



APOSTOLIC VISITATION TO THE ARCHDIOCESE OF ARMAGH
SERVICE OF PENITENCE AND HEALING
SHEILA BARONESS HOLLINS

23 January 2011, St Patrick's Cathedral, Archdiocese of Armagh

Reflection by Baroness Sheila Hollins, Consultant Psychiatrist, Assistant to Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor during Visitation

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God let it happen?

Well, he may not stop bad things happening, but remember, God gave us His only son and let him suffer and die at our hands. Was this to show us His understanding of our human frailty?

And to show that it is possible with His love to rise above suffering and pain, I believe he gave us His son so that we would learn from him, how to suffer with each other and how to love one another. Jesus became human and experienced suffering and pain, similar to the trauma of the person who has been assaulted or abused. He promised to be with us to the end of time. He didn't promise to prevent suffering – to prevent us from hurting each other – but he did promise to be with us in our suffering.

Sexual abuse is almost always perpetrated by people who are in positions of power and authority, people whom the child or vulnerable adult trusts. How can someone who has been abused ever learn to love and trust again when their trust has been shattered in such a devastating way?

I believe that the deep healing that is needed comes slowly, and in different ways, but that the mystery of the triumph of the Cross is very important to try to understand.

What I have heard in these last two weeks is of the suffering of so many people, people who have not been listened to, and who have not felt the Church alongside them, unconditionally loving them and helping them to rise above their pain. What I have heard is of victims of abuse lending a helping hand and a listening ear to other victims. I think there is a lesson here for us, that those who have experienced abuse are our essential teachers. One of the people we met introduced the slogan 'Nothing About Us Without Us' to make the point that unless we listen and include the very people who have suffered the most, we will get things wrong.

Out of their suffering, some of them, as survivors, have been able to reach out with compassion to victims, to offer a service which is spot on and valued by people in need. Who knows what service each and every one of us might be called to give? We know that we all have some gifts to share, and following Christ's lead we should share them in a humble and honest way, whether we are called to serve in our church as lay people, religious, priests or bishops. We can build bonds of trust again through openness and through vigilance. We are all called to love.