

The Spiritual Wounds of Sexual Abuse

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In a meeting with Pope Francis, a victim of sexual abuse said with profound sadness and desperation: “Jesus had his mother nearby when he faced suffering and death. But my mother, the Church, left me all alone in my time of pain.” These few words express the horror of abuse, especially the sexual abuse of minors in the Church. They show how much the Church’s attitude and that of her leaders needs to change.

An especially poignant, religious-spiritual factor comes into play when the perpetrator is a man of the Church. When someone is abused by a biological father, there is always someone to turn to for help, namely, God. But when a priest commits abuse, that is someone who by his very office represents God and is referred to theologically as an *alter Christus*, then the victim’s image of God is obscured and he or she can quickly fall into a dimly dark abyss of loneliness. Of course, this is not limited to cases where the abuser is a man of the Church but when it does involve a priest it takes on a dimension that is qualitatively different and serious, especially in those for whom faith, liturgy and a relationship with God are important realities. For many this results in a compromised or completely broken life of faith and lack of trust in God.

The victims: their perspective and their suffering

Those who have been subjected to unspeakable suffering by representatives of the Church and who report the crime and wish to be heard are too frequently simply turned away or reprimanded for being troublemakers who would do better to keep their mouths shut. This can also lead to serious spiritual trauma over and above the psychological and physical trauma of abuse. Yet the incredible burden this entails is not clear to everyone in the Church, even to those in positions of responsibility. One would presume that those whose mission it is to preach the Gospel would understand better than anyone the extent to which some events – in this case, one causing extreme trauma – can weigh upon the core of a believer’s spirituality. And yet it is surprising how rarely this is the case. This might also help to explain why some bishops and religious superiors pay greater attention to the political, legal and psychological implications of sexual abuse than the spiritual and theological aspects.

So it comes as no surprise that victims often view the Church’s way of reacting to accusations of abuse as if she were an institution concerned only with herself rather than acting as “a loving mother” (significantly, Pope Francis uses these very words to begin his *motu proprio* by which he admonishes bishops and religious superiors to assume greater responsibility for uncovering and preventing abuse).

The Church: holy and sinful

The Church was founded by its Lord Jesus Christ and commissioned by him to announce the Good News: God loves us, is merciful toward us and does everything to save us, even giving us his Son who gave his life for us. For the past 2,000 years, countless people have carried out this task and dedicated their lives to making the Church a marvelous sacrament of salvation to the poor, the sick and those who are especially vulnerable. At the same time, we must acknowledge that in the Church there have always been people who have acted in a way that is diametrically opposed to what they, the Church and Jesus proclaim. It is not without reason that popes have repeatedly and firmly over the last decades asked for pardon for the sins and crimes committed by men of the Church.

The return: searching for and appealing to Christ

Confronting the topic of the sexual abuse of minors by priests is inherently upsetting and agonizing. We are speaking of sex and violence, the abuse of trust, ruined lives and hypocrisy, all done within the bosom of the Church. Any attempt to bypass or marginalize these problems arises from an impulse of self-preservation and a desire to protect the institution. Not only modern psychology but Jesus himself and many spiritual masters after him have warned us about the unforeseeable and tragic consequence of such avoidance: whoever refuses to confront a personal dark side will pay for it more dearly sooner or later. The film *Spotlight*, which expresses contempt for decades of priestly sexual abuse and its cover-up, presents this mechanism very well.

We must never forget that the sexual abuse of minors by clergy happens throughout the world.^[1] Considering the stance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – the office of the Church entrusted with handling penal processes against accused priests – and despite the fact that there are places in the world where the data is incomplete, it is clear enough that abuse is occurring in virtually every local Church. The frequently asserted argument that sexual violence toward minors is really only a problem in the crumbling Church of the West is patently false and misleading. It detracts from the fact that there are clearly factors in the Church's life that are conducive to abuse or that hide or impede its discovery and punishment. Precisely by confronting this problem within a global perspective, we have a clearer perception of how the Catholic Church is a religious community spread throughout the world, infinitely multiform yet stratified, exhibiting remarkable consistency in its daily practice and an invariable set of elements wherever it is found.^[2]

Again, it is not easy to confront openly the evil of sexual abuse and the suffering it causes. This especially holds true when one is not directly responsible for dealing with it. But throughout the world, priests and bishops are held responsible for the good or evil that happens in the Church and for what their brother priests and bishops do. And whatever happens in their daily life, priests are considered representatives of Christ and of his Church, and in fact they effectively are so, according to what is theologically said of them. The more distant one is from the Church, the more it is

perceived as a uniform and monolithic entity. This is the reason why every act of abuse committed by one priest is collectively associated with all priests and the Church.

Priests: their state and formation

The impact of abuse perpetrated by Catholic clergy is not concerned with their function in itself, that is their priestly function of mediation and their possession of a real, spiritual power. Indeed, abuse is more or less present in every religion, be it Islam (we only have to recall the frightening statistics of abuse committed in the madrasas of Great Britain), Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism or natural religions. Also celibacy is a requirement not only for clerics in the Latin Rite Catholic Church but also in other religions there are priests and monks – both men and women – who live according to the celibate state of life.^[1] Clearly then the elements that follow are not exclusive to the Catholic Church or reserved to her clerics.

Managing one's sexuality

Living as a sexual being according to one's state in life is a continual challenge. Many priests who have promised a life of celibacy do not have recourse to sufficient human and spiritual support. The promise should be made only after a serious process that proceeds along the various stages of development, follows a clear program of integration, and includes solid psychological and spiritual support that is ongoing after ordination.

Despite the clear and excellent norms developed for priestly formation – repeated in *Ratio Fundamentalis* published December 8, 2016, by the Congregation for the Clergy^[2] – formation in human maturation still only occupies a secondary role in the overall education of future religious and priests. If we consider that the present vocational crisis is, to a large degree, due to individuals falling in love – many admit doing so for the first time – and that a desire for conjugal and family life only occur subsequently, we should not be surprised that those who have the responsibility of formation do not invest the energy and time where it is needed most.^[3]

In-depth psychology speaks about defense mechanisms that arise from the removal or denial of vital impulses. On a spiritual level, we can call this *acedia* and *inertia*: apathy and laziness. We might also attempt to formulate the thesis that the failure of formators to take spiritual experiences and human processes seriously – and to accept the eventual decisions made by those they are responsible for – is transferred either directly or indirectly to those being formed in their own path of formation.

These processes of psychological repression can run the risk of leading an individual to act out what he has in theory rejected or disregarded – in this case sexual desire – as it is mixed in with other non-satisfied needs. This happens when one either actively or passively suppresses everything pertaining to sexual desire, or expresses it in an

unchecked manner, as happens in the case when one pursues the path of least resistance to act upon impulses: in this case toward children and youth.

The understanding of priesthood in the Catholic Church

The way in which the ministry and role of priests in the Catholic Church is conceived plays a major role in the abuse of minors by clergy being revealed only much later. In many parts of the world, priests continue to be viewed as irreproachable messengers of God who exercise special powers, authority and a capacity for governance derived more or less directly from God. Such an image of the priesthood may lead the faithful to an inviolable idealization that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to criticize the figure of the priest or even imagine that he is capable of committing evil.

This at least partly explains something that is inconceivable to those outside the Church. Those who suffer abuse often say that when the sexual contact occurred, it was they, not the priest, who felt guilty and dirty. Others experienced the physical and emotional attention of a priest as something that made them extraordinary, something that “raised them to the level of the priest.” If we want an answer to why so many victims were not able to speak about their abuse until years or decades later, one of the reasons is the conflicted conscience and the dilemma of perceiving oneself as the victim of an irrepressible act of violence and the enormous weight of having to attribute this cruelty to a priest. In this regard, we should point out that many victims of sexual violence were close to the priests who abused them because they were chaplains or leaders of youth groups or with them in a college setting. Victims were often particularly diligent and trusting of others: a trust that was subsequently taken advantage of and destroyed.

Whoever in infancy or youth or as a candidate for priesthood learned that a priest is always blameless can easily develop the mindset that he does not need to justify himself to anyone. Anyone endowed with sacred powers can take anything he wants for himself. That kind of mentality can explain, at least in part, why some priests who have abused children or young people deny doing so or believe that they themselves were victims or merely accomplices (“he seduced me,” “he liked it”), often making them blind to the suffering they have caused.

We see that some candidates for the priesthood understand their state as seminarians or priests as a profession in the commonly held sense of the term. Consequently, as soon as the workday is done they do in private things that are not reconcilable with their priestly life. It seems that they are yearning for the privileges, power and beauty of that state in life but they are not ready to pay the price specified in the Gospel – poverty, chastity and obedience – and essentially to give up their lives for Jesus.

A bunker mentality

Finally, another ingredient of the typically Catholic mix that makes abuse possible and impedes its discovery is a bunker mentality. The Church wants to resolve her

problems from the inside and exclude the public dimension because she is afraid of her own reputation and the reputation of the institution. In this way, the Church forgets both the suffering of the victims (who must be kept silent) and a law of mass media that says: “Sooner or later things will come out in the open. Take the initiative, acknowledge the error, ask for pardon honestly, and you will be believed.”

Another factor often comes into play, namely, a unilateral interpretation of the special link and responsibility that binds a bishop to his priests. On the one hand, not enough consideration is given to the fact that paternal care entails not only pardon and mercy but also just punishment. On the other hand, there is an *esprit de corps* on account of which bishops first think of protecting their own rather than the good of the vulnerable and needy.

We should briefly mention that many perpetrators of sexual abuse manage to elude or even manipulate their superiors so that the latter are too prone to believe whatever the former promise them (“I won’t do it anymore”). The result is that they exercise a false mercy. This also leads them to the erroneous reasoning that they need no outside help because they believe they have all the means and strategies necessary to solve the problem themselves. In this way, they dig themselves into their own bunker and fail to see that they have constructed a closed system as we saw in Ireland or in the Catholic communities in the United States and Australia, all places that have seen a string of frighteningly frequent and longstanding abuse.

The same is true for some religious congregations and new spiritual communities founded around the time of the Second Vatican Council and which for many years, particularly for the number of vocations they were attracting, held out great hope for the Church. In the last few years, however, we have seen that several of these religious groups – some of which assumed strongly conservative ecclesial positions tied to traditional forms of liturgy and theology – ended up being centers of various forms of serious abuse. Among the more notable cases are the Legionaries of Christ (Mexican foundation), the Community of the Beatitudes (French), the *Comunità Missionaria di Villaregia* in northern Italy, the *Sodalitium Christianae Vitae* (primarily in Peru), as well as the group that gravitated around Fr. Fernando Karadima in Santiago de Chile.

Such cases did not always involve the abuse of minors but rather of protected persons, including male and female novices and students. Under the pretext of vows of obedience and strict religious observance, extreme relationships of dependence were formed. Criticism was not allowed and fundamental norms of the spiritual tradition were simply ignored, like the separation between the internal and external forums, not to mention abuses of sacramental confession (the seal of confession or the *absolutio complicitis*, that is, the absolution of someone with whom the priest-confessor himself broke the sixth commandment).

We could write entire chapters on the personalities of the founders of the above congregations. Some of them, because of sexual abuse, financial irregularities or plagiarism, were expelled from their own communities or sanctioned with

ecclesiastical penalties, even including excommunication. Often they were able to boss others around and lord it over the operations of their congregations for decades, and no one would dare question their absolute power and demands, which were speciously justified in a spiritual way. Since there was no control mechanism and no system of checks and balances, they were able to do whatever they wanted.

Not all of these founders were or are priests, and this unveils an even more basic problem: when an (ecclesial) environment isolates itself and shuns open communication or an adequate process of formation and human development, the risk of abuse increases exponentially.

Blurred lines of governance structures and ambiguous hierarchical boundaries can also create the conditions in which abuse happens too easily. For example, the so-called *Deetman Report*— a document outlining abuse in the Dutch Church — hints at this. It is shocking to see how many unresolved procedural issues were brought to light by this scandal. When responsibilities are poorly defined, people find it easy to wash their hands of any responsibility.

Neither the bunker mentality nor chaotic organization helps matters. The authority and guidance of bishops and religious superiors are necessary precisely because it is a matter of protecting human lives. And in any case, the power associated with these roles necessitates both external control and interior dedication, which help those in authority to truly understand their positions and their duties in the sense given by Jesus: “Whoever is greatest among you must become your servant” (*Mt 23:11*).

Questions and tasks for everyone

In a society that holds credibility as one of its highest values, the crisis provoked by sexual abuse places some decisive questions before us: Are we able to reenvision our way of being Church? We have to ask ourselves to what extent we refuse to do so, to what degree we intend to do away with injustice and the harm that has been caused, to what extent we think we can return to the pastoral work as soon as possible in the wake of the scandals, and to what extent our gaze is fixed upon ourselves, blocking our energies and apostolic creativity. Pope Benedict XVI, who consistently took measures against the perpetrators of abuse, even at the highest levels, left us an excellent example in his retirement of how one can exercise power (in the Church). Pope Francis never tires of condemning the plague of clericalism, careerism and a life of comfort, and of preaching a return to the simplicity and immediacy of the Gospel.

Some questions emerge when we apply these considerations to the causes and effects of the spiritual trauma suffered by those who have been subjected to abuse: How can we conform the exercise of power to the Gospel? How can men and women complement one another in their respective ways of exercising and handling power? What can we learn from what the social and economic arena calls *corporate governance and compliance* so that we can assume an effective co-responsibility and adopt verifiable control mechanisms? What is the true essence of priestly ministry

and how much can or should the power of governance exercised by priests in parishes and other institutions be delegated to collaborators? How can the discernment of spirits be exercised on an individual and communal level in a manner that will help find a way to effectively navigate between entrenchment and chaos? How can bishops and religious superiors learn to weigh decisions and make them at the right moment? How should they be effective formators of future priests and religious? How much of an investment should be made in the formation of those who are themselves destined to form others?

We can see how difficult it is both for those who hold positions of leadership in the Church and for the simple faithful to have faith in Jesus and believe his words, “The truth will set you free” (*Jn* 8:32). It is not easy to look pure and simple truth in the face. It takes courage and a strong will to place oneself in front of reality, however upsetting and sad it may be. It would be good for Christians to trust God more than themselves, especially in difficult times when faced with individual and institutional failures.

In such situations, anyone willing to open his eyes, mind and heart is not only able to know things about himself and others on a human and spiritual level but also to open himself to the grace of conversion and mercy, which is promised to all those who sincerely confess their failures. This also entails a willingness to open oneself to embarrassment, discouragement, doubts and mistrust. None of it is easy. But to anyone willing to shoulder these things with faith in Jesus Christ and find support in the community of the faithful, the help of the Holy Spirit is promised.

Such an attitude opens a path that, by penetrating the depths of the human heart through “spiritual desolation” (as St. Ignatius would write), with the help of grace can bring solace and even healing. Because it so happens that after years of unspeakable pain and teetering on the brink of depression and suicide, after years and decades of depression and suffering, there are those who find a road that leads to the source of new hope and life. People like this who – as it is said – “have gone through hell” are credible witnesses of the strength of salvation in Jesus Christ. Many people who have given testimony with their lives – lives filled with fear and the risk of falling back into trauma – have subsequently shown that they have understood in an entirely new way the meaning of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The battle against sexual abuse will last for a while, so we must not delude ourselves into thinking that the solution simply lies in introducing new rules and guidelines. What is needed is a radical conversion and a decisive attitude to render justice to the victims and to make sure it never happens again. The message of the God of Jesus Christ is the source and strength of our efforts and for our continual reflection on the core of the Gospel: because God loves the little ones and the vulnerable most of all.

Of course, no one is able to definitively conquer evil, even the abuse of minors. That would be a fatal presumption. But much can be done to minimize the risk and maximize prevention.^[6] Today, the scales are beginning to tip – slowly but surely – in the right direction throughout the universal Church. Pope Francis has continued

and strengthened the line of his predecessor, especially by setting up the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. He has thus created, at the level of the universal Church, the structural and material conditions that will speed up with effectiveness the protection of children throughout the entire Catholic Church.

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^[1]Cf. B. Böhm – J. Fegert *et al.* “Child Sexual Abuse in the Context of the Roman Catholic Church. A Review of Literature from 1981-2013.” In the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 23 (2014) 635-656.

^[2]Cf. C. J. Scicluna – H. Zollner *et al.* “Verso la Guarigione e il Rinnovamento. Chiesa e abusi sessuali sui minori.” Pontificia Università Gregoriana, February 6-9, 2012.

^[3]The telling statistics of the two *John Jay Reports* in the United States and in Australia the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has revealed that abuse committed by clergy in various religious communities, including Muslim spiritual guides and Rabbis, is more or less equivalent to that found in Christian denominations.

^[4]Cf. G. Cucci – H. Zollner, “Il nuovo documento sulla formazione sacerdotale,” in *Civiltà Cattolica*, 2017, II, 61-75.

^[5]We can also here refer to the data on sexual abuse in the report commissioned by the German Conference of Catholic Bishops (*Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*, or D.B.K.), and the initial results of an international study carried out by the *Centre for Child Protection* of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

^[6]On strategies for prevention, cf. S. Witte, B. Böhm *et al.*, “E-Learning Curriculum ‘Prävention von sexuellem Kindesmissbrauch für pastorale Berufe. Forschungsergebnisse,’” in *Nervenheilkunde* 34 (2015), 547-554; K. A. Fuchs – H. Zollner, “Prävention in der katholischen Kirche: Drei Beispiele aus der Praxis katholischer Institutionen,” in J. Fegert and M. Wolff (eds.), *Sexueller Missbrauch in Institutionen: Entstehungsbedingungen, Prävention und Intervention* (Weinheim – Basel, Beltz), 2015.