Culture
Book Reviews



Mark Joseph Williams, an abuse survivor, speaks during a Nov. 15, 2022, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)



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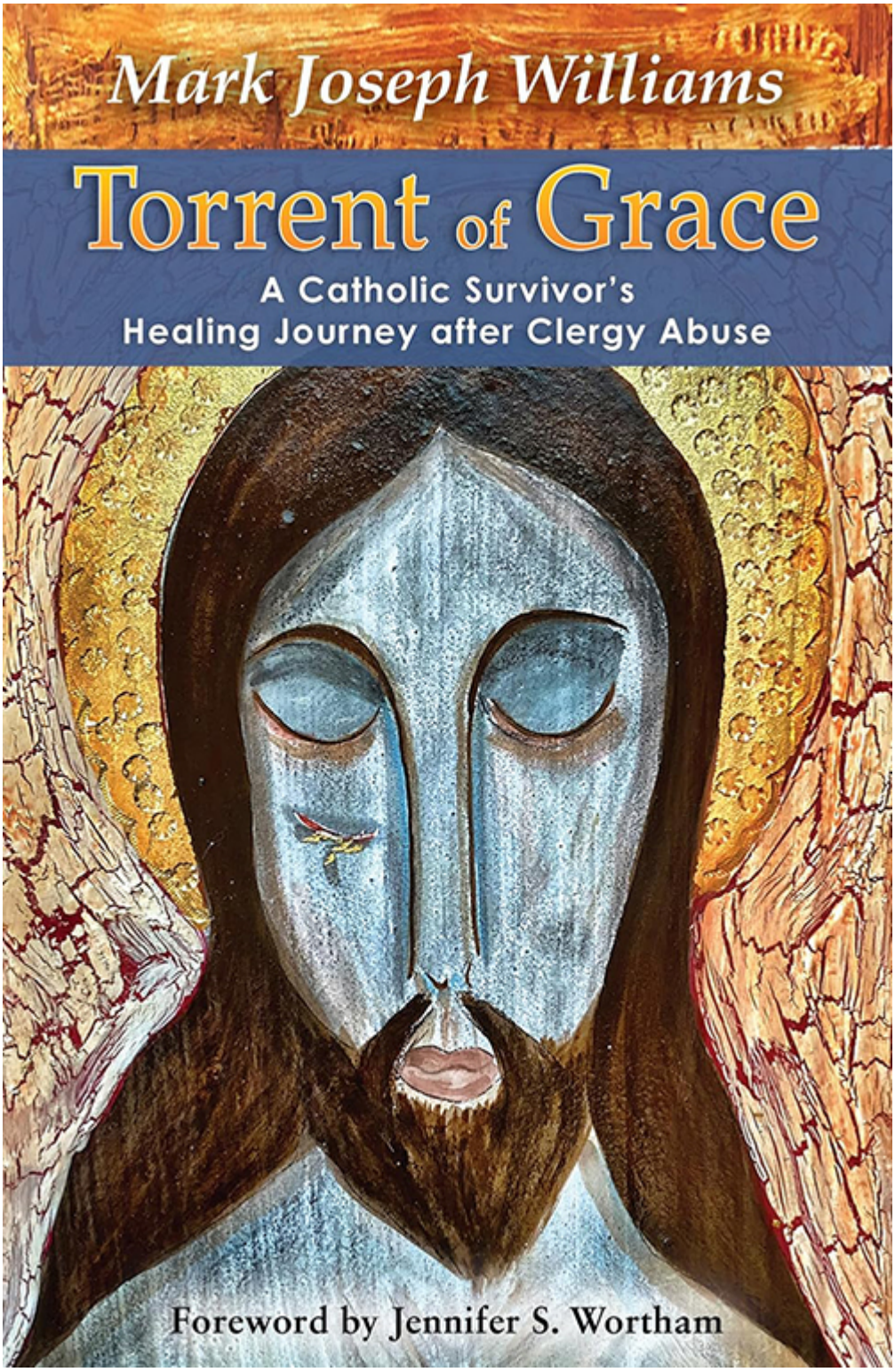
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February 1, 2025

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Shortly after his 12th birthday, Mark Joseph Williams' father died, leaving him under the care of a mother suffering from alcoholism and mental illness. The fact that several men in his community stepped in as father figures appeared to be a positive thing — until it wasn't. Williams was first raped at the age of 13 by his devout Catholic teacher, later by a Catholic priest.

In his new book *Torrent of Grace: A Catholic Survivor's Healing Journey after Clergy Abuse*, Williams offers a contribution to a concerningly limited literary genre in the church: clergy abuse survivor narratives. Torrent of Grace is not without its shortcomings, but the messy, painful and challenging story is a necessary and important work for the church.



Torrent of Grace: A Catholic Survivor's Healing Journey after Clergy Abuse
Mark Joseph Williams
192 pages; Orbis Book
$24.00

On the night of his first sexual assault, the young Williams was given alcohol by the schoolteacher, who had offered to babysit for the single mother. That was the beginning of an alcohol addiction that Williams used to numb his pain for decades.

After the abuse, Williams remembers, he felt consumed by fear and "couldn't understand … what exactly I had gone through." No one in his school or community suspected his suffering. This reality continued into adulthood; he was an accomplished corporate executive, a family man — but also an alcoholic with secrets that controlled his life.

But those secrets caught up to him. Williams writes of "bottoming out": lying to his wife, getting drunk at a bar, injuring himself and finally being arrested. That night, he shared a discovery with many saints throughout history: "Before I would reckon with humility, I would meet humiliation." If the first night of abuse closed Williams off from himself, "bottoming out" was the start of him opening up again. He looks back on that horrific experience with gratitude.

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That opening was messy. Williams gave up alcohol "cold turkey," only to suffer from panic attacks, a psychosomatic limp and serious mental health struggles as he stumbled toward healing.

Healing from abuse is an ugly and chaotic business. Williams' vulnerability can help destigmatize the messy process, which many experience to be exhausting and scary. Given the prevalence of abuse in our community, all Catholics should learn about the complicated healing process and how we can play our part in it, cultivating environments where people feel safe and able to open up about abuse, because abuse can be very good at hiding.

As an abuse survivor once shared with me, "You can wound with just incompetence. There doesn't have to be malice." We need to learn.

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I do want to offer a word of disagreement and caution. Williams admiringly quotes fellow survivor Jennifer Wortham: "If we do not open our hearts and forgive all those who have transgressed against us, we will never experience the joy of grace." Williams stresses the role of forgiving his abusers in his healing process. But in an interview excerpt at the end of the book he acknowledges that he "can't imagine everyone being able to do that." Are we then to believe that not every survivor can experience the "joy of grace"?

These sorts of messages are unfortunately common when leaders in the church talk about sexual abuse. After hearing a similar message from a popular Catholic speaker at a retreat, one survivor told me she experienced panic attacks and thought something was wrong with her because she just couldn't muster forgiveness for her abuser. Each survivor's journey is unique, and we should be cautious with the assumption that what brought one survivor peace is what all survivors need. Messages like these risk shaming survivors who do not feel ready, able or interested to forgive. Grace and joy are available to all.

The variance in experience ultimately speaks to the value of survivors continuing to share their stories of healing. This genre must be expanded. Williams does not offer the only or final account, but his story is both important and necessary, helping to open important doors in the church. Will our leaders help more survivors walk through them?