

Where is my Guardian Angel?



Holy Communion ~ St Mary's Church, Castlemaine ~1970

I had been looking forward to this day for such a long time. I was very excited and looking forward to making my Holy Communion. I would get new white shoes and be able wear a veil and dress like a little nun ... and like the nuns I would promise my loyalty to God ... however, this day was overshadowed by the burden of intense guilt, shame and terrifying fear of religious retribution from the actions of a Paedophile Priest.

I was systematically abused by Father Leo Halloran, Parish Priest at St Mary's Catholic in Castlemaine between the years 1970 to 1973. The abuse only ceased when I left the school at the end of Grade Six, however he did continue contact with my family and was relentless in pursuing my older siblings to attend mass. On one occasion Father Halloran visited the family home when there was a family crisis to tell me that I had bought the devil into the family and created the problems that my family was experiencing ... I was 25. It was like being struck by a bolt of lightning as I yet again felt the wrath of God upon my soul, and the old feelings of hopelessness and self-loathing once again took hold.



I was four when I started school at St Mary's Primary School, the sixth child in my family. I had five older siblings and three younger siblings. We were an extremely poor family, living in a house with no heating, no hot water and only a small combustion stove to cook meals for eleven. Food was scarce and many nights were spent shivering in

bed, cold and hungry as there was just no money to buy food. I thought that as Jesus had suffered for our sins, what right did I have to complain and as such accepted my world of poverty and scarcity.

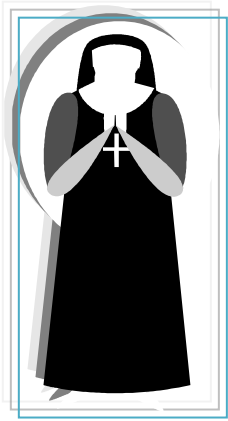
Despite this, I loved the church and adored the Virgin Mary and the fact we were always told that we would have at least one Guardian Angel watching over us at all times. The world of the nuns, the Sisters of Mercy who taught us seemed magical and mysterious and I was constantly mesmerised by their existence.



I loved the thought of a Guardian Angel by my side and seeing the nuns at school and at church. Mother Superior was the most mesmerising of all nuns whom I would catch glimpses of at the convent as she went about her daily chores ...she was a little old lady bent over at a ninety degree angle. I assumed she was called Mother Superior and was bent over because she'd spent a lifetime

praying and therefore must have been much closer to God.

Even at my young age, as early as Grade One, I was aware of the hierarchy that existed between the nuns, and the priest, and God. The nuns always deferred to the Priest, and seemed very unhappy and angry at times. I wondered if they were angry at all the sinners in the world, at the Priest or at all the children who failed to say their prayers at night.



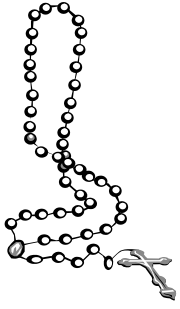
Despite being mesmerised by God's 'living Angels' in their black and white robes, the nuns were to be feared . . . and feared they were. The punishment metered out by the nuns was short, sharp and very painful.

Punishment was a regular occurrence of every class, and I would quietly pray to myself that it would not be me who would be yelled at, hit and beaten. Maths was my weak point and I suffered severe shyness so lived in fear when maths classes began and hoped and prayed that I would not be asked to do additions on the blackboard.

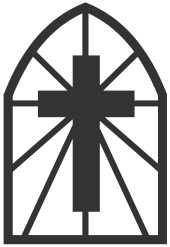
There were a range of punishments dished out by the nuns . . . wooden rulers used to hit knuckles to bring order to rowdy children, fists made with protruding knuckles jabbed repeatedly into your back for greater effect (pain), the leather strap reserved mainly for boys, and the open-handed slap to bare skin on the back of the legs. A slap given with such force that a hand-shaped welt would develop on the skin and remain visible all day and well into the evening.

I was often the recipient of such a slap when out of sheer terror I would not be able to think clearly enough to do the sums on the blackboard . . . a beating by the nun would ensue, and reinforced to me that these god-like figures also hated me because the priest must have told them I was evil and bad.

I felt that I had lost my soul to Satan and that no amount of praying and being good would undo the damage that I had created or remove the evilness within me



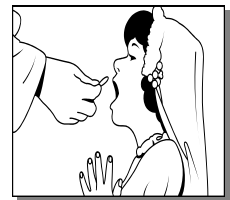
My mother, being a devout Catholic was utterly devoted to God, the Church and the Priest and in my little eight year olds mind; I felt unimaginable shame and guilt for what I had taken place with Father Halloran . . . I could never tell my mother as this would be like telling her I love Satan and I would be punished. I thought that the priest on one of his many visits to our house must've told my mother that I was an evil child and would go to hell.



Going to Mass every Sunday at the Church became a mini sort of Hell, intensifying my fear and resulting in me experiencing what I know understand to be anxiety attacks. I was expected to attend Holy Communion; however I had to first go to Confession where I had to tell Fr. Halloran all my sins in the enclosed space of the confessional box.

I would kneel in the darkness in terror as I could see the priest's mouth through the metal grate separating us and would recite the prescribed invocation "forgive me Father, for I have sinned". Fr. Halloran would then meter out the required number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys for me to recite in order to appease God.

After receiving absolution from my sins, I was deemed "pure" enough to be able to receive Holy Communion. Receiving Holy Communion added



another layer of terror to my already fearful and unbearable existence. This required me to again kneel at Fr. Halloran's feet and open my mouth to receive the "Body of Christ" . . . an experience that became increasingly difficult as it mirrored the sexual abuse I had been subjected to by this representative of God.

The pressure on me to attend Church was a constant and an expectation of the family; however I did all I could to get out of attending Mass each week. It was now three years since the abuse began and when I did attend Mass, I would become dizzy, find it hard to breathe and would feel a acute panic and a sense of dread would descend upon me. I would flee the church midway through the Mass as the terror escalated with each passing minute and overwhelm me to the point of nausea and hyperventilation.

I was now 11 years of age and getting more creative at getting out of going to Mass. If I was forced to go, and to the constant annoyance of my mother, I worked out that if I ate food an hour before going to Confession, I would not be allowed to repent my sins and as a prerequisite for Communion, I would be saved from having to kneel in front of the priest and relive the abuse.

My mother doing what she felt was right tried all she could to get me to stay for the duration of the Mass service and even resorted to sitting me in the middle of a long pew in between other people. I thought she knew how evil I was and was trying to save my soul by making me attend Confession and Communion. This time of my life was extremely painful as I had to face the Priest on a weekly basis, as well as upset and disappoint my mother on a regular basis for my own survival. The feeling of wanting to die never left me and I had over the preceding three years retreated into a world of self loathing, pessimism and deep Depression.

The abuse by Father Halloran consisted of emotional and spiritual abuse, along with ongoing sexual abuse. The emotional and spiritual abuse permeated to the core of my being where I felt fractured by the darkness of his predictions for my soul. His words to me during each episode of abuse reverberated in my little mind like evil darts from the devil himself.



I prayed and prayed and prayed and wondered where my Guardian Angel had gone to??

..... and then one day I had the terrifying realisation that I was too evil for a Guardian angel to watch over me!! ... and it dawned on me that I was all alone to face my sins and fate and ultimate destination in hell!!!



The abuse took place in the Rectory, the Priest's residence and also in a disused toilet located behind the church set up by the Father Malloran purely for the purposes of child molestation.

The detached toilet block situated behind overgrown shrubbery in a corner of the yard behind the church consisted of two toilet cubicles. One cubicle was always locked, with the other toilet left unlocked for children from Grade Three to use. The Grade Three building was set apart from the main school building and sat alongside the toilet block.

From this point on, the effects of the abuse was hideous, frightening and all encompassing. ... as a little Catholic child who had just turned eight, I felt destined to end up in the fiery abuse of hell and would undoubtedly be subjected to eternal damnation for what was happening to me ...

.throughout this time a growing sense of helplessness and hopelessness descended upon my world like a dark cloud of evil and so began an intolerable mental, emotional and spiritual prison sentence that I was convinced would ultimately lead me to an afterlife of flames and wailing people – the dreaded place called HELL ... and I lost the will to live.

I began to see the world around me in black and white....a little girl's world once filled with wonderment and art and colour and butterflies and flowers became a cold and frightening world . . . my world descended into a dark and lonely place where no-one could help me or save me, no-one would want me and my family must surely hate me.



Nighttimes were the worst. . . I would lay awake in fear of the dark, that the Devil was lurking in the darkness to take me.

thinking

I lived in acute fear of what hell would be like and suffered terribly with palpable loneliness when thinking of the disappointment my mother and family must feel towards me.

.... I did not want to live

I did not know that people could die at will by their own means. I was a very innocent child and the exposure to any sort of outside beliefs or influences was extremely limited due to only being allowed to watch certain TV shows. I did not know that there was a word for what I was feeling, and it was not until many years later that I learned that what I felt was "suicidal".

I wished I was dead every day and felt immense hatred for myself with urges to harm myself an ever present threat which would be felt as intense feelings of self hate. Whenever I was mistreated, or reprimanded or bullied at school, this told me that everyone else in my life could see my badness and had no other option but to treat me with disdain and hatred. Had I lived in a different era and exposed to TV and the electronic media that we have in this era, I would have known that there was such a thing as suicide and I would have carried it out.

Whilst I did not know that what I was feeling was suicidal, I knew that my life was not worth living and I would day dream constantly that I would be killed somehow and be taken to my rightful place in the “fiery abyss of hell.”

On one particularly low day, I was being ostracised by the usual sibling rivalry and fights in families, when the sense of despair and hopelessness and intense self loathing reached a crescendo – the urge to die was overwhelming and I ran from the home to find a place a couple of streets away where I sat for hours beside the road sobbing and contemplating how I could die.

I watched cars go up and down the road and had visions of me being run over and killed, but could not conceptualise how this could occur and how I could end up under a car. In my little mind, I did



not know what suicide was and as such did not know that I had the power and could die through my own action.

... I was eight years of age.

... I am now fifty years of age

... and extremely lucky to be alive.

Mary Rutledge