

**Transcript from
Fr Jim Corkery**

Does there now need to be a re-examination of the theology of salvation, in the light of the experience of survivors of abuse who did not sin, but were sinned against?

In this question, the most important words are: “who did not sin but were sinned against.” Why? Because often, when there is talk about “salvation,” the idea that is present is: salvation *from sin*. But survivors of sexual abuse have not sinned; they have been *sinned against*. And so, emphasizing that the heart of salvation is Jesus dying *for our sins* is not particularly helpful for them because in the entire traumatic experience of their sexual abuse, they are not sinners at all. Jesus is not saving them from sin; he is saving them from the terrible sins of other people. In all of this, they do not contrast with Jesus, as sinners do; rather they share his experience, as he shares theirs. For survivors of abuse, the Jesus who saves is in *solidarity* with them; *like* them, *beside* them; because just as they, who are entirely innocent, have suffered abuse, so has he. He knows their pain.

When human sin is at the forefront of the picture in talk about “salvation,” the focus is on “salvation *from*.” But there is another side to salvation: salvation *for*. The very word itself, “salvation,” is related to “health,” “wholeness,” fullness. When, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus says: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (Jn. 10:10), we catch a glimpse of the *positive* side of salvation: it is wellbeing, freedom, renewed life, happiness, re-found joy, and finally peace. It makes much more sense to think of the salvation brought by Jesus as offering these positive gifts to people, especially those who have lost them through abuse and violence. The cross of Jesus is a protest against such violence – by Him, who knew it too. And it is a promise of new life, not just in some unimaginable future, but *now*, as every tear will be wiped away, already in this life. Salvation is *now!*

Is salvation really *now*? Well, think of all the people who encountered Jesus in the Gospels; they were not made to wait. He answered them there and then – healing, embracing, showing compassion, loving. He stood beside them in their pain and restored them to love and freedom and new life at the heart of the community. And his saving touch was always more than a *fixing* touch; it was a compassionate, tender, understanding, “entering in” ... to

all of the difficulties of people, bringing light where darkness had reigned. God becoming human has its *deepest* meaning just here: He becomes like us so that we can become like him: a victim Himself so that we can be victims no more.

People who have been sexually abused by priests and religious have experienced, inside the Church, the very opposite of what they are meant to experience. The Church, the “community of salvation,” is the usual place where believers can hope *together* in the God of grace and salvation. In the Church, people are enabled, somehow, to touch “salvation” through the Scriptures, the sacraments, and the kindness and love of fellow believers. That is how it should be in the Church – so that God’s salvation can become tangible, at least in a fragmentary way. But what of those who have been abused within the Church – and by figures who are meant to be its most trustworthy representatives? For them, the Church ceases to be a place where salvation is easily experienced and it becomes, instead, a place of the opposite: of darkness, evil, of what might even be called “un-salvation.” I am not saying that those abused within the Church lose their “anchor” in the salvation and love that comes from God in Christ. No! But I am saying that this “anchor” becomes, because of their experience, difficult to hold onto *within* the Church. Their experience pushes them to the edge of the life of the Church; it sometimes even pushes them outside of what was once, for them, the “community of salvation”.

Jesus, in the salvation that He brings, wants, with particular intensity, to reach with his healing love and tender heart those who have been abused and violated. He wants this because he is aware that survivors have been doubly “robbed”: robbed of all that was taken from them through the abuse itself and robbed also of being “anchored” and feeling safe in the community of believers, the community of salvation, because in this community, the Church, “salvation” has *not* been their experience. So He wants them to feel safe once more, loved, healed, welcomed and understood, cherished and protected. All these positive characteristics of salvation confer life. They make women and men whole again. They save people *for* a better life, a life of love with God and others. When the Italian poet, Dante, spoke of his beloved, Beatrice, as his salvation, he knew he had found in her what would make him truly *live*. Salvation is fullness of *life*. And for survivors this has to include life also at the heart of the Church, the community of salvation, where they have been hurt

but must not be hurt again.

Thus the Church and theology must indeed learn to speak of “salvation” in the light of survivors’ experience, emphasizing the positive riches that salvation bestows. Central to the theological understanding of salvation is what is called *divinization*. This means receiving a share in the very life of God, something that Christians are already given in baptism. “Divinization” is an unusual word, but it teems with dignity, with the sense that human beings, touched by salvation from God in their present life, become a new creation, become whole, become healed and enlivened. All this belongs to the “*being dimension*” of salvation: one comes to *be* something new: a sharer in God’s own life. For survivors of abuse there is a special tenderness to this because in what they have gone through they share the experience of being *similar* to Jesus, who has been subjected to abuse also. So they can say tenderly to him, “we know what it’s like,” and they can hear tenderly from him: “I too know what it’s like.” There is a particular closeness here, a truly being *like* him, a sharing in his life in a heartfelt and tangible way.

There is a “*doing dimension*” to the gift of *divinization* also. If survivors share especially in who Jesus, a victim like them, *is*, they share also in what he *does* as he brings salvation to people now. This is because, although he alone saves, he does not save alone. He involves those he loves and saves in his own work of saving – here, of saving and re-including those pushed by clerical sexual abuse to the edges of the Church. Survivors, divinized and sharing in Jesus’ own life, are invited in their dignity to *act* with him too in the saving and re-including of other abused persons, whose pain they surely know best. This is a genuine mission of saving that can place survivors at the heart of the Church’s life again, saving with Him whose Cross repudiates the violence of abuse and whose love “enlists” their help in his work – because only they know what it is really like to be robbed of the sense of salvation through abuse. Every person in the Church, bishops and religious superiors of abusers especially, is asked to be involved, today, in this salvific work of Jesus Christ. But no one is more effective in it than those who themselves have been abused because, like Jesus, they know the pain involved. Thus, their receiving salvation can involve them in bringing salvation to others like themselves – because they do this with Jesus, who alone saves, but who never saves alone.