

Human Vulnerability, Spiritual Abuse, and Its Prevention

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Summary

People react differently to the news of sexual and spiritual abuse that has shaken the Catholic Church over the last decades. When it comes to the abuse of adults, many are of the opinion that if anything has happened, it is probably because the alleged victims were vulnerable. In the Catholic Church, the recognition that adults who are “vulnerable” can be sexually abused was an important step forward, because it acknowledged the harm done to them also and not only to adolescents. Of course, the use of the term “vulnerable persons” for these victims is ambiguous, because it has two meanings: the specific vulnerability of persons and the anthropological vulnerability of all persons. The author puts forward the thesis that every human being is anthropologically vulnerable and can be spiritually abused. In order to refute or confirm this, he first defines anthropological vulnerability and demonstrates its importance for the human being and for humanity. In the second part of the paper, he presents spiritual abuse and its consequences. In the last section, he illustrates the various ways in which these can be prevented. In conclusion, he offers some suggestions as to what needs to be done to render the Church more trustworthy and to enable the Church to authentically fulfil its mission.

Keywords: sexual abuse; spiritual abuse; vulnerable person; vulnerability; consequences of abuse; ways to prevent spiritual abuse; Catholic Church

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Introduction

In recent decades the Catholic Church has been shaken by scandals of sexual and spiritual abuse.¹ When news of adult abuse breaks, people react in different ways: their response ranges from the assumption of the complete vulnerability and helplessness of the alleged victim to, what some call, “blame the victim”, particularly if the alleged victim was of legal age and unimpaired physically, psychologically, or emotionally.

The term “vulnerable person” was used by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* (2019), in which he defines a vulnerable person as »any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist the offence« (Francis, 2019, no. 2, b).

In any case, the recognition of adult victims of sexual abuse (Francis, 2019, no. 1, a, ii) was an important step forward in the Catholic Church, because it acknowledged the harm done to adults and not only to young people. Of course, the use of the term “vulnerable persons” for these victims is ambiguous, because it has two meanings. The first meaning implies a specific vulnerability of persons, such as the vulnerability of children, young people, people with disabilities and the elderly. The second meaning refers to the anthropological vulnerability of all persons.

In her study, Carolina M. Orphanopoulos (2023, 28) notes that such use of the term vulnerable persons »entails a risk in its potential revictimization, because it situates the source and the (perverse) reason of the abuse on the assumed vulnerability — and on a specific way of understanding vulnerability — of that particular adult rather than on the person that perpetrates the abuse. Such an approach distorts what happened: a power abuse over against the sexual and conscience integrity of an adult, by claiming the lack of certain qualities — especially a certain understanding of autonomy — in the victim.«

The problems with this approach to understanding adult victims can be better understood if we acknowledge that it is a person’s anthropological vulnerability that enables him/her to become fully human. So, if it is a person’s anthropological vulnerability, i.e. their openness to trust others that makes spiritual and sexual abuse possible, rather than their inability to be open and fully autonomous, is it right to use this term to define these victims?

In this paper, we argue that every human being is anthropologically vulnerable and therefore can be spiritually abused. In order to refute or confirm this thesis, we will focus on the definition of anthropological vulnerability and its importance for man and humanity in the first section, and in the second section we will focus on spiritual abuse and the consequences thereof. In light of the search

1 João Braz de Aviz (2017), Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, said in an interview in February 2017 that some 70 »new religious families« were under investigation for abuse.

for an answer to the question of what can be done to prevent spiritual abuse, we will outline the possibilities of prevention in the third section.

1. Anthropological vulnerability

A lot of research has been done on human vulnerability in recent years (Have, 2016; Brown, 2018; Capantini and Gronchi, 2018; Fernández, 2022; Keul, 2022; Orphanopoulos, 2023). The word “vulnerability” has different meanings and resonates differently with each person. It is difficult to find anyone who is comfortable with the word, as it suggests human helplessness, weakness, insecurity, fragility, and transience. When we speak of vulnerable people and groups, we are referring to those who need special care and help because they are not autonomous and therefore cannot look after themselves. Roman Globokar (2022, 8) points out that it is not only these persons who are vulnerable, but that every human being is vulnerable. In fact, he understands vulnerability »as the original human condition of not being self-sufficient, of not being perfectly sovereign, of always remaining imperfect — exposed to risk and also to pain. And that is why he longs for a relationship, for the other. Because we are vulnerable, we are capable of feeling, empathy, love, and transcendence. It is the awareness of our own fragility, impermanence and imperfection, which in turn opens us up to relating to others and finding creative solutions. Vulnerability is therefore about exposure, sensitivity and at the same time the capacity to respond and adapt« (Globokar, 2022, 8; cf. Have, 2016, 12).

This anthropological vulnerability also promotes cooperation, solidarity, care for the other, compassion, and therefore, according to Globokar (2022, 13), »it is the starting point for a new humanism, for a global ethic — and thus for a brighter future for all humanity. Catholic theology, centred in the Paschal mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, can contribute, through its view of the human person, to a courageous acceptance of vulnerability and a responsible care for one’s own life, for the life of one’s fellow human beings and for the life of other living beings.«

Since the myth of autonomy, among other things, prevails in today’s society, vulnerability is often understood as a lack of cognitive and voluntary freedom to consent and/or protect one’s own interests. It is also understood as a human deficiency in the pursuit of autonomy, since the fullness of life is thought to depend primarily on the will and the intellect as Orphanopoulos (2023, 29) notes.

Drawing on extensive research and contributions by numerous authors, she stresses that man cannot live his life to the full without accepting his vulnerability, which is his “universal anthropological characteristic” and signifies his “inner openness” towards people and the world. Although anthropological vulnerability is an innate, universal and anthropological quality, it is individualised in different ways for specific individuals. For this reason, she says: »We are all vulnerable, but each individual is positioned in different ways in life, in his or her biography, social spaces, and the way we are supported — or not — by social institutions. The

result is that every human being is not always equally vulnerable in different situations. This is what is called *situational vulnerability*« (Orphanopoulos, 2023, 30).

Each human being's anthropological vulnerability, on the one hand, exposes him or her to the possibility of being wounded, but on the other hand, it is a condition of the possibility of an intersubjective relationship that enables him or her to become fully human. If he or she were self-sufficient, impermeable and completely independent, he or she could not be wounded, but would also be condemned to the most monotonous and absurd solipsism. It is certainly not easy to admit one's own vulnerability as well as that of others, and that vulnerability is the path to humanisation. The vulnerability of others can trigger in us contradictory feelings such as contempt or pity, violence or concern. Our own anthropological vulnerability can cause fear, shame and various psychological defence mechanisms. It is therefore important to bear in mind that one's vulnerability can be both threatening and enriching at the same time, and that it can be experienced as pure threat or pure joy and trust, or all of these together (Orphanopoulos, 2023, 32).

It is certainly possible to recognize anthropological vulnerability as a potentially valuable and innate human quality, however, unfortunately what often creates relationships of asymmetric power, manipulation, control of personal conscience, is something completely different. Orphanopoulos (2023, 33) therefore warns: »To guarantee that the vulnerable aspects of being human can be carriers of beauty does not lessen the ethical requirement of one's responsibility in relation to that vulnerability. The vulnerability of those who open themselves to faith and to the ecclesial community in search of transcendent meaning and of a life traversed by the Good News of Jesus is marked by generosity and the desire of God. This openness, this vulnerability, commits in binding ways those who interact with it to respect and protect the integrity of the other without manipulating the exposed intimacy and generosity of searching for a relationship with transcendence, with the Transcendent One.«

All people, children, young people and adults, are therefore vulnerable to abuse because they are all vulnerable, which is why the term "vulnerable person" is dangerous. Abuse can happen to all those who, in their anthropological vulnerability, i.e. in their openness and permeability, are ready to trust, to love and to believe in the other on the basis of spiritual values. It is precisely of such vulnerable people that the Church is made (Orphanopoulos, 2023, 34). If there were no people in it who were ready to trust those to whom it has given a particular mission in a parish or in one of its institutions, it could not exist and function well. Spiritual and other abuse are therefore not a problem of the vulnerability of the victim, but occur when the common anthropological vulnerability of those present is abused, turning their capacity for openness to integral maturation into mental, moral, spiritual or physical harm.

At the end of her paper, Orphanopoulos (2023, 36–37) acknowledges that from the perspective of clinical psychology, we could allow for some distinctions in measuring the fragility or psychic strength of different people and say that

there are adults whose relational dynamics are more fragile and who may therefore be more vulnerable to abuse. At the same time, she makes it clear that »the various ecclesial relational contexts place believers in a situation of special vulnerability, particularly when it comes to relations with clergy, which are still, for too many, asymmetrical. In the case of ecclesial abuses, this vulnerability is further accentuated by how what is sacred is projected into the performative language of the Catholic Church and into its members, in particular, the clergy.«

2. *Spiritual abuse and its consequences*

The term “spiritual abuse” began to be used already in 1991 among Protestants in the Anglo–Saxon world (Johnson and VanVonderer, 1991), and much later elsewhere (Heyder, 2022). In the Catholic Church, spiritual abuse began to receive more attention when the sexual abuse of even adults as vulnerable persons was recognised (Francis, 2019). Of course, at first these were discussed only in relation to sexual abuse, but gradually it began to be recognised as a form of abuse in its own right (Demasure, 2022).

Heyder (2022), who analysed 23 reports of spiritual and sexual abuse in his book *Erzählen als Widerstand*, came to the conclusion that, like sexual abuse, “spiritual abuse is acting against the spiritual self–determination and the will of the persons concerned, involving violence and coercion and taking advantage of positions of power and authority.” A more explicit and detailed definition of spiritual abuse is provided by Lisa Oakley and her colleagues, as they arrived at it after a large–scale empirical study in 2017 in the UK, involving different Christian denominations: »Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision–making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism« (Oakley & Humphreys 2019, 31).

Since the pioneering work on spiritual abuse was published in 1991,² many different definitions have emerged. Samuel Fernández (2022) has analysed sixteen studies on spiritual abuse since 1991. He has discerned three obvious elements of spiritual abuse: the misuse of spiritual power, the harm caused to the victims and the benefits sought by the abusers. Heidi M. Ellis and her colleagues reached similar conclusions in a systematic review of twenty–five empirical stu-

2 The pioneering definition of spiritual abuse was given by Johnson and VanVonderer (1991, 20): »Spiritual abuse is the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment.«

dies on spiritual abuse and trauma that existed to that point (Ellis et al., 2022). They found that there was some degree of consensus across studies on the definition of spiritual abuse and trauma. Although differences are highlighted in how spiritual abuse and trauma are conceptualised and defined, consistency is found with regard to three main factors: abuse of power, psychological harm and spiritual harm. In this context, spiritual abuse and trauma have been defined as abuse of power in a religious/spiritual context »resulting in psychological and spiritual harm« (Ellis et al., 2022, 226).

It is important to be conscious that spiritual abuse occurs, affecting both individuals as well as entire communities. In commenting on this abuse Andrej Saje (2020, 34) notes, that it occurs »in a religious context, where power is exercised over others under the pretext of obedience to God, represented for example by a spiritual leader or superior. For such abuse to occur, someone must have power and authority; while on the other hand, others must acknowledge it and submit to it unconditionally. The person being dominated identifies with the voice of God. For the abuser, religion is merely an external form and an object of manipulation to facilitate the achievement of goals. He pretends to be responsible for the other, but in fact he is responsible for the actions he commits against the subordinate. In doing so, he or she uses a systematic pattern of control, with psychological and emotional violence at the same time. The subordinate is deprived of the fundamental and natural given of personal decision-making.«

Doris Wagner (2019, 79–147) speaks of three forms of spiritual abuse: a) Spiritual neglect takes place in various ecclesial communions and religious communities, or in families, by parents who fail to give their subordinates the necessary and obligatory support in times of distress or need, or in times of growth. b) Spiritual manipulation is a subtle and covert way of acting when a responsible person deceives a subordinate and gives him or her false information about his or her behaviour. Being deprived of personal freedom of which he or she is not even aware, he or she loses touch with himself or herself and becomes completely controllable. He or she sees himself or herself and the world through the eyes of the manipulator. c) Spiritual violence is the total control of the subordinate by the superordinate. He or she must always follow his or her instructions, accept the ideals presented and strictly limit contact with others. His or her daily life and activities are completely under his or her control.

The harm caused to people by spiritual abuse is, on the one hand, similar to that caused by other types of abuse, but on the other hand, because it is done in the context of religion or spirituality, it affects them on their religious or spiritual level. It can be classified into five categories: loss of freedom — a true state of bondage, distortion of the image of God, undermining of the process of making sense, disabling of trust in others and in oneself, and the emergence of depression (Fernández, 2022). Some authors (e.g. Ward, 2011; Demasure, 2022; Figueroa and Tombs, 2023) who have analysed the testimonies of spiritually abused persons believe that the depth and breadth of the damage inflicted reveals precisely the loss of one's own identity, dignity, spiritual autonomy, and

the capacity to love and respect oneself and others, and to be open to trusting the other/Other, and oneself. The dynamics of spiritual abuse, which are similar to those of sexual abuse, often result in the victim becoming a perpetrator later on, as they unconsciously adopt the behavioural models of the perpetrator and, in a leadership role, repeat what they themselves have experienced (Saje, 2020, 35; Repič Slavič, 2020, 23).

Spiritual abuse most often occurs in hierarchically organised communities such as the Church, religious orders and charismatic movements, where there is an asymmetrical relationship between the superordinate and the subordinate. Consequently, there is a double responsibility for abuses. On the one hand, there is the perpetrator, and on the other, there is also the institution, which provides a favourable environment for such abuses, especially when it is aware of the abuses and does nothing to either stop them or take the necessary steps for healing (Saje, 2013; 2020, 33). Because of the asymmetrical relationship, the victim is also never guilty (Fernández, 2022; Keul, 2022; Orphanopoulos, 2023, 29–37; Repič Slavič, 2020, 11–24; Saje, 2020, 30–35).

3. Opportunities to prevent spiritual abuse

There are some options that can prevent the believer from being spiritually abused as well as help the Church to prevent it.

3.1. Accepting vulnerability and abandoning the “vulnerance”

In her study, Hildegund Keul (2022) shows that it is not enough to talk only about vulnerability and resilience, as many people do, in the belief that everyone should strive for resilience in order not to be abused, but that one should also pay attention to the dynamics of vulnerability when confronted with the vulnerability of others: »There is one’s own vulnerability, but there is also the vulnerability of others — and both enhance each other. This also applies to institutions that tolerate sexual abuse when covering it up. Already here, the institution’s own vulnerability exercises an unspeakable power that the concealment of sexual abuse by church leaders has revealed. Vulnerability has the power to enhance violence« (Keul, 2022).

We see the reality of this in the Catholic Church. When its leaders wanted to protect their faith communities or spiritual movements, that which was sacred to them, from the harm of the abuses that would result if they became public knowledge, they opened the door to new violence. In this way, they have further wounded those who were already wounded: e.g. by denying the crimes, accusing them of lying or of being guilty themselves, casting suspicion on them, excluding the victims from the community, etc. To describe in one word this human and/or institutional willingness to use violence to protect themselves from their own vulnerability, the author uses the new word “vulnerance” (Keul, 2022). The two forms of “vulnerance” — abuse and cover-up — »amplify each other, dealing

immeasurable damage to survivors and non-survivors. In cover-ups, the vulnerability of one's own institution operates as an unspeakable, violence-enhancing power« (Keul, 2022). This “vulnerance”, or the violence with which one wounds others in order to protect oneself and disguise one's own vulnerability, is often unleashed not by the actual wound, but by the wound one fears, i.e. the fear of one's own vulnerability. This is why it is very important to immediately reveal the abuse that has taken place and to realise that it is not one's own vulnerability itself that is wrong, but the denial and cover-up that leads to the “vulnerance”.

When we are wondering how it is possible that spiritual and sexual abuse can occur in the Church, it is important to bear in mind what Keul (2022) points out, referring also to the research of Hoyeau (2021). Like any institution, the Church is particularly vulnerable to abuse and cover-up in times of crisis and decline, for it is then that it quickly becomes the case that it sees the hope of salvation in new spiritual movements and charismatic leaders. For the Church this becomes something “sacred” which must be protected at all costs, even at the cost of victims.³ The sacred in the religious sense in itself creates a willingness to sacrifice, which may be free, but which the leader may demand or even coerce from the members of the community. This creates victimisation. However, the more it is ignored, denied and hidden in the community or in the Church as a whole, the stronger it is. Victimisation is bottomless and gradually destroys such a community and the Church. As long as those who embody the hope of the Church are untouchable, their resilience is increased by the violence they inflict on their victims. This resilience is strengthened by the faith and trust of the community. Only the disclosure of abuse by surviving victims can provoke a counter-movement. When victims leave the safety that silence and seclusion seem to give them, or the “vulnerance” towards themselves or others, and risk increasing their vulnerability by speaking out, they transform the destructive power of the ‘sacred’ into a creative power. This unleashes in them the power that Paul already experienced in his wound, the famous “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7).

3.2. *Give up naive confidence in promises*

Heyder (2022), who analysed the abuse narratives in the book *Erzählen als Widerstand*, found that what all victims had in common was their search for a solution to their distress and believed that this would be provided. Believing victims were particularly attracted by the “promise of healing”. For when a person is in distress, he or she clings to any promise that assures him or her that he or she will be saved or healed, even if it seems impossible and unreasonable.

3 The fact that the focus should not be on the cost of victims, but on the goal of preserving the holiness of the Church may also be due to the fact that the Church is often compared to an “army” — a Church militant. Whoever wants to win the war must not pay too much attention to individual victims. But in the Church this must not be the case. For her, each person must be holy, for each is an image of God, a son/daughter of God — Christ lives in each person.

A similar snare in which many believers are caught in the midst of all uncertainty is their longing »for a clear explanation of doctrine, intensive experiences of God’s nearness, and sacred liturgy« (Keul, 2022). This makes them easy prey for those who promise them this convincingly.

It is only natural that human beings seek a solution to the various hardships that befall them. However, the solution is not to want to get rid of the distress or the cross at any cost, but to renounce oneself in the spirit of the Gospel, i.e. one’s limited view of oneself, to take it upon oneself and to carry it after Jesus (Lk 9:23–24; Mt 16:24–25; Mr 8:34–35). In this way, his cross is transformed into “the cross of Christ” through which He has saved us. Whoever carries it with Him, no evil, sin and death can have the last word, but rather love, mercy, forgiveness, eternal life. »In a spirituality that dares to look at the woundedness to the bottom, that comes down and does not teach the world what is right and wrong, but shares suffering with it and heals it from it in the power of God, there is a possibility that is offered to us, sometimes even imposed on us, and which we often fear« (Vodičar, 2020, 103).

If the Church does not seek to proclaim the integral Gospel doctrine of the promises of Christ, and supports various charismatic spiritual leaders and communities who promise healing, clarity, certainty, holiness, she is responsible for the spiritual abuses that happen precisely because of naive trust in them and their promises. Such spiritual leaders may unconsciously or consciously confuse their own voice with God’s, or they may think of themselves as God’s messenger, whom all must follow and believe (Wagner, 2019, 19–22).

In Christianity, to believe is not to be naive, but to trust in the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit, and to live Christ, i.e. to see, hear and perceive God, ourselves, others, events, hardships and creation in His way, and to allow that He can be close to everyone through us and make His love real. It means to be a branch/to be Christ’s on/in the vine/Christ and to bring the fruits of love into this world and time (Jn 15:1–10). Whoever believes in the spirit of the Gospel is aware, it is very normal, that in him faith and unbelief, certainty and uncertainty, clarity and obscurity, the nearness of God and his farness, the hearing of petitions and the unhearing of petitions, the sacredness of the liturgy and its everydayness, etc., are always intertwined.

3.3. To be aware of the dangers of abuse in toxic spirituality, community and leadership

Christian spirituality is the Christian faith lived personally in the power and under the guidance of the Spirit of Christ and of the Father in union with brothers and sisters in the communion of the Church, in the midst of different communities, environments, societies, nations and the world. This is the concrete life of the Christian in all its dimensions — body, psyche and spirit — where he or she lives and works. It enables him or her to search for and find the content, purpose and meaning of life and the answers to life’s deepest questions, and leads him or

her to an integral relationship with him or herself, with others, with creation and with the Triune God.

There are many different spiritualities within it, which is also the richness of the Church. They are not different in the fundamental elements of Christian spirituality, but in the differing emphases that they give or that are given to them. Of course, it can happen that, unknowingly or knowingly, an element of spirituality is completely neglected or over-emphasised.⁴ As a result, it no longer helps people to mature integrally, but it becomes »a tool to inflict psycho-spiritual damage« (Ward, 2011, 899). Such spirituality is called toxic (Wagner, 2019, 76–78). Where a healthy spirituality is present, so too is healthy spiritual leadership. The characteristics of such leadership are: »Leadership recognises, and is sensitive to power issues. Leadership accepts the individual due to intrinsic human worth. It seeks to incorporate a healthy bio/psycho/spiritual integration and seeks to cooperatively address spiritual needs. It encourages a spirituality that can be expressed uniquely by each member within the same group. Leadership recognises and acknowledges their own personal flaws and limitations« (Ward, 2011, 909). Where these characteristics are absent in leadership, leadership is toxic.

Anyone who detects a toxic “Christian” or other spirituality, community and leadership should not delude themselves into thinking they can change it, or that it will not affect them, or that they will not be abused because they are autonomous enough, but should run away immediately. This was already suggested by Johnson and VanVonderen (1991) and others after them. Of course, this should not be done by the leadership of the Church, or by the ordinaries and major superiors of religious communities, but by regular visitations to check what kind of spirituality and leadership is being put into practice in those for whom they are responsible. And if they detect toxicity, they must take appropriate action.

3.4. *Continuing education*

Many people inside or outside the Catholic Church are often unaware of what spiritual abuse is, and even less aware of when and where it is particularly possible. For this reason it is important to raise awareness among all the believers, not only those in formation for religious orders and congregations, deacons and priests and lay pastoral workers, and among all religious, deacons, priests and bishops and all pastoral workers, of what spiritual abuse is and what its forms and

- 4 a) The following are neglected: e.g. the Gospel image of God, the gratuitousness of grace, personal desires and longings, freedom of conscience and decision, spiritual autonomy, spiritual discernment, the separation of the internal and external forum, the relationship to relatives and to every human being, the relationship to vocation, ministry, society, the world, culture and politics, etc.
- b) They over-emphasise: e.g. the image of God as Judge, the inaccessibility of God, the power of evil and sin and eternal damnation, sexual sins, addiction, the power of the devil and possession, the merit of grace, sacrifice, fasting, vigils, various ascetic exercises, merits and victims, the priest acting *in persona Christi*, community, being holy in the sense of being perfect, perfect chastity, blind obedience, perfect humility, self-accusation and self-annihilation, flight from the world, spiritual warfare, liturgy, mysticism, the mystical view of sexuality, etc.

consequences are; where and when it can occur; when someone is abusing spiritual power and authority; how in the Church the superordinate is always responsible for everything that happens because there is an asymmetrical relationship between him and the “subordinate”; identify toxic spiritualities, communities and leadership; how freedom of conscience, spiritual freedom and autonomy are important for human dignity; identify the dynamics of abuse and abusive systems, communities and leadership; what kind of theology and pastoral supports abuse,⁵ etc. (Fernandez, 2022, 8; Ellis et al., 2022, 227).

In this way, all believers are empowered to be able to immediately perceive the various forms of spiritual abuse for themselves and to judge, discern and decide more freely and responsibly what is necessary and right to do in order to protect persons who are situationally vulnerable and to open ourselves even more as a faithful communion to the power of Christ (Vodičar, 2020, 98). Those responsible in the Church and all pastoral workers are thus better aware of the many different ways in which spiritual abuse can occur and how quickly they can unwittingly become trapped in an addiction to abuse, its cover-up and “vulnerance”, of what must be done urgently to prevent spiritual abuse and what to do when it does occur.

Codes of conduct in all forms of spiritual help need to be drawn up and legally approved by the Church to prevent spiritual and other abuses. Of course, it is also necessary that all pastoral workers know them and commit themselves to using them. However, there also needs to be a verification system to check their use.

More also needs to be done on the evaluation and implementation of supervision and intervention for all pastoral workers, because only by constantly working on themselves will they be able to act responsibly and not get caught in the trap of the evil of “wounding”.

Conclusion

Research confirms that every human being is anthropologically vulnerable and can therefore be spiritually abused. For this reason, it is not wise to use the term “vulnerable persons” when speaking of victims of abuse. It would be better to replace the term “vulnerable persons” with another term such as “persons who are specifically vulnerable”.

The various spiritual abuses in the Church and their cover-up have led many people to say: Christ — Yes, the Church — No. To become more trustworthy and to be able to fulfil her mission authentically, the Church must do the following:

- a) When all Christians and those responsible in the Church accept their own anthropological vulnerability and the vulnerability of the Church and furthermore renounce “vulnerance”, they become able to enter into deeper relationships with every person and with God and to partake of the

5 There are already some studies that speak of the necessity for theological and pastoral renewal. See: Celarc, 2020; Keul, 2022; Fleming et al., 2023.

graces that God gives them through the Church. They also become more alert to any abuse and will immediately do whatever is necessary not to cover up the abuse, but to recognize the dynamics of abuse, confront them and acknowledge that they exist. If they are willing to face the reality of abuse and “vulnerance” and accept responsibility, there is a possibility of healing the wounds and restoring trust in the faith and the Church.

- b) Church documents and canon law are very clear on the recognition of sexual abuse of minors and “vulnerable persons”. Spiritual abuse is often linked to sexual abuse, but not always. Therefore, Church leaders must establish clear guidelines specifically for spiritual abuse and fulfil them transparently and honestly.
- c) Whoever denies the abuse he has committed loses his moral dignity and credibility. It can only be restored when he or she is willing to accept responsibility for his or her actions, to acknowledge the wrong done, to repent, to make reparation inasmuch as possible, to listen to the abused victims and accept their experience, to ask for forgiveness from the victim, the community/Church and God, repent/leave the path of abuse, consciously acknowledge that he or she is addicted to the evil of “vulnerance” and that this cannot be resolved without the help of others and God, and sincerely accept and put into practice what those responsible (Ordinary or Major Superior) for his or her future life and actions decide.
- d) Any community in the Church in which abuse has taken place, as well as the Church as a whole, loses its credibility and confidence in herself and in her redemptive mission if she does not acknowledge her responsibility for the evil of abuse. It is certainly not enough to acknowledge that it has happened, but it is also necessary to acknowledge her vulnerability and to consciously renounce the “vulnerance”. She must also take the necessary steps to prevent further abuse, to provide integral help to the victim, to help the abuser so that he or she can take the necessary healing steps in regard to the victim, to the community/Church, to God and to him or herself, and to consciously embark on the path of his or her own integral transformation.
- e) It must always be recognised that within an asymmetrical relationship the victim is never guilty. Every effort must be made to protect the victim from further abuse and to provide a safe space where he or she is allowed to express all that he or she has experienced and will be heard, accepted and respected. It is necessary to provide him or her with appropriate therapeutic help, not just spiritual help, so that he or she does not remain in the role of victim and is accompanied by a qualified person who understands the religious context of the abuse and its dynamics. Forgiveness is very important, though it should not be forced, but should take into account psychotherapeutic elements as well as spiritual or religious elements.
- f) It is imperative that those responsible in the Church and all those who provide spiritual help within and on behalf of the Church, as well as all be-

lievers, receive professional training on spiritual abuse, because only then will they be able to understand the gravity of the crime committed and to take appropriate and adequate action. Since these abuses are made possible or even supported by certain aspects of current theology and pastoral care, they need to be constantly renewed in the spirit of the Gospel, the Church Fathers, the human sciences and the signs of the times, and above all in fidelity to the Holy Spirit for remembering, inspiring, teaching and guiding us.

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Ljudska ranjivost, duhovno zlostavljanje i njegovo sprječavanje

*Ivan Platovnjak**

Sažetak

Ljudi imaju različite reakcije na vijesti o seksualnim i duhovnim zlostavljanjima koja potresaju Katoličku crkvu posljednjih desetljeća. Kada je riječ o zlostavljanju odraslih, mnogi ljudi misle da ako se je nešto dogodilo, to je vjerojatno zato što su navodne žrtve bile ranjive. U Katoličkoj crkvi, priznanje da odrasli koji su "ranjivi" mogu biti seksualno zlostavljani bio je važan iskorak, jer je Crkva priznala štetu koja je učinjena i njima, a ne samo adolescentima. Naravno, uporaba izraza "ranjive osobe" za žrtve je dvosmislena, jer ima dva značenja: specifična ranjivost osoba i antropološka ranjivost svih osoba. Autor postavlja tezu da je svako ljudsko biće antropološko ranjivo te da može biti duhovno zlostavljano. Da bi se to opovrgnulo ili potvrdilo, najprije definira antropološku ranjivost i pokazuje njezinu važnost za čovjeka i čovječanstvo. U drugom poglavlju donosi prikaz duhovnoga zlostavljanja i njegove posljedice. U završnom dijelu prikazuje različite načine kako se takve pojave mogu spriječiti. U zaključku donosi nekoliko konkretnih prijedloga što je sve potrebno učiniti da Crkva postane vjerodostojnija i da na autentičan način ispunjava svoje poslanje.

Ključne riječi: seksualno zlostavljanje; duhovno zlostavljanje; ranjiva osoba; ranjivost; posljedice duhovnoga zlostavljanja; načini sprječavanja duhovnoga zlostavljanja; Katolička crkva

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