

Maggie Mathews  
at the Installation of Bishop Stephen Wright  
In Hexham & Newcastle - 19-07-23

Hello, I'm Maggie.

I've been invited to say some words about the ribbons that have been presented to Bishop Stephen. The ribbons - they represent people, real people desperately hurt by abuse within the church, many of them abused by priests or religious. Many of those people roar with anger and hurt, unable to enter our church today. Many utterly at a loss because they have clear eyes and they see the systemic nature of abuse in our church. They see the structures that lead to abuse. They see the damage that excessive deference and the fear of speaking continues to cause. People are exasperated with a leadership when it continues to let them down so badly. A leadership when it fails to provide the mechanisms for the transparency and accountability needed to make our church a safer place.

My friend Antonia Sobocki has been bringing the ribbons of Loud Fence to different churches, Catholic and Anglican, in the UK, as a way to make those people visible, to have their voices heard. Some of those ribbons are for those who did not survive, for those who took their lives because of the abuse they experienced within the church. Please let their voices, their appalling experience, speak to you today. Why am I speaking? Well, survivors of church abuse allies and Bishop Stephen agreed that the voice of someone who'd experienced abuse within the church in this diocese was needed on this occasion. As a young adult at 18 I came to the north-east. I was a student in Durham. In the first term I went to Confession. That was back in 1979. I haven't been to confession since. And my trust in priests, certainly in the exclusive male priesthood... it's not there... it's just not there. My relationship was changed. Like so many people's I would like to belong. This is the church that should carry Christ's word, his mission to the world to love one another, and the world we have been given, and to take particular care of the poorest among us. But I don't feel safe, secure at home in this church. For decades, I've been clinging on at the margins trying to see how on earth I could with integrity still fit in. I cling on because I go to a parish that does try to put the poor first. The asylum seekers, those who've come to this country because they've experienced

torture, or sexual abuse, or those who are on the lowest incomes struggling to feed their families. I wish my church to be the sanctuary for those people especially. But what are we to do when sanctuary is betrayed? When our leaders betray the flock and cover up the extent of that betrayal? How can I wholeheartedly invite people into a church when I see it continuing to minimize the impact of abuse on survivors. Or talking about a crisis as though that crisis has been and gone. Survivors are acutely aware of the abuses being revealed day in and day out. In the global church. It might be cold comfort, for those in Hexham and Newcastle to know you're not the only ones to experience sickening betrayal. But if you see it as purely an isolated event, please wake up and start reading the Catholic press. So where is hope and wisdom and a way forward to be found? Well, I think it's significant that there are ribbons here today as a sign. And Bishop Stephen has invited us. Perhaps some of us uneasily but we are here. And perhaps the wisest of the leaders who remain will seek the wisdom of those hurt most badly. And they will give space for those voices to be heard. And the wisest of the flock, the ordinary people with no positions in the church, please, you must speak up now too. But if you think you don't have the capacity to speak, then pray for that capacity. Please take seriously that dignity that Bishop Stephen spoke about, that dignity that comes from your baptism. Know that on occasions you must with respect and with love and with some urgency challenge our leaders. It's not disrespectful to hold them to account. It is utterly essential. Please, ordinary Catholics try to reach out tenderly to those hurt within the church. It may be very painful for you to do so. But if you do, perhaps you may receive quite a tender blessing from doing so.

There are some particular people I have been asked if I would have remembered here today. One is the nun. She was raped here in Hexham and Newcastle. It was when she went to Confession, and she's not been able to go to Confession since. She asks us, she asks you, to pray for her today. I don't know of anyone else who has experienced abuse within Hexham and Newcastle is here with us in the Cathedral today, or perhaps more likely watching on the live stream. If you are, we're so so sorry, it happened to you too. I'm thinking about one friend I've met particularly who is able to be within a church, but absolutely not within this Cathedral. And they said not with the ranks of hierarchy here. What does that tell us? I wish that person could be here. It would be a sign of this place being made safe, of sanctuary being regained, if they could come.

What difference will listening make? Well, can I just tell you what some other friends said. One said that - I just want to know that Catholics are actually bothered about what's happened to us. Instead of seeing us as some kind of embarrassing relation, who needs to be hidden away, or some kind of collateral damage to be swept under the carpet. Perhaps they could begin to see that there is some value in us. If they tried, they might even realize that we've got something to offer, that we could have a role to play in making the church safer. That while some days we may be hurting, and in need of a bit of support, on other days, we know that some of us have clear sightedness, determination, plain spokenness and actually a rather extraordinary power that comes from having survived and perhaps it will be wise people who are able to see those gifts and ask to receive them. I am so glad that bishop Stephen has welcomed us here today. He didn't ask to see beforehand what was going to be said. He freely made space. I really appreciate that Bishop Stephen made that space without precondition and accepting what was perhaps going to be a rather uncomfortable gift of our words – but thank you.

Lord, bind us together. Help us have the courageous, difficult, painful conversations we need to have. Give us the wisdom and strength to do so.

Lord In Your Mercy.