

Abuse of Children: A Liturgy of Lament

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Abuse of children by some priests, and the failure of some bishops to protect these children, is a great concern of the church at the present time. A number of responses to this situation are being discussed, planned and implemented.

An important way to respond to the abuse of children in the church is of course through prayer, by individuals and by local church communities. A particularly appropriate form of prayer, I suggest, is that of *lament*, and I offer here a liturgy of lament that may serve as a model and resource for church communities in this time of sadness, anger and questioning.

A liturgy of lament is concerned especially with those who are sinned against, directly and indirectly. It provides an opportunity, in a liturgical setting, to name the sin of abuse and to express feelings about the church's present situation. Prayers are offered for persons who have been abused, for others who have affected, and also for the perpetrators of abuse. The liturgy restates God's vision for children in society and in the church, and calls all to recommit themselves to this vision.

This liturgy may be celebrated in a church or chapel, in a meeting room, in a home, or in other places. The number of participants may be large or small, and it may be more or less formal in style. It may be led by lay people or ordained ministers, and in general ministry is to be shared. Psalms may be sung or spoken, and used in various ways. Songs may express Jesus' love for children, or feelings of grief and loss.

Order of Service

Introductory Rites:

The liturgy may begin with a greeting, welcome and introduction, song, and a prayer.

Jesus and Children:

Matthew 18:1-14 is read, followed by silence, reflection and/or preaching.

Lament for the Abuse of Children:

A psalm of lament (psalm 80 or 74) is sung or spoken.

Contemporary stories of abuse are shared and feelings are expressed..

Another psalm of lament (85) is sung or spoken.

Prayers of Intercession:

Prepared and spontaneous prayers are offered for victims and survivors, for parents, families and friends; for the church community, for innocent priests and bishops, for others who have been hurt; for abusers and those who protected them.

All pray in silence as well. A song may be sung.

Trust in God and Recommitment to Jesus' Vision:

A psalm of lament (126) is sung or spoken.

Matthew 19:13-15 or Luke 18:15-17 is read, followed by silence.

The sign of peace is exchanged, and there may be a closing prayer.

Concluding Rites:

The liturgy concludes with a blessing, dismissal, and song.

Children as Church

After a simple gathering or introductory rite, Jesus' own words concerning children and their place in the church are proclaimed. This gospel reading names his expectations for the church and its ministers, and strongly condemns any who would harm the "little ones" (a phrase that probably includes not only children, but also others who need care, and those whose faith is immature).

It is appropriate to reflect on Jesus' words in silence, in preaching, and perhaps other forms of sharing. The following points might be noted: Abuse of children obviously is a great human tragedy, as well as being a sin and a crime. It is also a failure to listen to and comply with Jesus' frequently repeated message of respect for children. (In addition to the gospel passages used here, see Mark 9:42; 10:13-16 and Luke 9:46-48.) The centrality and respect for children is in fact a part of Matthew's description of the church (in chapter 18) and so their abuse also does violence to the church. Jesus' words about children were addressed to his closest disciples and

apostles, and he told them to model their own attitudes on those of children; respect for children becomes part of the vocation of those who hold office in the church. Abuse, therefore, is a failure to live up to the vocation of ordained ministry.

Lament

The liturgy then moves to lament, using two or more psalms of lament that cry out to God, relating bad things that have happened and asking God, “how long” will these continue. The bad things that have happened in our own time with respect to abuse of children may be told in various ways: firsthand accounts, written reports, stories of families and friends, teachers, social workers, pastoral ministers. As further expression of lament it is appropriate for participants to express feelings of sadness, anger, grief, and to raise questions about this problem (though this is not an appropriate setting for discussion and debate).

The next phase of lament is to lift up prayers of intercession for all those touched by the abuse of children in the church: for victims and survivors, for their families, for the entire church community, for innocent priests and bishops. In addition, prayers are offered for the abusers and those who protected them. These prayers may be prepared ahead of time, but opportunity should also be given for silent prayer and for spoken spontaneous prayers.

Moving to Trust Again

After further prayer in silence, and perhaps a song, the liturgy moves to express trust in God and God’s continuing presence in the church through another psalm of lament. This leads to the restatement of Jesus’ respect and love for children in another gospel reading; this allows all to recommit themselves to this vision. The gospel reading may lead to the exchange of the sign of peace, which is an example of gentle, respectful touch that is the opposite of the touch of violence. (Other nonverbal expressions may also be used.) There is a simple concluding rite.

This liturgy is offered as a model and resource, to be adapted as seems appropriate for particular circumstances.

Additional Resources Available from Liturgy Training Publications

J. F. Henderson, *Liturgies of Lament*

Mari West Zimmerman, *Take and Make Holy: Honoring the Sacred in the Healing Journey of Abuse Survivors*

Additional Resource Available on this Website:

J. F. Henderson, *Protection of Children against Violence: Liturgies of Anointing*