# The Empty Chair – a Liturgy of Lament

## Preparation

### Setting

An empty chair is placed prominently – on the sanctuary or as part of a focal point.

In readiness for the Ritual Action –

* Tealights or similar to be placed around the empty chair.
* Ribbons distributed to be taken out at the end and tied to a tree or to a church fence.

### Readers

It helps to have a variety of voices. You may like to have different readers for each of the Opening and Closing Responses. You will need several readers for the Litany of Lament – give them an opportunity to read and reflect on what they will be reading – some could be quite hard-hitting.

### Music

Invite your parish or community musicians to choose appropriate music from their repertoire. Music can be used to open and close the session. A simple response could be used between each reading in the Litany of Lament.

The Liturgy

(Copy and paste as required)

### Opening Responses

Reader We gather in the name of the Father, and of the Son

and of the Holy Spirit.

**All Amen**

Reader We gather as people who know and cherish God’s gifts

of the Light and the Word –

of Baptism and Eucharist –

of sacraments of commitment and of healing.

We gather as people who know that we belong.

Reader We gather knowing that many others do not have this sense of belonging –

who feel excluded –

unwanted –

too angry to be here –

or never even knowing that they are beloved of God.

Reader We gather – taking our places amongst friends and colleagues,

but bringing into this space

those for whom our churches seem distant or excluding.

### Scripture Reading

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

*Matthew 23: 1-4*

### Short Reflection

Suggested theme of our aspiration to be a Church that is welcoming of everyone – especially those who have been hurt or are excluded by wider society – but how we are not always able to live up to those aspirations.

Introduction to a time of listening to the voices of some of those who should be on this empty chair. There are many other voices we need to listen to – but, today, our focus is on those who have been affected by abuse within the Church.

### Litany of Lament – for those who are missing…

Reader I was just a child.

I loved everything about the church – the smells, the candles, the vestments, the way things changed through the seasons. It was like home.

I loved Father. He really was a father to me – at least I thought so.

He asked me to do things I didn’t feel comfortable with but he said it was holy. He did not ask everyone – just a few who he said were special.

It was only later – when I looked back – that I realise what was happening.

I began to link all the beauty with the sordidness of what happened to me.

This chair is empty because candles – and sanctuaries – and smells bring it all back and it is too painful to be here.

Music response

Reader I remember the humiliation.

The nuns were experts in making me feel stupid – screaming about how I was inadequate – unworthy of anything.

There was physical abuse – slaps and canings that left us in pain and shamed.

But it is the humiliation I most remember.

I’m reminded that the women are now in their 80s and 90s. Many have dementia and I’m told have no memory of these things.

But I remember.

This chair is empty because it reminds me too much of shame and humiliation and I cannot bear to be here.

Reader I was an active member of my parish.

Father encouraged me to get involved

and would often be in church when I was working in there.

I don’t really know how it happened –

this should have been a safe relationship.

He accused me of tempting him –

that I had made him commit a grave sin –

that it was my fault that his holy vocation had been compromised.

I had to confess, he said.

He absolved me, he said.

But then it happened again – and again.

This chair is empty because I realised what was happening and don’t want to risk putting myself in that situation again.

Reader We were so please to get our child into a Catholic school.

Our faith is so important to us

and we wanted a school that shared our values and vision for our children.

They seemed to do well academically

but one of them gradually became more and more withdrawn.

We tried to find out if there was a problem.

Our child told us that one of the teachers was making them do things they knew were wrong.

We were angry – but with the wrong people.

How dared they say that a teacher we knew and respected would do this to them.

Our child stopped talking to us – stopped trusting us.

Years later, that teacher was convicted of abusing dozens of children in their care.

This chair is empty because we did not listen –

we lost our child and all our dreams for what they could become with a Catholic education.

Reader He was a lovely priest.

He was great with parishioners of all ages –

kind to our older folk,

a deep listener to people with problems

and an inspiration to our younger people.

And then he was arrested and eventually convicted.

It seemed as if he was two people –

the wonderful priest I knew –

and the person who could do such harm to others.

I am conflicted.

This chair is empty because I cannot make my mind up about whether I can be here or not.

Reader I am incensed - outraged - utterly disgusted by what has been emerging about the abuse that has been part of this Church - supposedly, *my* Church.

And worse - the fact that people knew about it and covered it up - protecting the institution but adding insult to injury to those who had already been cruelly hurt.

Report after report appears and it still doesn’t feel as if the Church is a safe place to be.

So, this chair is empty - because I feel too angry at all the abuse and the hypocrisy to be here.

Reader I am a survivor.

I mean it – I have survived.

In the words of Gloria Gaynor –

“Long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive  
I've got my life to live  
And all my love to give and  
I will survive…”

That is me.

So many people helped me –

but not the Church.

To the Church I was to blame –

or making it up –

or just a nuisance.

But I am a survivor.

And this chair is empty because I survived but did not find the healing I needed in the Church but elsewhere.

### Reflection

The list is nowhere near complete… In a time of silence – maybe of Adoration – we reflect on who, for me, is missing – whose absence touched me as I listened to the Litany?

### Ritual Ideas

* People are invited to come and light a candle to place near the empty chair as a sign of wishing light and love for those who should feel able to be part of a faith community.
* Ribbons are distributed and people are invited to take them with them from the service and tie to a tree or a fence as witness to our desire for healing and reconciliation with those who have been hurt by people within the Church.

### Turning Towards Hope

Reader Jesus said,

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

*Matthew 11: 28-30*

### Pause for thought

As disciples of Jesus, this role is now given to us - to be those who share the load, who offer rest for the souls of those who have been hurt - who feel excluded – who feel over-burdened.

How might we respond to this call?

### Closing Prayer

Reader We pause our liturgy with a time of thoughtfulness…

What has struck us?

Has something been triggered within us?

Are we angry - depressed - ashamed?

Or do we feel those things but also a determination to play our part to make things better…

We place all that we have experienced into the hands of God.

Reader God of expansive and unconditional love,

You offer so much to those whom you have created and whom you love with an everlasting love.

We are conscious of how many do not know this -

whose experiences in our Church have been hurtful and damaging.

We are aware of the many empty chairs where your people should be -

and acknowledge that we have not always shown your hospitality,

or made our Church the safe haven it should be.

**All But we bring this knowledge into your mercy,**

**trusting that, with our willingness**

**and with your grace,**

**we can be among those who follow Jesus’ example,**

**embracing the weary - the heavy-burdened -**

**and those in need of rest and strength for their souls.**

**May God be present to those most in need of knowing this love.**

**Amen**

**Song** Looking towards hope