

Rebirth : A work of art and healing from abuse

Nikki Dhillon Keane, Head of Safe in Faith

Last week, in the beautiful surroundings of Lourdes, I was privileged to be involved in an extraordinary project depicting the journey of healing from abuse in the forms of art and film.

The project, “Renaissance” or Rebirth, is a collaboration between French hermit religious sister and abuse survivor, Soeur Samuelle and Filmmaker Quentin Delcourt. Soeur Samuelle is a very talented mosaic artist who is creating art as a depiction of, but also a path to healing, not only for herself, but also for other survivors of sexual and spiritual abuse within the Church. For the past year, she has been creating the huge art piece made of 200 smaller mosaics, symbolising the journey of healing and restoration after abuse. The mosaic is made up of thousands of stones, each one sent to her with a message written on the back by survivors and supporters all over the world. The whole piece, with all 200 mosaics together, is 12.5 metres by 4 metres in size, and will be unveiled at a later date in its entirety, before being split into the individual mosaics which will be displayed around the world. Quentin Delcourt with his film crew are working with Soeur Samuelle to make a documentary called “Renaissance: La Symphonie des Teselles” (Rebirth: the Tesserae Symphony.) It tells the stories of religious sisters around the world who have survived abuse, and documents the creation of this magnificent work of art and healing.



Stones sent from around the world with messages from survivors and supporters



Antonia Sobocki (LOUDfence) Bishop Jean-Marc Micas and Marlene Watkins (North American Lourdes Volunteers)

Bishop Jean-Marc spoke of his decision to cover the mosaics at the entrance of the Basilica in Lourdes as an act of support and solidarity with survivors of abuse. The creator of the mosaics is the priest Marko Rupnik who has been accused of abuse by up to 30 other women, mostly religious sisters. Bishop Jean Marc described how victims and survivors of abuse had felt unable to go inside the Basilica because of these mosaics at the entrance. Pilgrim leaders described later how covering the artwork has made the Basilica and the whole sanctuary of Lourdes a place of safety and healing once again for all pilgrims, including survivors. It was a powerful reminder of the importance of trauma-informed stewardship of our holy sites.

Following the speeches, we moved outside, where the completion of the 200th and final mosaic took place in the open air, with the beautiful grotto in the background, just across the Gave de Pau. In one of the most deeply moving moments, Soeur Samuelle invited her supporters to lay a stone in the 200th mosaic. It is hard to describe the atmosphere as we gathered round, collectively holding our breath as she placed the final stone. The moment, caught on camera for the film, was one of profound joy and The date for the premiere of the documentary hasn't been released yet, but I hope it will bring opportunities for many more people to come to know this extraordinary woman, and to deepen their understanding of abuse and healing, and of what we all need to do to create a safer Church.

On Tuesday 30th June, at a special event held in Lourdes, Soeur Samuelle completed the final mosaic, surrounded by people who have supported her on her journey, including the Bishop of Lourdes, Bishop Jean-Marc Micas, and the Rector of the Sanctuary of Lourdes, Fr Michel Daubanes. Other members of the clergy, religious and lay people, and survivors of abuse were also present to offer their support. This extraordinary project has attracted interest beyond the Catholic Church; members of French national press were among those gathered for the event. Supporters had travelled from around the world to share this moment with Soeur Samuelle. Those from the UK included Antonia Sobocki (founder of LOUDfence) who has been deeply involved with this project, and Lucy McAuley, Safeguarding expert who previously worked with the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA.) The event began with presentations in the Salle Cardinal Gerlier, where Soeur Samuelle described how she has symbolised the journey of restoration from darkness to light in her artwork. Very movingly, she described that there was always a little light in the darkness, and will always be a little darkness in the light, something she said “all survivors will understand.” In the face of all that she has experienced, her resilience, her deep spirituality and her focus on healing, not just for herself but for other survivors, are truly inspirational.



Nikki Dhillon Keane (Safe in Faith) laying one of the final stones with Soeur Samuelle

For more information about the [film](#)

If you are impacted by abuse, or concerned about someone you can find support here:

[Safe in Faith information for survivors](#)
[Grief to Grace](#)
[National Association for People Abused in Childhood](#)
[Rape Crisis](#)
[Childline](#)

