

Abstract

An initiative that invited churchgoers and the wider community to unite in solidarity with survivors, through engaging in a liturgy of symbols, prayer and silence. Two survivors joined both services.

It was lay led: the Catholic area dean and a female vicar from a Welsh church attended the village hall, and the parish priest came to the evening church service. None of these individuals took on a formal role, but they participated fully.



Methodology

The outline structure of the prayer

- We journey through **seven** movements:
- Welcome:** Setting our ‘locus’: a neutral space with full agency for participants, stressed as foundational
 - A reflection:** Sharing our symbols
 - Listening:** Hearing the Word of God and the unifying meditation. Luke 2 & *Dilexit Nos 19*
 - Shared silence & active listening to responses**
 - Act of collective reparation:** the stones
 - A witness speaks:** *A Survivor’s Voice* [Laurence Gien]
 - Litany of the wounded heart:** Praying for the broken-hearted, against institutional indifference

A Prayer Service for Survivors of Abuse: *The Open Heart & The Empty Chair*

Michael Woodward

Spiritual Director & Pilgrimage Leader; Founder of Sanctuary of the Heart (2026)

Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality (CACS), Oxford, UK



Symbols & Materials

The Empty Chair
“A communication from some unable to enter Church or unable to speak, but still wanting, somehow, to cry out to the Church family – and invite them to remember and consider how they might ease the situation for those harmed.”

The Heart
The heart of Christ, as the symbol of the deepest and most personal source of his love for us, is the very core of the initial preaching of the Gospel.

Water
The living water given to the Woman at the Well (Jn 4) stands at the origin of our faith as the wellspring that refreshes and enlivens our Christian beliefs. Water flowing from Christ’s side on the cross gave birth to the community of The Way.

The Stones Ritual
Each person who wishes to places their stone in the bowl of water.

The Intention of Collective Reparation
”As we place these stones, we acknowledge that the Church owes a debt of love and restoration to each and every survivor. We stand in solidarity with those whose trust was broken.”

Results

- ❖ **Productive conversations** and the opportunity to get to know a survivor with an advisory role in the national Catholic Safeguarding Agency (CSSA) who has invaluable experience and advice to share. We hope to work together.
- ❖ The Archdiocesan safeguarding officer who attended both services is now a supportive advocate, opening future possibilities.
- ❖ A very **positive ecumenical cooperation** in this area, based on prayer, is an encouraging sign for the future.

“
I will share how Laurence Gien’s courage in speaking from his experience is helping many.
”

A survivor attendee from a neighbouring diocese, speaking days after the service.

Looking Back & Further On

This initiative was prompted by an online talk from Fr Zollner in January 2026. The *Sanctuary of the Heart* material developed in response is still evolving. Your use of the service outlined here is warmly encouraged. I ask in return only for you to send a brief assessment of your group’s experience afterwards.



“
I highlighted that you'd gone out of church, to the village hall, that'd you emphasised 'free agency' – that the invitation was, for me, good in its symbolism, that it had said it wouldn't be more than an hour, and that there would be refreshments.
”

I also highlighted that it had been quite a thing that (in the evening) the parish priest had been present, but the service had been lay led, and how much it was that this 'flipping of the power dynamic' had been a helpful experience.

The CSSA person was interested that a space had been opened up for anyone to speak. She and I were talking about services on the "Day" where no voice of a survivor has been heard.
”

Response from a survivor in contact with the national safeguarding agency (the CSSA).

Recommendations

- ❖ Seek out those who can help you, especially survivors. Liaise with safeguarding professionals.
- ❖ I was humbled, by how much experience was available locally, and of great help.
- ❖ Don’t expect to reach full agreement on actions; survivors have differing experiences and perspectives.
- ❖ Existing attitudes of fear, misunderstanding or indifference in our communities will change slowly, one person at a time. That’s fine.
- ❖ Expect Rule #1 to apply (you can’t win or hope to please everyone concerned)
- ❖ A tiny beginning may, in God’s time, go a long way...

Acknowledgements

Fr Zollner SJ and the Carmelite Spirituality Network [csn.org.uk] for creating the event in January 2026 leading to this. A number of survivors and trauma-informed people helped to shape my outlook and this liturgy in valuable conversations. I am grateful to the Lay Community of Saint Benedict [lcsb.uk] members who took part in a useful pilot on Holy Saturday in Wales. Thanks are due to James Mulcahy for crucial technical help, and to JP De Quay.