News



An image of Our Lady, Undoer of Knots, is seen in the Vatican Gardens in 2021. (CNS/Filippo Monteforte, Reuters pool)

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An abuse survivor group has just chosen several patron saints as "heavenly friends" and guides on the journey to recovery.

"Many people find great comfort and strength in developing a relationship with particular saints who they turn to for inspiration and intercession," said Sara Larson, executive director of the independent nonprofit Awake Milwaukee, which works to raise awareness of and heal sexual abuse in both the Milwaukee Archdiocese and the Catholic Church as a whole.

In a message posted to its website Oct. 25, Awake announced it had named as its patrons:

St. Charles Lwanga is depicted in a window at St. Jerome Church in Hyattsville, Maryland. (OS

St. Charles Lwanga is depicted in a window at St. Jerome Church in Hyattsville, Maryland. (OSV News/CNS file/Bob Roller)

- St. Charles Lwanga, a 19th-century court page in what is now Uganda, who was martyred for his faith and for defending royal pages from the king's sexual advances;
- St. Catherine of Siena, a 14th-century Italian mystic, church reformer and one of only four female doctors of the church;
- St. Mary and St. Abraham of Edessa, fourth-century ascetics who personally experienced the devastation of clerical sexual abuse;
- St. Michael the Archangel;
- Our Lady Undoer of Knots, a Marian devotion originating in 18th-century Germany and popularized in recent years by Pope Francis.

The roster was unveiled at a prayer service earlier in the week that began Awake's novena asking for the saints' intercession.

Larson told OSV News that she knows "survivors who feel distant from God but are still able to connect with a particular saint that they see as a friend and companion."

The decision to choose patron saints was a response to the "knowledge that so many in the Awake community have negative experiences and associations with aspects of the Catholic faith," Larson said in the official announcement.

In addition, the group wished "to draw from parts of Catholic tradition that can be encouraging or inspiring or strengthening, regardless of someone's current relationship with the church," she said.



A statue of St. Michael the Archangel is seen at the Church of St. Michael in New York City. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Choosing the saints "involved dozens of people" from Awake's staff, board, leadership team and survivor advisory panel, as well as "deep listening to many perspectives and prayerful communal discernment," Larson told OSV News.

"We knew we wanted a diverse group of saints representing different life experiences, ethnic backgrounds, genders, time periods and connection points to Awake's work, so that each person in the Awake community, particularly the survivors, would be able to find at least one saint that resonated with them," she said. "We started by brainstorming a long list of possible saints, then narrowed the list down to 10 possibilities that we researched and prayed with before ultimately

choosing our final list."

St. Charles Lwanga stood out as "an example of courage in the face of sexual violence" — a courage he found "in community, just as we do in the Awake community," said the group on its website. "We do not know if Charles Lwanga himself ever experienced sexual abuse, but we know he fought to defend the vulnerable, even when it meant risking everything."

St. Catherine of Siena "saw that the church of her time had gone astray from its mission and worked courageously for reform and renewal," Awake said on its website. "She was deeply rooted in prayer, and even in the face of deep opposition by Catholic leaders, she never lost her love for Jesus or her beloved church."



A depiction of St. Catherine of Siena in adoration of the Sacred Heart (circa 1739) is seen in a painting displayed at the Church of Saint-Martin de Montchamp in Valdallière, France. (OSV News/Wikimedia Commons-cc 4.0)

The lives of St. Mary and St. Abraham of Edessa in particular speak profoundly to clerical abuse survivors. St. Mary, who along with her uncle Abraham had embraced an austere life of prayer and penance, was exploited and raped by a corrupt monk.

The trauma of the assault led her to flee to a distant city and become a prostitute, a destitution from which St. Abraham rescued her.

Awake noted in its announcement that the experience of St. Mary — often surnamed "the harlot" in various accounts — "is sometimes told in a way that holds her responsible for the monk's assault, not recognizing the power differential that made her consent impossible."

"Hearing her story now, it's easy to understand the impact of this trauma on Mary, and how shame and guilt led her to painful choices after her assault," the group said.

"We were grateful to find a patron saint who was herself a victim of sexual abuse by a Catholic leader," Larson told OSV News. "We have heard from many survivors — especially women who experienced abuse as adults — that they find great comfort and hope in Mary's story, especially when it's told with an understanding of the power differential at play in her assault and the way this trauma impacted her later choices. The recognition that absolutely nothing can cut us off from the love of God or the possibility of holiness is so important for abuse survivors — and for all of us."

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St. Abraham "provides an example for all who seek to support and accompany survivors," the group said.

St. Michael — revered since ancient times as a protector in the Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Baha'i faith traditions — is also "a symbol of divine justice" who affirms that "any victory ultimately comes from God," said the Awake announcement. "We heard from many survivors that they are drawn to 'warrior' saints like Michael the Archangel because they need to know that someone powerful is fighting for them."

Our Lady Undoer of Knots, whose image depicts Mary patiently loosening the snarls in a strand, recalls both the damage of clerical abuse to the church, and the divine intervention needed to reverse it, said the Awake statement.

"We recognize that the reality of sexual abuse and institutional betrayal in the Catholic Church has tied knots of all kinds in the church and in our world, and the

trauma of abuse can tie knots within victim-survivors, complicating their ability to relate to themselves, to God, to the church, and to other people," the group said. "When we call on Our Lady Undoer of Knots, the Awake community recognizes that the problems we face are simply beyond our capacity to untie. Through Mary's intercession, we place our trust in God who makes awakening, transformation, and healing possible."