**Testimony:**

**"Light in the Darkness"**

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? (Ps27:1). Believing Him present in each of us,

For many unspoken reasons the vulnerable child I was became a victim of abuse at the hands of strangers, not clergy, not family, just strangers. The God I once knew seemed impossible to find, and peace was only a word – with no meaning at all. As the darkness surrounded me, my victimhood made me a prisoner of self-hate.

My story of sexual abuse had long been a shameful secret in my life. Blaming others for my failures and disappointments only got me deeper into emotional debt. I had to find help to remove my blinders and to see what the Lord desired of me. I needed to acknowledge His forgiveness and healing.

Fortunately, there was light in the darkness and there were signs in the world of God’s love. There was a psalter I found in a goodwill shop. That provided a re-connection to prayer. There was the church that made bread for the poor where I found a community with purpose. There was the confessional where I was accepted again into the Church of my Baptism. All this began my turning away from victimhood. These promises of hope and justice and mercy, led me back to my faith after years of struggling alone to be freed from the darkness of pain, fear, and distrust. Mother Church gave me a Way to follow ...

By the time I heard of the Diocesan Program, I had often sought personal help over the years, from counselors and in the confessional. This helped my conscience, but did not help me to balance my inner life with reality and society. I knew that isolation was not the answer to healing my pain. I needed to meet and pray with other victims of abuse.

It seems clear why I turned to this support group. It is uniquely centered on the Lord. It is a community seeking to bring its members to wholeness, while fully forgiving ‘the institutions and shortcomings of our own humanity. I discovered in this group a promise of trust. I could be free from inhibition to truth-telling. The group is a welcoming, non-judgmental community.

Only by ‘going public’, even in this safe and anonymous way, can I hope to grasp the peace and grace needed to live a meaningful life centered on the Lord. I believe that means for me to speak about the grace and goodness of the Lord in the forum of this support group.

In our meetings, others with these same wounds, when they spoke of their lives, awakened in me a deeper wonder and caring, it brought an understanding of my own defensiveness and programming of avoidance. To admit to such victimhood was to stand vulnerable to all my imagined fears, but, in such a safe space, opening up in this way – without emotionally reliving the experiences with details, but rather admitting the reality of this past anguish,

I am finding a softening of the gates of my heart and mind. I have prayed for a clean heart not made of stone, and the Lord has come to my aid. I have become able to forgive myself.

I believe that this group allows members to speak words they have long feared to voice. It is a place where the weak and injured can find love and acceptance and gain self-confidence to admit and be freed from the shame, blame, fear and anger tied to our abuse.

It also reminds us to forgive our abusers, and for me an important message was really to forgive myself. This was made perfectly clear in a most tender message when Bishop Loverde said, and others reiterated, that ‘it was not your fault’. No matter how wrong or misguided I was as a youth, the Lord has forgiven me and does not want me to blame myself for what happened.

This Christ-centered anonymous support group is a fountain of mercy. Here we may drink deeply of the love of Jesus, and be strengthened. We can be strengthened to journey beyond our own sorrows, helping others to carry their sorrows so that they, too, may be strengthened. The merciful Lord takes the weight of our burdens and carries them, walking beside us. Pope Francis has written in The Face of Mercy, a definition: “Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope”. New life, courage and hope!

Once we have fully claimed healing, we may need no longer consider ourselves victims. Survivors, yes, that may well describe us. But there is another claim we may have, and that is to be survivors, victorious with Christ, victorious over sin and death! We no longer seek to blame and excuse, but to realize the glory of Jesus as the power above all things. May you find this Way and walk in it, relying on the Lord to lead your steps in the Way that Jesus shows us, as our Pope has said, “the path of merciful love”.

God bless you and all God’s children.

**Testimony:**

**"Hope, Trust and Mercy**

**Healing and Recovery.** What exactly is Healing and Recovery? What is the driving force behind Healing and our desire to recover? What causes Healing & Recovery to take place? The Merriam-Webster definition of Healing goes like this: 1. to make sound or whole, to restore health. 2. To cause ( an undesirable condition) to be overcome. To patch. Some say set right, repair. 3. To restore to original purity and integrity. Some say to restore a person to spiritual wholeness. The definition of Recovery is 1. A return to a normal state of health, mind and strength. 2. The action or process of regaining possession or control of something stolen or lost. I especially like this last definition because that is our journey, step by step to regain possession of what we lost and what was stolen in the abuse we experienced as children. Our journey, the act of travelling from one place to another, takes us from being Victims, to Survivors, and onward to Thrivers. There is no road map for this journey, nor does anyone know how long it might take. Sometimes you might get tired and need to rest from the journey, and that is OK!

**Healing begins with Hope and Honesty.** We are all here today because we have been honest, with ourselves, and at least one other person. We knocked on the door of Hope, and it was opened to us. Hope that our silent pain, internal suffering, and most of all, that our voices will be heard, believed and respected. Hope is what brought us here today, Hope keeps us coming back, and Hope ignites our hearts to believe that perhaps, in the midst of our heartache, we can find the good that God has planned for us.

"Who will give me wings, I ask—

"Wings like a dove?

Get me out of here on dove wings;

I want some peace and quiet.

I want a walk in the country,

I want a cabin in the woods.

I am desperate for a change

From rage and stormy weather...

I call to God

God will help me

As dusk, dawn and noon I sigh

Deep sighs-

He hears, He rescues

My life is well and whole,

secure in the middle of danger

Pile your troubles on God's shoulders

He will carry your load,

He will help you out

He will never let good people

topple into ruin.

From Psalm 55

He will never let good people topple into ruin, and we are all GOOD people, we are all Children of God, and as that child, we must learn to rebuild the Trust that was so shattered in our youth. Trust is something that is earned, step by step. It takes time to rebuild a new foundation of Trust, and that is OK. When I first started attending the Prayer Services, the Support Group meetings, and Retreats, my attendance was very sporadic for a multitude of reasons. I was not sure I needed it, I was not sure if I was ready for it, I was not sure if I had time for it, and I was not sure I would feel SAFE in it. Some people like to drive 80 miles per hour, others like to follow the speed limit, and some of us will travel at our own pace as our Hope unites with our Trust on this journey.

I will tell you that even with Hope and Trust with us on our journey, there will be a few dark days ahead. I remember, clearly at the beginning of my journey, there were days that were filled with such pain, heartache, grief, anger and frustration. I cannot begin to tell you how many times I felt like giving up. I was in the throes of “Why me, God?” feeling very unlovable, unworthy, and so remarkably unforgiving towards myself and others. There were many days, when I thought I was going to lose my mind! My daughters were very young, ages 2, 5 and 8; I was married but my husband was away for months at a time. It was not easy, but I knew, deep in my heart, I could not give up Hope. I knew that once I unraveled all the strings of abuse, I could re-weave them into something beautiful that represented a new me, a refreshed me, a restored, spiritually renewed me. One thing I did during these dark times, to remind myself of the spark of Light within me, the Hope, I was so desperately clinging to, which helped me so very much and it was so simple. I lit a small votive candle in a little glass holder and I put it somewhere in my house where I could see it often. It was my reminder of the living Light of God inside of my heart that was ME! Hope and Trust were in that little flame.

What I have struggled with the most is Mercy. Up until recently, I always thought that to show Mercy was to give forgiveness. I now know that is not true. I am reading a book titled Beautiful Mercy, by several authors. One in particular, Jackie Francious-Angel wrote about Mercy, she said: “It wasn’t until recently, when I heard a priest’s homily about Mercy that I finally had a concrete definition to apply to my thoughts and actions in daily living. The priest broke down the Latin word for Mercy, which is miseriacordia, derived from the two words Miserere, ( miser-are-ay) meaning pity or misery, and cor, meaning heart. He then proceeded to say the when we ask for God’s mercy, we are essentially asking Him to relieve us of a heart that is in misery.” As we all know, our hearts can be in a state of misery from so many things, not just Sin, but so many other heartaches.

This has opened a new door in my heart, because there was a time when

I contemplated for many years, on what it meant to receive Mercy, when I equated it with forgiveness, but I never felt that I deserved it, not from God, Jesus, Mary or anyone, for that matter. This is one of the hallmarks of our struggle and journey.... the complexity of the unfounded shame, blame and guilt we so easily place upon ourselves.

Hope, Trust and Mercy. These are the gifts of this program, this fellowship, this camaraderie, with Mercy being the greatest gift of all, because over time, we do receive the gift of relief from a heart that is in misery. We are stronger, better equipped, and fortified through His Mercy and **with** His Grace.

God Bless You All.