

Mercy Walks With Trafficked Women

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Where do I walk? With whom do I walk? My answers may vary from yours, but we Sisters of Mercy walk with those who are most vulnerable and wounded in some way by contemporary society.

I walk with others who care, many of whom are my colleagues. We are walking with persons who have been exploited by commercial sex trafficking and/or labor trafficking. They are of any age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic status – most are at risk in one or more of these designations. They have suffered violence, abuse, discrimination and disrespect. When we reach out to them, who do we see? Can we identify with their suffering? No, but we can reach out to them with truly felt compassion. Assistance, care, understanding and interaction must be offered without judgment.

When I interact with trafficking victims, most often sexually exploited women, I experience their incredible resilience. For some, their experiences are too painful to share; for others, they want to share so other victim/survivors can find courage to transition out and rebuild their lives.

As a Mercy woman of faith, my prayer calls me to respond to the needs of these victim/survivors. My response in ministry leads me back to depending on God. I am called to integrate contemplation and action. I often reflect on who God is for me; but more importantly, who is God for victims/survivors?

How does their endurance of daily repeated physical, emotional, sexual and labor-related abuses shape their image of God? The trauma that trafficked women experience is extraordinarily complex. How do I help them understand the love of God? How do I remind them that they are spiritual beings worthy of being loved by God? I needed to ask and

understand how they see or experience God. So, I asked a small group of exploited women served through The Justice Project's *Willow Tree*, in Kansas City, Missouri.

Here is what some of them said about God:

- God is my protector.
- God is good all the time.
- God is REAL love, not fake love.
- God always found me when I was lost.
- God is a spirit who always loved me when no one else did.
- I used to think God was punishing me but now I know I just didn't let Him help me.
- Without God, I would be dead.

Which of these descriptions of God most strikes you? Why?

Conversation with the women also brought out that they don't like the God-name "higher power" because it's too abusive. They might consider "deeper power." A Native American transgender woman talked about the native belief that God is everywhere, takes all forms, has many names and is in all of us. The belief that God is always with us, but that we have the choice of what to do was voiced by almost everyone in the group. The overall belief is that God is a loving God, but that God is very capable of, in their terms, "kickin' your ass."

What do these women's reflections about God say to you?

As so often happens, these victims and survivors amaze me, and I receive more than I ever give. I have no idea or experience of the horrendous treatment they endure and survive, so I am amazed at their courage in making the transition out. To fully respond to my calling to ministry with them, I must simply walk with them until I understand. It is a slow and arduous journey that I began more than 20 years ago. My journey with them continues.



*I pray: Compassionate, tender God, you desire that all might have fullness of life and you invite me to care for all persons you have created. God, I know you are present, and I am in awe of your grace which strengthens me as I hear and respond to the call to confront the tragic reality of human trafficking. May I respond as You would.
Amen.*

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