

# The enduring faithfulness of God

*A sex abuse survivor shares her story of hope and healing.*

————— *Seventh in a series.* —————

Mary was about two years old when she first experienced abuse. Each morning her mother took her and her twin sister to a babysitter living in the Valley, not knowing that the woman, her son and the son's friends would physically and sexually abuse both young girls for the next four years during the late 1950s.

Mary learned coping skills to survive severe trauma. It involved disassociating her mind and going into a trance-like state when the molestation began.

"I honestly did not know I was living a life of horrific abuse as a child," says Mary. "You don't differentiate necessarily between your face and your privates. You're just being hurt. You do know it's not right, but you can't even communicate."

The girls were threatened with additional abuse if they told what was happening, and Mary felt an increasing sense of shame grow within her.

Her family moved and she was enrolled at Catholic elementary school in Los Angeles. The abuse finally stopped and Mary loved the care the nuns showed her and her sister. But harm found her again in seventh grade in the later 1960s, when the pastor, Father John, began to hug her inappropriately and to fondle her breasts. Mary, re-entering into a trance-like state, didn't know how to defend herself. "I kind of went into abuse mode," she remembers. The priest would tell her that Jesus loved her and hum a child's tune while he touched her. "I began to despise the word 'Jesus,'" she remembers painfully.

Eventually, Mary saw that a religious sister had witnessed the priest's behavior. "Father is hugging us," she told the nun. Now she observes: "We didn't have the word 'molest.' We didn't have words that could state we were being violated."

The nun put her finger to her lips and Mary remembers her saying, "Shhh. Yes, I know. Stay away from him."

"She probably did as much as she understood was the right thing to do, which was to empower me to run," reflects Mary, adding that she doesn't take today's consciousness and apply it to yesterday.

That same year, Sister Eileen, her teacher, began to target Mary and to hit her physically. One day as the nun was banging Mary's head on a concrete wall, "I felt this horrible sense of abandonment and loss."

At age 12 Mary experienced a spiritual collapse and left her Catholic faith for nearly four decades.

She immediately turned to the sea and took up surfing, finding joy in the ocean. "Out in the water, the sea treated everybody equally. It was my sacred place. There was peace."

At age 17, Mary won the U.S. Surfing Championship.

She would later create the largest surfing school in the country.

Still, the abuse by clergy and religious unhinged her from any kind of moral structure, says Mary, and her teenage years and adult life were filled with meaningless and exploitive sexual encounters, a gang rape, an abusive marriage, refuge in a battered women's shelter, and time in a psychiatric hospital.

In the late 1980s Mary returned to the parish to notify officials of her abuse experiences. The first time she got into a shouting match with a deacon, and the second time a nun told her Father John was no longer there and Sister Eileen had left religious life. The third time, in the mid-1990s, she did meet with archdiocesan officials and was told the priest had retired. Mary didn't want any help from the church other than to have her story be heard and to receive an apology.

The fourth time she called, it was in 2002, after the clergy sex abuse scandal had become public nationwide and the Los Angeles Archdiocese had established the Office of Assistance Ministry. Holy Child Jesus Sister Sheila McNiff, Office director, visited her within a few days and listened to her testimony. Cardinal Roger Mahony has also listened to her story. Mary was offered counseling services, something she says she was ready to accept and which has been "enormously helpful." The abusing priest had died.

"An untreated infected wound is worse than the original wound," says Mary. Sex abuse survivors often have compounded issues that include alcohol or other addictions and struggles with intimacy and trust.

One day while walking on the beach Mary heard a message that explained her love of the sea: "You thought you were running away from me, but you ran to me."

She realized that God had found a way to be faithful and present to her all this time. Last year she returned to her Catholic faith and joined a parish in the South Bay. "My whole journey has been about wanting to know love."

Mary finds solace in Scripture, particularly a dozen Psalms she has memorized. She also connects with the story of Jesus asking the invalid man by the pool if he wants to be well. Every day, Mary affirms her desire for healing: "What baby steps can I take today to affirm my wanting to be well?"

She also is enrolled at Loyola Marymount University as a theology major and is doing an independent study on theology, trauma and healing. She facilitates Serenity Sisters, a weekly healing group for women survivors of sex abuse.

Mary hopes that her involvement with Assistance Ministry will ensure that future generations of young Catholics will not suffer the trauma of abuse that goes undetected, unreported and unhealed.

"We're going to be a real strength in this church one day."