); *mental* (post-traumatic

stress disorder, depression, or suicidal thoughts); and *emotional* (mistrust, unnecessary guilt and shame, or disorientation).[4] Moreover, SA can lead to deep *spiritual* wounds such as developing false images of God, doubt, anger, and fear of death.[5] In all these, the survivor has *not* committed a personal sin of their own, but has been thrust shamelessly into a wounded world. The survivor then is faced with the possibility of continuing this vicious cycle, or co-operating with a kind of healing process.

Perpetrators, on the other hand, experience this brokenness in a subtler, yet equally powerful way. Studies show complex causes for predatory behavior such as: poor relationships with primary caregivers, cognitive distortions, exposure to sexually violent pornography, being sexually abused as children, and more.[6] While the perpetrator *has* committed personal sin bearing guilt and consequences, we can infer that there is an evil structure greater and beyond the workings of personal sin. Their brokenness is caused by a vicious cycle of victimhood unbeknownst even to them. The perpetrator is at the same time a victim and victimizer—a *survivor* in another sense.

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[4]Joyful Heart Foundation, "Effects of Sexual Assault and Rape," *Joyful Heart Foundation,* 2002, accessed 15 February 2023, https://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/learn/sexual-assault-rape/effects-sexual-assault-and-rape.

[5]Victor Vieth, "When Faith Hurts: The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse," *Zero Abuse Project,* 15 June 2017, accessed 15 February 2023, https://www.zeroabuseproject.org/when-faith-hurts-the-spiritual-impact-of-child-abuse/.

[6]Susan Faupel, M.S.W., "Etiology of Adult Sexual Offending," *Somapi Research Brief,* July 2015, accessed 15 February 2023, https://smart.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh231/files/media/document/etiologyofadultsexualoffending.pdf 2.

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The Gift of Healing Grace

SA survivors and perpetrators seem to be "inserted into a race and an environment contaminated by corporate evil. Each person is infected by the contagion before being able to offer the least resistance."[7] But amidst all these, our God does not leave us alone. He intimately knows the woundedness of creation, and thus wills to save us and bring all things into one in him (Eph. 1:10). God communicates His very self to us, graciously, steadfastly, and mercifully despite our sinful condition. This is the gift of **Grace** which journeys with us, and heals our brokenness.

After the Fall, God kindled in our first parents the hope of salvation (Gen. 3:15), and He continued to journey with humankind. In his elected time, He chose to make a covenant with Abraham and gathered a people to Himself (DV 3). In the Old Testament, God is portrayed as *"hen"* and *"hanan"*—Hebrew words for a God who is benevolent and condescending to those who are weak and oppressed; as well as *"hesed"* to describe his steadfast covenant of love. In the New Testament, these characteristics including *"charis"* and *"eleos" [Gk.]* (*"gratia"* and *"misericordia" [Lat.]*, i.e. graciousness and mercy of God), are fully revealed in Jesus Christ: the very Word of God made flesh, Grace Incarnate.[8] Jesus shares with us our humanity, heals and liberates us from sin, and invites us to be whole and holy. Grace, therefore, is not a "thing," but a Person—Jesus Christ—God's very self-communication to us.

[7]Stephen J. Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 616.

[8]Stephen J. Duffy, The Dynamics of Grace: *Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 18-ff.

Among the many images of Grace, I propose the image of "Healing Grace" as hope-giving for the SA survivor. This calls to mind the healing (forgiving) of the adulterous woman, where Jesus says "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more" (Jn 8:11). This unconditional grace of forgiveness given by Jesus embraces the shame and secrecy of the SA survivor, even before they ask for it. On the other hand, the "two-stage" healing of the blind man of Bethsaida (Mk 8:22-26) also gives hope to the SA perpetrator who, because of psychology and negative habits, may need to be reminded of the patience of Jesus who emphasizes the process more than the result.

Awakening to Healing Grace

The experience of sexual abuse itself can seem to be a barrier of Grace. Some survivors of SA turn their anger towards God, and doubt His goodness: *"Is He a 'sadistic' God who continues to create even though he knows that we will only be hurt by the problems of the world?"* I think this is a question marred by one's woundedness of faith, and should not be answered immediately. One who ministers should exhibit deep empathy by means of accompanying the SA survivor throughout the questioning process. This accompaniment is patterned after the intimacy of God with creation, most eloquently shown in the Incarnation, and consequently, in the Paschal Mystery of the Trinity.

In the **Incarnation**, we believe that the Divine Logos out of sheer love for the Father, and in perfect union with the Spirit, *became flesh and made his dwelling among us* (Jn 1:14). He took on human nature in the lowliest of human conditions (Lk 2:6-7) so that thus we might know God's love, and thus become partakers of the divine nature (*CCC* 458, 460). **Jesus of Nazareth**, lived among us, ministered to the poor, healed

the sick, gave hope to the hopeless. He revealed his intimate relationship with God as "Abba," Father (Mk. 14:36) and sent the Spirit of Truth to lead us into all truth (Jn 16:13). And his words and deeds—culminating in his passion, death, and resurrection—pointed to and actualized the Kingdom of God on earth, to which we are called sons and daughters (Jn 1:12).

When the accompaniment of an SA survivor is patterned after the loving intimacy of God to humanity as seen in the mystery of the Incarnation, it is very possible that the person would slowly take down their guard and awaken to Healing Grace. Most often, it only takes *one* unconditional, accepting, and healthy friendship for an SA survivor to open up their secret wounds. This is the power of the Kingdom of God—as it is "already but not yet"—it breaks the walls of secrecy and shame, and grants to the person that glimmer hope that healing and forgiveness is possible.

Another powerful symbol and source of strength for SA survivors is the crucifix: the symbol of the divine act of forgiveness done by Christ on the cross. Jesus, who was totally obedient to the will of the Father, was led to die the most shameful of deaths. By intimately uniting themselves with the **Paschal Mystery** (suffering, death, and resurrection) of Christ, the SA survivor's suffering is not meaningless. Christ's **suffering** transforms their subjective suffering into an opportunity for self-sacrificing love. Suddenly, it is not anymore a question of *"Why me?"* but an overwhelming realization of *"For me!"— if I suffered, Jesus suffered for me first!*

This Paschal Mystery continues into Christ's **death** or *descent into hell*, which according to Hans Urs von Balthasar

is the pinnacle of the Trinity's self-revelation in history.[9] Our God is one who chooses to suffer with us, not only by undergoing physical death, but also spiritual death–that of being made to be sin (2 Cor. 5:21). As the Divine **Son** unites himself with sin, he suffers and becomes totally estranged from the Father. The **Father**, out of his intimate relationship with the Son, shares in this suffering of longing for the Son. And like a divine dance, the **Holy Spirit** unites both of them in Divine Love, proving its power over sin and death, and rendering sin ultimately powerless to separate man from God. This **Trinitarian** intimacy even unto death can surely give hope to the SA survivor that even in the most unimaginable sufferings, God is present.

But death never has the final say. Therefore, as we unite ourselves with Christ's suffering and death, we are also united with him in the **Resurrection**. By His death, Christ liberates us from sin; by his resurrection, he opens for us the way to a new life: a life that reinstates us in God's grace (*CCC* 654). Our dignity is restored and our goodness is affirmed. When an SA survivor finally realizes this empowering love of the Resurrection, they instantly recognize their worth as children of a God who is steadfast, merciful, and just. This overflowing love is then translated into mission, which gives the SA survivor hope to co-operate with Grace, and break the vicious cycle of evil.

Deepening of Healing Grace

These initial moments of hope deepen when the SA survivor is embraced into a loving community of service, the

[9]Lyra Pitstick, *Christ's Descent into Hell: John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar on Theology of Holy Saturday* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 5.

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Church. Unfortunately, because of the growing mistrust in religious institutions due to her human fault of perpetrating this kind of abuse,[10] there is also difficulty in presenting the Church as a safe space for SA survivors.

Among the Trinitarian images of the Church, I would like to suggest emphasizing her as *Temple of the Holy Spirit*. We may present the Church as *People of God*, but this may connote authority and rigidity. We may also present the Church as *Body of Christ*, but this may subject them to judging their own bodies as "defiled and unworthy." Highlighting the empowering, permeating and unifying presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church affirms the sacredness of the Temple where God dwells, and the dignity of their bodies as "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). It also declares that God dwells in them, as well as in their very *perpetrators*. This gives hope that someday forgiveness may even be possible.

Presenting the Church as *Temple of the Holy Spirit* may, however, connote a "faceless" and impersonal church. But to this, Pope Francis says that the church needs nearness and proximity; much like a *field hospital* after battle. In a 2013 interview, the Pope emphasizes that we cannot lock ourselves up in small things and small-minded rules, instead:

> "The church's ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like

[10]Tim Sullivan (AP), "Why is no Priest Ever Convicted of Child Abuse in Philippines?" *Gulf Press,* 09 September 2019, accessed 13 February 2023, https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/philippines/why-is-no-priest-ever-convicted-of-child-abuse-in-philippines-1.1568030082665.

> the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor. This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin."[11]

We cannot, however, turn a blind eye to the abuse of power and scandals of her members in terms of SA. In 2018, Pope Francis acknowledges the wounds of those who suffered, and forcefully condemns the perpetrators:

If, in the past, the response was one of omission, today we want *solidarity*, in the deepest and most challenging sense, to become our way of forging present and future history *(emphasis mine)*."[12]

This solidarity is most eloquently seen in the **Eucharist**, which is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being (*CCC* 1325). In the Holy Communion, we unite ourselves with Christ's offering of his body and blood to the Father, and we receive this *bread of angels*, *bread from heaven*, and *medicine of immortality*.[13] Unfortunately, sometimes these same "communicants" and "church-goers" are the first to make SA survivors feel "unworthy" and "ostracized." Thomas O'Loughlin criticizes this as he develops his Theology of the Eucharist as a "sharing in *one* cup." He says that all Institution narratives which contain Jesus' *gestures* (instead of words), emphasize that "He took

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[11]Antonio Spadaro, SJ, "A Big Heart Open to God: An interview with Pope Francis," *America Magazine,* 30 September 2013, accessed 2 March 2023, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis.

[12]Pope Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God,* Documents, 20 August 2018, accessed 19 February 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html.

[13]St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Eph*. 20, 2: *SCh* 10, 76, as quoted in CCC 1331.

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a / *the* cup."[14] Drinking from *one* cup was counter-cultural, because then "the wealthy would have shared it with the poor, benefactors with clients, slaves with owners."[15] This, he says, was the contention of Paul when he admonished the Corinthians: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons" (1 Cor. 10:21). These unifying actions had *ethical* consequences which identified Christian discipleship. Therefore, each time we partake of the Eucharist, we are bound to be in solidarity with everyone—SA survivor, or otherwise—and we acknowledge that we *all* need Healing Grace to make us whole as persons, and as a Church.

Conclusion: Healing Grace and Hope

Today, as I complete my theological studies and continue on the path of formation to the ministerial priesthood, I am grateful for the journey of healing and wholeness that has characterized my years in formation. I have come to truly experience Healing Grace as real and at work in me as one who has suffered from sexual abuse. It was a traumatic childhood experience, which I was able to talk about openly only when I was in college. The overwhelming shame from SA resulted in my image of God who "loved me only if I had done something right"—to which nothing seemed to make the cut. The overwhelming experience of this evil "greater than me" threw me into a vicious cycle of addictions and unhealthy patterns from which I needed to be saved.

I was awakened to God's healing grace slowly but constantly all throughout my life. Loving people: family, friends and

[14]Matthew 26:20-29; Mark 14:17-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25.

[15]Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Furrow,* vol. 68, no. 2, "We Drink from One Cup – Towards a Theology of the Eucharist," 2 February 2017, 74.

formators, have accompanied me and simply allowed me to let down the walls of shame in my heart. The more I opened up, the more I was healed. This healing grace deepened as I served as youth minister and community leader. This gave me a chance to prudently share and write about my SA story in witness to God's healing grace in my life—and almost always, someone would come up and say: *"It happened to me too. Thank you for giving me hope."* My personal experience of the Paschal Mystery continues up to now, as I continue to experience this "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7) in the daily crosses of discipleship (Mat. 16:24). But this experience remains imperfect and incomplete if they are not united with Christ's once and for all sacrifice, sacramentally offered in the Eucharist, of which I strive to participate in daily, with people who are also broken and in need of healing.

Indeed, *spe salvi sumus*, "In hope we are saved" (Rom. 8:24). Our ministry to SA survivors does not come from our ability to listen, teach, or accompany, but it flows from Jesus Christ our savior who is Healing Grace himself, real and at work even in our deepest brokenness. United with the Father, and in the Holy Spirit, He is always present and active despite our negative experiences (be it sexual abuse or other patterns of sin). To Jesus we ought to cling and offer our lives, he who bore the punishment that makes us whole, [for] by his wounds we [are] healed (Is. 53:5).