Opinion
Guest Voices
Appreciation



Luis Torres Jr., an abuse survivor, speaks to bishops in the chapel during a day of prayer Nov. 12, 2018, at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Teresa Pitt Green

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My fellow survivor of clergy abuse, Luis Torres, first appeared in my well-ordered life one steamy summer evening. He arrived from his home on Staten Island, New York, in an old minivan with a bike strapped to a rack on the back. Where most people would have been thwarted, as was my intent, by the lack of a doorbell or knock, Luis was unfazed.

He was like that with survivors. He simply didn't see barriers. He was all heart and responded to all hearts, especially to broken hearts. Perhaps it was his substantial suffering that won him, on the spiritual plane, a license for entry. At least, that was what I experienced that first evening on my porch.

I had been told a fellow survivor of clergy abuse might reach out to me for support in his healing. I imagined the usual phone calls. What I encountered was someone standing at my front door who would, in turn, play a decisive role in healing me.

It was just before former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick would be exposed for his abuse and the limits of institutional reform would be laid bare. My home was my hermitage, and a productive hermitage it was. I was running a full-time business and a part-time survivor ministry. Even my post-traumatic insomnia was productive, permitting me to engage with many survivors or family members by phone or email.

Then Luis arrived. Despite his jovial demeanor, Luis was taking a courageous step toward hope by visiting me. He was just beginning to gain ground in his battle against a debilitating depression. It had upended his adult life when the full impact of childhood abuse by a priest hit him a few years earlier.

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His professional career had come to a screeching halt. The far greater burden than this financial nightmare was knowing his beloved wife and daughters suffered as he suffered. He spoke to me about it often. His was a tireless search for recovery for the sake of his family.

Haunted by days of being uncommunicative during the darkest of the depression, Luis took any call from his family, whether dining or meeting with any leader from any ecclesial level. His fatherhood disrupted the order of all other things.

He was a father riveted on caring for children he believed had been hurt by his shortcomings during his depression, and doing so he inspired bishops, whom he admonished repeatedly to be fathers not administrators — promising them, too, the love and healing they could receive as fathers in return.

Luis and I, like so many survivors of clergy abuse, were members of that secret club where dark stories were not impediments to knowing each other. We were able to bond easily because we were each in the mode of building.

Luis was driven to rebuild the life his family shared before the emergence of his memories. I faced a task more elusive, a purpose still unseen. I was no longer motivated to build my business, yet still puzzled how to build a ministry that had no name and had little likelihood of finding welcome in the church.



Teresa Pitt Green, left, and Luis Torres Jr., right, pose for a photo with U.S. prelates on May 1, 2019, at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. (CNS/Bob Roller)

I tended to poke fun at what I was doing. Luis was far clearer about my calling. I would not see clearly what he was until just before he died.

Luis and I found so many affinities during our first encounter that we started to build together. We called our collaboration Spirit Fire. It was founded on a mutual certainty we discussed that evening, that only clergy-abuse survivors could bring healing back into the church.

He left believing the future was bright for us and for the church. I left thinking he was oddly optimistic, for a survivor of abuse.

Yet, our friendship had taken root. It seemed we were always talking to someone about the need for a whole new pastoral sensibility toward the many dimensions of healing after abuse. He was particularly vocal about how the church needed us to help complete its reforms.

We double-teamed the talks to help heal the wounds that remain for victims, families, parishes and clergy. And we had more than many good laughs to recount how, when people pressed us for a program to solve the problems, we told them our faith was the only program anyone needed.

When Luis wasn't held back by another bout with his depression, we drove to different events and services in that minivan with the bike strapped to the rack on the back, considering ourselves sparks in spreading Spirit Fire, a fire that would not burn the church but could bring courage to leaders to take the lead spiritually in pastoring the church.

With his remarkable professional skills, Luis proved to be a dignified speaker and facilitator in many events, including an unprecedented day of encounter between bishops and survivors. He especially loved supporting the Mass of Hope and Healing in Brooklyn, New York, where he had faithfully served on the Diocesan Review Board.

Abuse survivors Teresa Pitt Green and Luis Torres Jr. address the U.S. bishops during a day of prayer Nov. 12, 2018, at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (YouTube/United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Because of his unflinching belief in the possibility for healing and hope, Luis was invited to address the full U.S. bishops' conference following the McCarrick scandal. Few saw the courage it took for my friend and all his faith, countering his recurring depression, to drive to Baltimore where the conference was held.

He struggled against so many demons from the past until the moment he stood on the dais, pulled out his tablet, and began to read his remarkable testimony. He told of the painful impact of abuse without flinching, and he challenged the bishops to be fathers, not CEOs. Luis closed with a bedrock assertion that, in hoping for the church to heal, he was often dismissed as naive, but for that naiveté he made no apology, because faith is nothing if it is not naive.

Soon after, Luis started to falter.

At first, it was hardly noticeable. He seemed tired, but we dismissed it as a mild virus. I noticed he had stopped riding his bike. Soon I noticed the bike was no longer strapped on the back of his minivan.

During our last trip, he held up a tremor in his hand for me to see, and we wondered. There was a neurologist appointment after that. In tiny increments, he was growing weaker; however, I didn't see the impact. The pandemic was upon us.

For almost two years, a gruesome paralysis would progress without witnesses other than Luis's wife and daughters, and home health care aides. Only infrequently would Luis relate details of the illness, preferring to focus on his determination to find the cause and to cure the problem.

> As much as he hated the dependency of his paralysis, it helped him overcome the shame left from abuse. Those who cared for him were helping him see his own dignity in God's eyes.
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By the time the pandemic was subsiding, I had moved to Enders Island, Connecticut, and begun full-time ministry at a Catholic post-treatment recovery community. Luis and I laughed that we both now lived on islands. We often found ways that our friendship reflected the islands of our ancestors — his, a sunny and gregarious emerald Puerto Rico; mine, a brooding and rainy emerald Ireland.

From Enders Island, I was able to visit Luis easily once the pandemic restrictions relaxed. I sat with Luis on the porch of his arts-and-crafts house, laughing together in the face of his suffering, talking about hope and healing and faith and life. Luis

had become almost completely paralyzed and used a Stephen-Hawking-type wheelchair.

Those were the days when Luis truly became a Christ figure to me, with the greatest part of his suffering being that he would never rebuild a life with his family that reflected a recovery from the impact of abuse.

We talked candidly about growing paralyzed when you are a survivor of abuse and how, oddly, there was healing to be found in needing people for every action and normal human function. As much as he hated the dependency of his paralysis, it helped him overcome the shame left from abuse. Those who cared for him were helping him see his own dignity in God's eyes.

He was finally able to believe, as well, that people loved him for who he was, for there was nothing he could do for anyone anymore, yet they loved him anyway.

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Luis passed away on March 30, 2023, at the age of 58. His obituary talked about how he was a Brooklyn native and son of immigrants from Puerto Rico. He had loved his Franciscan teachers and excelled at school, as well as volunteered as a camp counselor for developmentally disabled children where he met his beloved wife.

The first in his family to graduate from college, Luis had attended Princeton University for his undergraduate degree and then obtained his law degree from New York University. His career included work as a corporate lawyer and industry leader. His life had been one of hard work and service and faith.

Eventually, while serving in New York City government, Luis was involved in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, escorting dignitaries and other visiting officials to Ground Zero, which led to the rare cancer that just this past month took Luis from us.

And, through it all, through this entire great and suffering life, Luis not only bore the cross of a survivor of clergy abuse, he also tirelessly found ways to bring his own ongoing healing process as an offering to help the church heal.

The night of his wake, a long line stretched through the entire funeral home for a full four hours. Every room in the funeral home was crowded with people, and there was standing room only during the funeral Mass the next day.

As people shuffled forward to receive Communion, I was reminded of how Luis treasured the simple act of receiving the Eucharist with all the holy naiveté God wishes us to have, trusting him for safety and for life — and for eternal life where the wounds of abuse are no more and the loving husband, father and friend finally lays down his impossible cross to live freely in a faith rewarded abundantly for, in the midst of great suffering, its naiveté.

The Luis A. Torres, Jr. Esq., Fund has been established to honor the leadership of the beloved husband, father and friend, with all gifts being used to continue the work of Spirit Fire, which Luis co-founded. The fund will sponsor survivors and family members for visits to Enders Island, where they may rest, pray and encounter the trauma-informed pastoral ministry of Spirit Fire, or to sponsor priests or religious to attend Spirit Fire training, where they may learn basics in offering trauma-informed pastoral care to survivors of abuse in their own ministries.