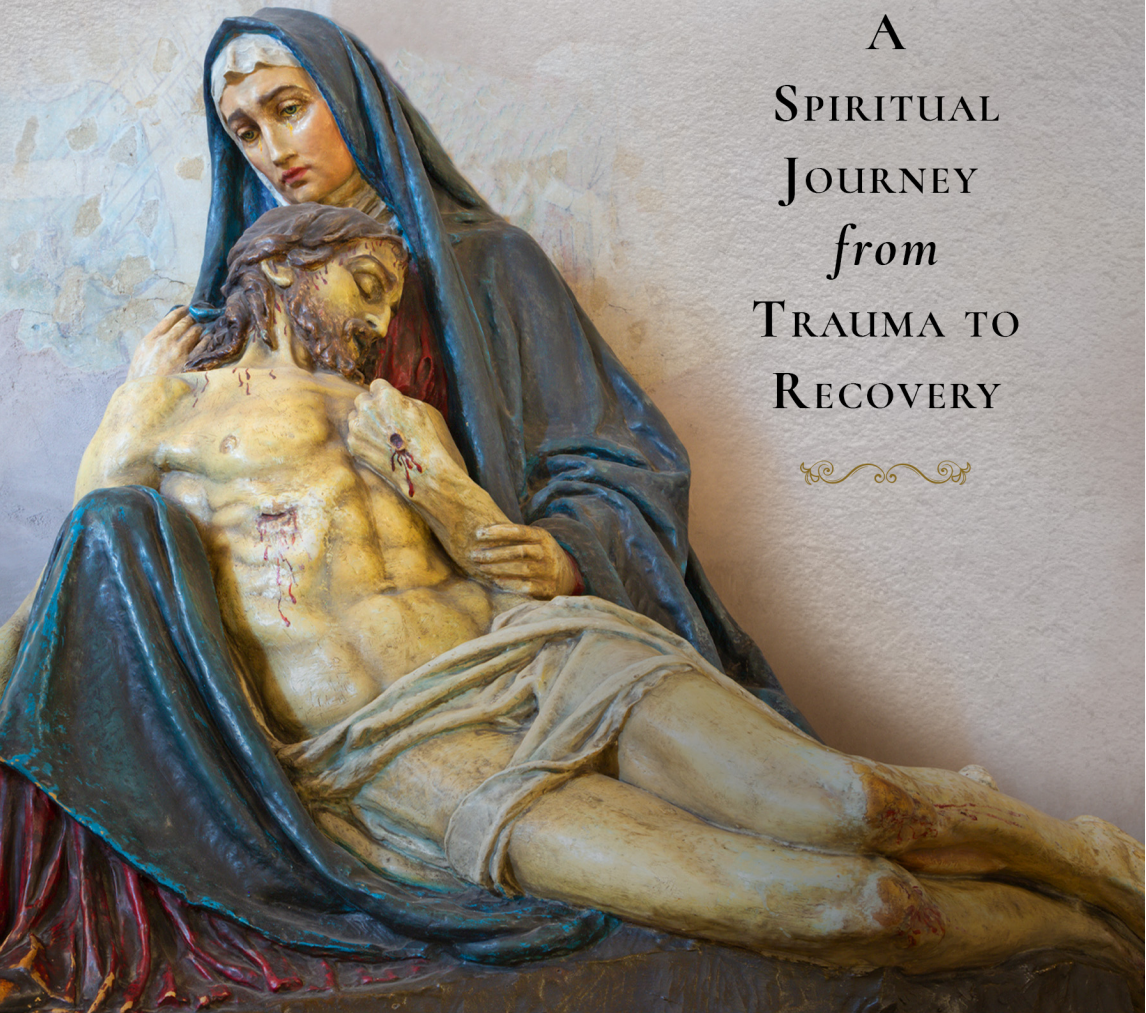


# *Cradled in the Arms of* COMPASSION

A  
SPIRITUAL  
JOURNEY  
*from*  
TRAUMA TO  
RECOVERY



FRANK ROGERS JR.

*Cradled in the Arms of*  
COMPASSION

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY  
*from*  
TRAUMA TO RECOVERY



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*Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.*

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections and information gathering of experiences over time. Some of the names of individuals or institutions and their characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated.

If you are feeling suicidal, are thinking about hurting yourself, or are concerned that someone you know may be in danger of hurting himself or herself, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). You can also find help in locating a mental health professional by consulting with your health-care provider.

# A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE READER

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THIS BOOK TELLS a painful story. And it can be a painful read. It chronicles the experience of childhood sexual abuse, its torturous aftermath, and the long, anguishing road to psychological and spiritual well-being. Some scenes are graphic. The emotions felt are raw. The perils along the way can be harrowing.

If at any point it becomes too much, take a break. Put the book down and go for a walk, bake bread, run a bath, tend a garden, sip tea, and watch the sunset. Listen to your body and care for its needs in the way that you know how. The book will still be there whenever you are ready.

And if you are a survivor yourself, and you become flooded by memories or emotions that are engulfing, lay the book aside altogether and tend to your regulation and recovery. Seek out someone to talk to. Metabolize your pain. Respect the pace of true inner healing. And go as slow as your body necessitates. Take all the time that you need before coming back to this book—ten days, ten years, or even not at all.

My primary hope in writing this book is that other survivors will know that there are people, much like them, who have also been abused, that the shames that fester in the secrets that we hide can be disclosed and faced with resilience, and that genuine healing is possible.

This book need not be read to serve that purpose.

If scanning but a few pages, or its mere appearance in a bookstore, inspires one person to claim the truth of their experience, to share their pain with a caring listener, and to step toward an emboldened recovery, then its writing will have been worth it. The unread book can become a back-seat companion. Its sheer presence in the world can bear testimony: To those on the journey, “You are not alone. There is at least one person who gets it. And healing can come through telling your story.”

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# Part I



# San Mateo, CA—Age 8

*Winter 1966*

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“IS THERE SOMETHING in your dream world that is more important than knowing the source of your sin?”

The nearness of her voice snapped me back. Clad in black, Sister Bernard hovered so close to my desk I could feel the ire emanating from her body. My skin burned, shame oozing from every pore. Her finger stabbed the catechism splayed open on my desk.

“What is the sin called which we inherit from our first parents?” she seethed, apparently for the third or fourth time. I stared at the catechism, unable to focus. Her finger jabbed it again. She still stared at me. But she called on somebody else. “Theresa, ‘What is the sin called which we inherit from our first parents?’”

Theresa recited the answer, “The sin which we inherit from our first parents is called original sin.”

Sister Bernard still looked at me. “Stop your daydreaming,” she scolded. “Your soul depends upon it.” She lingered, then released me, returning to the front of the classroom.

I had not been daydreaming. I was wide awake to reality. As if prompted by a premonition, I had glanced out the window beside me. The road alongside the Catholic school playground led to the neighborhood where I lived. When I glanced out, I saw him driving by on his way to our house.

I knew that my grandfather was arriving that day for an extended visit. All the same, seeing him in person caused my stomach to turn. His huge body,



more bullish than obese, was crammed into the tiny cab of the Chinook camper he was driving. He slouched forward, as if on a mission, two hands squeezing the wheel, eyes boring straight ahead. And I knew, with a dread as certain as the shame that already soiled me, *Here comes pure evil. And it's coming after me.*

Is there anything more important than knowing the source of our sin? No. Not when its stain causes a child to recognize evil in a grandfather.

MIDMORNING RECESS FOUND me outside, but its usual safe haven brought no reprieve. With my appetite for play dispelled, I walked the edge of the asphalt playground all but oblivious to the squeals of my classmates kicking the ball and skipping rope. The playground's merriment felt unbearable, exposing my despondency with a glare too bright to withstand. I wanted to hide. That's why I sought refuge. I wanted to find a place to get away from it all—the morning's humiliation, my classmates' cackling, the foreboding of my grandfather stalking our house. Nothing pious inspired me. I entered the sanctuary simply to disappear for a while.

I have replayed the ensuing moments so often its details are seared into my imagination. Our chapel, large enough to hold five hundred families, abutted the end of the school building. I could have walked the hall from my classroom and entered the church through a door on the side. Instead, I climbed the outside steps and entered from the front.

As soon as the door closed behind me, I was sealed off from the outside world. The looming sanctuary was silent, the cathedral quiet palpable. And dark. So dark, the scattered candles before the statues up front stood out like stars glistening in the night sky. I stepped in cautiously, only a few feet, and sat in one of the pews near the back. I had never been in the sanctuary alone before. I may well have been trespassing to be in such a holy place all by myself.

Soft streaks of colored light drifted down from the stained-glass windows along the side. The altar up front, draped by a purple cloth, held a cup and a plate. Two spiked candles stood sentry on either side. Above, a life-size crucifix was suspended. The dead body of Jesus hung askew. His eyes, drained of life, were closed.

Mary's, however, were open.

Behind the cross, perched at a height that could peer across creation, an ivory statue of the Madonna gazed out in maternal majesty. Her arms were outstretched, poised to embrace any who would weep into her shoulder. Her face was tender—sobered by the pain that all of us carry, yet all too content to companion us through it. And her eyes. Her eyes held it all—the death of her son on a cross hanging before her; the table that promised bread to endure; the rows of pews still haunted by the countless faithful longing for a place to feel safe and at home; and me, sitting alone in the back.

I cannot explain it. I can only try to describe it. Staring into those eyes, I was cradled into love. She saw me. She saw all of it—my dread, my shame, my sorrow, my depletion. And she got it. I was no longer alone. I was no longer untouchably soiled. I was swaddled in a blanket of sacred care as tender as a mother harboring her newborn. It was not cognitive; I was not thinking. It was not imaginative; I saw no visions. It was immediate. Intuitive. Visceral. And more real than reality. I just knew. Whatever numinous phenomenon that goes by “God” was as with me as if Mary herself—cloaked in invisible presence—had come down from her perch, sat in my pew, and wrapped me in her embrace. I let myself be wrapped. I sank into a warmth, a peace, a security I never knew existed.

Mystics describe being absorbed into the divine as like a drop of water dissolving into an ocean of oneness. I was not dissolved. I was fully aware while it was happening. I was still me. I was, however, fully enveloped in that ocean. For those few moments, nothing else existed. The day—what lay behind, what lay ahead—even the sanctuary I was sitting in, just melted away. Until all that was left was me, and this womb-like presence, soaking me, from within and without, in a cosmic sea of compassion. In that moment, in that eternity, embryonic as it was, I knew in my bones the birthright of every being that dwells in creation. I was welcomed. I was known. And I was loved. With a love more pure than I dared dream possible.

It did not last long.

A door clicked closed off to the side. A visiting priest, not one of our regulars, had vacated the confessional. I turned to catch him staring at me. He smiled, but I was not comforted. I only knew, all of a sudden, that I should not have been there at all.

“You looked so peaceful,” he said. “So innocent.”

I was not sure if he was sincere or toying with me. I felt anything but innocent. I was spotted in a place where I did not belong, an intruder inside the Holy of Holies.

“What is your name?” he asked.

I was too stricken to answer.

“Aren’t you in Sister Bernard’s catechism class?” I nodded, still mute with guilt. “Recess is over. Shouldn’t you be there?” Of course, I should. He had me. And he knew it. He studied my traumatized stare. “Come with me,” he said. “I’ll take you there.” I had no illusion of his benevolence. It was a command, not an offer. I was caught and being escorted to my punishment.

He placed his hand on my shoulder as he ushered me out through the side door and into the school’s hallway. His touch was gentle. His hand trembled slightly, as if some resolve within him was weakening. Then he pressed down. His firmness told me to stop walking.

“I have a better idea,” he said. “Why don’t you study catechism with me?”

He asked it like I had a choice, like I might really want to, like a classmate suggesting we do homework together at his house after school. I had no choice.

“Wait here,” he said. “I’ll talk to Sister Bernard.”

I watched him walk down the hall, then stop at the door to my classroom. Sister Bernard, I knew, would be livid by now—I was egregiously tardy. The priest disappeared into my classroom. Within moments, he was out. His stride was determined now. If once wavering, his resolve was back. Sister Bernard stormed out behind him, then stopped at the doorway. I was right. She was incensed.

The priest walked toward me, ignoring her presence as he left her in his wake. Behind him, I could see her. Her hands were fisted impotently at her sides. Her face was creased with controlled rage. And she was glaring. Not at him. At me.

I was so pinned to the spot, I could only stare back. Her eyes quivered with fury. They bored into me like she wanted to scorch me telepathically with the death ray of her wrath.

Pierced by her stare, however, I could see that there was something more. Something that almost seemed softer. If I ever thought her capable of feeling anything human, I would swear I saw something like pity lacing the fury in those eyes. It was as if she shared the dread of a schoolboy summoned to be disciplined, while scorning the one punishing the poor lad in the first place. I did not know if her pity was real. Perhaps it was only some trick of my mind grasping for mercy from any unlikely source. What I do know is this: I held onto that pity like a lifeline. As if her stare was all that tethered me to a shore where clemency had a chance.

Then the line gave out. The priest grabbed my arm and whisked me to his office. Once inside, he locked the door, sat me on his couch, and closed the curtains to the windows.

He was not interested, it turned out, in studying catechism. And he assured me that he was not there to punish me. He only wanted to play a game. He sat in a chair, scooted up close in front of me, and, with his hands on my knees, whispered the instructions. It was simple, really. We would take turns. Whatever he did to me, I would do to him.

He started out innocently enough. But it did not matter. The game was not fun for me. The priest did not seem to care. As the turns became less innocent, I fixed my eyes someplace else. Over his shoulders, straight across from me, a writing desk faced the wall. A handful of books were lined in a row. They were ordered by height, descending from left to right. The littlest book, the size of a pocket, was black. Its binding, shiny, looked soft and smooth to the touch. The edges of the pages on top glittered, gilded in silver. The end of a tassel

strayed from the bottom as if the book had a tail, a tail that lay there limply, puny and impassive.

Next to the book, so close I need not move a muscle to see it, a glass jar held a bouquet of candy sticks. Maybe a dozen, each one was the same color—green, with yellow stripes. They were long and slender, the kind of stick you could suck to a point so sharp it could pierce somebody's flesh.

A fraction of a glance next to the candy, a postcard crucifix was propped against the wall. Though small, its features were clear. Jesus was naked to the waist. His arms were spread wide. His hands and feet were fixed in place with nails. And his eyes were open. He was watching. Without blinking once, he took in every sordid detail. I watched him watch. His face was expressionless, his disgust masked. He simply stared stoically at each turn the priest and I took. I could not tell from those relentless eyes—maybe he knew; maybe he didn't; maybe it didn't matter to him anyway. But the game was not fun for me.

When the priest was done, he got my attention. He told me to pull my pants back up and to button up my shirt. He told me it was a bad thing that I did, making him play this game. And he told me not to tell anyone—not even in order to cleanse myself in confession—at the risk of my soul and my family's souls suffering in hell forever. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he disposed of me as if I stank of excrement. "Get back to your class," he dismissed. "Sister Bernard will be waiting for you."

I retraced my steps through the deserted hallway. At the side entrance to the sanctuary, I paused. I was not ready to face Sister Bernard with whatever reception she had waiting for me. And my ache overcame any remnant of worry that another trespass could stain me any further. I opened the door and reentered the church.

I did not sit this time. I stood just inside, not daring to penetrate further. Though I surmised better, something in me still hoped. That a womb of sacred care would still be there to embrace me. Its warmth cradling me. Its waters bathing me. Its love real and restoring.

But it was gone. The place was cold. Jesus's eyes were closed again. Mary was just a statue made of stone. As quickly as it had come, the ocean of divine mercy had evaporated. I was alone again. Soiled with sin. As I had been from the beginning. Perhaps since our first parents.

From that day forward, I have been haunted by a question, a question of life or death for me.

Was that glimpse of God I had in the church, that womb of grace that swaddled me, simply some dream world? Or was it real, a cosmic sea of compassion purifying enough that its wash could cleanse the filth that I had become?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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