



# The Pietà Project: Practical, Pastoral & Theological Considerations

These prayer resources have been designed to ensure that pastoral and spiritual support is appropriate, sensitive, and respectful of all those who are affected or harmed by contextual risk and especially by those who mourn.

Over many years the image of the Pietà has been used to provoke cultural discourse and has frequently been used to connect a range of contemporary social concerns and political issues to the murder of Christ. Biblically and theologically, the use of the Pietà images within this resource serve to powerfully connect the tragic horror of the Cross to the causes and incidents of contextual safeguarding risk within our communities.

However, the issue of serious youth violence demands an additional sensitivity particularly in terms of encouraging children and young people who have been affected, to recognise, hope and wait for the revelation of the infinite 'goodness of God' in situations of pointless tragedy and suffering. So, the following questions, have been designed to support clergy, leaders and teachers who may face questions from children, young people and staff instigated by the Pietà services or by events occurring within the community.

## **Is there any meaning, reason or purpose within serious youth violence?**

There are no words of comfort, apology or theodicy that can justify or find purpose in the death of a child or young person caught up in serious violence. The young are God's inheritance and so anyone who causes them to stumble, to die needlessly commits a crime, a theft against God.

It is challenging to speak of Jesus' resurrection of Jarius' daughter; of his friend Lazarus and ultimately of his own bodily resurrection, when those who attend the funeral of a young victim, are *as yet* unlikely to witness the resurrection of those whose lives cut short by violence.

It is challenging to support those who are grieving to try to comprehend the macro dynamics of generational social economic disadvantage, and the grinding impact of constructs like racism, sexism and class, when trying to comprehend the death of a fifteen-year-old.

## How can the Christian biblical hope be made explicit in such tragic and distressing circumstances?

Developmentally, it is challenging for a child or young person to comprehend the construct of time. This makes it exceptionally difficult for young minds to comprehend the eschatological promise of Revelation 21:4 that at the end of time, God 'will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Nevertheless, our biblical hope should be shared so that young mourners hear these statements of faith, but in these circumstances such as the death of a young person, these statements may need to be supported with reflections on what these claims might mean.

What we can say is that the eternal God of heaven, truth and justice sees our tragic circumstances and knowing how terrible it was and is, chose it for himself so that those who experience it after him, would know that they would never be alone.

Christ's choice to be born into poverty, to be counted amongst the oppressed and to identified as victim, means that he is eternally 'with' all those whose voices and dreams that are condemned by public opinion and then silenced by orchestrated violence.

Those young people who suffer and are silenced through serious violence are 'with God' in death in a way that is beyond coincidence and sympathy. They are witnesses to the systemic sin and a sign of the brokenness of our world yet by God's grace they share a deep connection with Christ who knows all our frailties and shortcomings yet still loves us and is able to speak 'new life' over us all.

It is important that those who are left behind can see that their friends and loved ones are not separated from God, but instead are seen, known and held within the mind and infinite love of God.

## What about those who mourn?

One of the unseen impacts of serious youth violence is its disproportionate effect on women and teenage girls.

Jesus' death at Calvary, is one that is surrounded by traumatised mourners most of whose are female. Highlighting this connection creates an opportunity to encourage grieving witnesses and bystanders to access specialist support, precisely because those who were close friends and supporters were not forgotten or overlooked by God.

Despite the passing of two thousand years, those victims and mourners who were present at the cross and are depicted within the Pieta are, in some intangible sense brought nearer to God's presence, protection and love. Through their experience they can come to know God in some deeper way. This intimate proximity and connection to Christ's passion is of course unwanted, and unasked for, but can come to be a great source of strength and courage that enables those who grieve to survive and in time, learn to live and thrive.

## Will there ever be peace from the violence?

In one sense there will not be 'peace' from serious youth violence until Christ comes to deal with the intrinsic and multi-layered causes of lack, need and equality in our society. However, we can and should do what we can to help address and reduce the risk faced by:

- making everyone feel welcome in our schools and churches, and particularly ensuring that those people who are different to us, feel that they belong.
- keeping each other safe when online and when out and about in our local community.
- going to safe places, connecting with safe people and learning to recognise safe relationships that help to keep all young people safe.
- Taking contextual safeguarding seriously and think carefully about the risks that exist around our schools, churches and in our localities.
- Ensuring that children and young people with needs and vulnerabilities are given the support needed so that they can stay safe and engaged in school.

## Will there be any respite from the feelings of grief and sadness?

Grief can look different for each of us, but as time passes our grief will change and, in some ways, subside. It is important to talk about our grief. This will help us 'come to terms' or learn to live with the loss of someone we love. If we repress or seek to avoid our grief, we can develop unhealthy ways of coping with our emotions.

The fact is that each human, is unique and irreplaceable in God's sight, so the loss of a friend leaves a permanent gap in our lives, but their memory lives in and through us. Whilst some memories will make us feel sad, others will remind us of those we have lost, with joy and become a powerful encouragement to us live our lives fully and with purpose. Tragedy can sometimes help us take the precious gift of our lives more seriously.

No experience of suffering, loss or grief is wasted in the divine life of God: He has promised to redeem everything.

## Are those we love, who have died at peace? And will we forget them?

God repeatedly tells the people of Israel to remember things that have happened, and particularly to remember what he has done in their lives, and the difficulties that he has brought them through. We should do the same.

It can be helpful during a period of grief to journal and write about our thoughts and feelings. We won't remember everything, but the Holy Spirit will help us to remember what is important so that we can come to 'accept' someone's death, but this does not mean that you are required to 'forget' them.

God is extremely good at remembering us all, and he chooses to remember us with great love. We can find peace in the knowledge that the names and memory of those who are lost to us in this life - are eternally held, remembered, and known by God the Father. Even if we forget our own names, God will not forget us: We remain eternally held in the mind of God from before the foundation of the earth (Ephesians 1:4) and we remain held in the mind of God, long after we leave this life.

This is the same God who was revealed to the early church as God the Son. This Jesus who weeps with us at the graveside, for his friend (John 11:35) even though he knows he has the power to heal, redeem, restore, and raise him to life and release us from the seemingly endless grief and injustice that a young person's death bears witness to. Yet because Christ knows our sorrow, he stands with us in our human grief.

This is the same God, who we experience as God the Holy Spirit who has the infinite power to turn our ashes into beauty; to turn our mourning into an oil of gladness (Isaiah 61:3). The one who is able to resurrect each of us, both bodily and metaphorically from the death that might seem to dominate and frighten us now but is able to bringing us through death into life, in all its fullness.

## Contextual Notes around Serious Youth Violence

The Pieta resources should be examined in the light of a society that has the tendency to adultify, criminalise and essentially blame vulnerable people who find themselves lured into and trapped by the organised exploitation of their youth and wider vulnerability.

Generalising and stereotyping victims in this way, ignores the fact that perpetrators are invariably traumatised victims, who often have had needs or vulnerabilities that may have been overlooked by multiple institutions over extended periods of time.

However, this kind of 'victim-blaming' is especially damaging in those circumstances where a young person has been randomly targeted, was a bystander or an unwitting witness to another incident or crime. All adolescents and young people should be afforded the space to 'be young', to experiment, to take risks and make mistakes, and then grow and learn from their errors. This is normal human development. It should not need to cost young people their lives nor can it be used to justify their demise.

Whilst Contextual Safeguarding and the issues of Child Criminal Exploration (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) are now recognised as legitimate safeguarding concerns, as Prof. Carline Firmin's research indicates<sup>1</sup> young people who are at risk of contextual harm face the double disadvantage of:

1. Safeguarding approaches that focus on locating the cause and solution to young people's risk in the home
2. Imbuing adolescents with power and responsibility for 'choices' that are made entirely based on their often oppressed and inexperienced response.

These approaches leave children and adolescences who experience harm outside of the home under protected and over responsible in circumstances.

This facilitates highly organised criminals who exploit the structural and systemic disadvantages that are present within our society as well as the gaps created by some of the specific resourcing issues that are affect our healthcare, mental health and youth services

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<sup>1</sup> Firmin, Carline. (2020) Contextual Safeguarding & Child Protection: Rewriting the rules. Pg 38