

Abuses in the Church

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Spiritual Abuse: Definition, Forms and Preconditions

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Spiritual abuse is a relatively young term, and there is still a lack of clarity about its meaning. Defining spiritual abuse as an injury to spiritual intimacy and autonomy makes possible a clear and nuanced classification of different abusive actions. In addition it exposes the scale of spiritual abuse. The inner freedom of a person, their spiritual autonomy, is the precondition for any faith act. In other words, spiritual abuse threatens the basis of faith. Alongside specific contexts within the Catholic Church, which are particularly susceptible to it, the ambivalent attitude of the magisterium to a person's inner freedom can be shown to be a breeding ground for spiritual abuse.

1. Spiritual abuse – a relatively new topic

While sexual abuse in the Catholic Church has been talked about for decades, spiritual abuse not only seems to be a relatively new concept in the Catholic Church, but the discussion in recent years has shown that the concept provoked unease in many quarters.¹ There are three possible reasons for this. First, talking about the abuse of people may seem problematic, since ultimately people are not objects to be used. Second, spiritual abuse seems to be a vague and extremely broad term. Directly linked with these fears is a third factor, that it may call in question common practices such as first confession or vows of obedience. I shall now address all three points and suggest a definition of spiritual abuse that may prove particularly useful in the debate within the Catholic Church.

1.1 Spiritual abuse is abuse of people, which means a violation of their spiritual intimacy and autonomy

Occasionally the assumption is accepted as pure logic, following the axiom *Abusus non tollit usum* ('Abuse does not abolish the right of proper use'), that 'abuse of x' presupposes a legitimate 'use of x'. For example, talk of the misuse of alcohol presupposes the possibility of using alcohol; talk of misuse of power presupposes the use of power. Talk of abuse attributes to the person abused the status of an object of use. That is why the idea should only be used with regard to things. Talk of the abuse of people should be avoided in order that people are not indirectly assigned the status of things.² For this reason some people prefer terms such as 'sexual abuse of power' or 'spiritual abuse of power'.

I think that there is a linguistic misunderstanding here. Talk of 'sexual use' or 'spiritual use' of a person, let alone a child, is from a modern ethical perspective rightly regarded as outrageous. But precisely *because* modern societies have developed fundamentally different rules for dealing with things and dealing with people, talk of the abuse of people in modern codes of conduct does *not* also imply the possibility of using people. Abuse of a thing is something quite different from the abuse of a person.

We can talk of object-related abuse whenever we are talking about a breach of rules governing the use of *things* such as positions of authority, tax revenues or service weapons. There is abuse when these things are not used for their real purpose, as either defined by some official rule or fixed by morality, but are used for a different purpose, for example for the personal advantage of those entrusted with them. *Person-related abuse* is something different. That is because, unlike things, people have rights. These include the right to autonomy in the way they live their lives including intimate activity, for example in the area of sexuality. When a person becomes the object of an act of abuse, the abuse consists not in the fact that a person is 'used' sexually in defiance of the rules, but in the fact that someone treats this person improperly, and in terms of modern moral and legal codes that means they place themselves over and above this person's sexual autonomy and violate the boundaries of their intimate sphere.³

In a similar approach the German or Austrian criminal codes may define sexual abuse as the violation of sexual autonomy. By analogy, spiritual

abuse can be defined as the violation of spiritual autonomy or as a violent intrusion into the intimate spiritual sphere of a person.⁴ Just as pressure to engage in an undesired sexual act is sexual abuse, pressure to engage in an undesired spiritual act also constitutes abuse. Just as undesired questions or remarks about a person's sexual life are invasive, undesired questions about a person's spiritual life are also invasive. Just as a forced intrusion into the body of another person constitutes rape, so forced access to the interior life of someone else is a sort of rape of the soul.

1.2 *Spiritual autonomy is the precondition for any faith act and a theological necessity*

In this section I define spiritual autonomy as the right or ability to undertake spiritual actions on one's own initiative and free from external pressures. Spiritual actions are all faith acts in the classical sense, from the reception of baptism or another sacrament, prayer, acts of love of neighbour or asceticism. In addition, spiritual experiences, spiritual interpretations of events in a person's own life and decisions inspired by these interpretations can be understood as spiritual actions. In this sense it is a matter of spiritual autonomy whether a person adopts a faith, and which faith they adopt, and how they practise it, which specific traditions, practices, ways of life and communities within the chosen religion someone follows. It is also a matter of spiritual autonomy how a person interprets particular events in their life, whether, when and how someone, for example, sees traces of divine action in their own life or what someone thinks in a particular situation they should do as a result of their faith.

At first sight, talk of spiritual autonomy seems to be a modern phenomenon. In the last resort the development of ideals of autonomy could not be more closely linked to the modern image of a human being and the emergence of human rights, with which, as is well known, the Catholic Church has an ambivalent relationship. Nevertheless there are deep and unbroken roots of spiritual autonomy in holy scripture, the history of Christianity and, not least, in the teaching and tradition of the Catholic Church. There are strands of freedom tradition in the Catholic Church that go a long way back.

In biblical stories of a call, people are faced with a free choice, from Adam and Eve, through Mary to St Paul. In the Wisdom literature there

are ideas of freedom of choice taken over from Hellenistic culture, for example, Sir 15.14-17. Even when God wants to lead people to a good life and seeks to win their agreement, he does not force them.⁵ Canon law, too, places considerable weight on the inner freedom of the faithful. This applies especially to spiritual actions that also have the character of legal acts: 'An act undertaken out of force inflicted on a person from without, which the person was not able to resist in any way, is considered as never to have taken place' (Can 125 § 1 CIC, translation modified). Such an action that has been undertaken through pressure is not 'given the status of an *actus humanus*, but of a mere *actus hominis*, als *actus materialiter tantum positus* (an act performed by a human being, but only in a material sense).⁶ This is discussed in depth, particularly with regard to marriage. Here it is not just external factors such as 'fear and force' that can lead to the nullity of a marriage, but also a lack of *inner freedom*, which is either a permanent state or the result 'of a temporary situation of conflict that, at the moment the marriage is contracted, the person is unable to resolve'.⁷ The external and inner freedom of the individual is also crucial in canon law with regard to conscience and spiritual direction. For example, a novice master may not hear the confessions of his novices (can. 985); what is mentioned in a confession (can. 984) or in a confidential conversation between religious and their superiors (can. 630) may not be picked up in another context. Moreover, Canon 630 § 5 forbids superiors 'in any way to get members of their order to open their consciences to them'. In other words, the Church legislator seems to regard it as important that faith acts are performed in complete freedom, including opening up one's conscience and one's own spiritual life to directors and superiors.

Finally, it is not disputed dogmatically that faith presupposes freedom. No-one can be forced or pressured into faith. The magisterium of the Catholic Church itself makes this argument, for example in the Catechism, citing Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae*: 'To be human, man's response to God by faith must be free, and... therefore nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against his will. the act of faith is of its very nature a free act' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 160).

In other words, anyone who deprives a person of their inner freedom deprives their faith of its necessary precondition. Here we find the incalculable theological weight of spiritual abuse: at its heart it makes

impossible faith or individual faith acts. It is in addition the violation of a person in a very sensitive part of their personality that gives them their sense of direction and can therefore have serious consequences for the life and mental health of those affected.

1.3 Ways in which spiritual autonomy can be violated

Spiritual abuse is particularly obvious when it is openly accompanied by violence and takes the form of *spiritualised violence*. Examples are physical violence, threats, blackmail or external force that make any other action than the one imposed impossible in practice. We might think of a pregnant woman who is threatened by her parents with eviction or disinheritance if she does not marry the father of the child. Another example are school confessions, at which children, irrespective of their own wills, are taken to confession as a class without having the possibility of refusing. A religion teacher has described how witnessing the mental and physical reactions of the affected children was also traumatic for her:

In my first year of teaching, 1991/92... it was normal for school confessions to be organised before Christmas and Easter. In each case there were two confession days, when we religion teachers had to take classes 3 and 4 [age 8-10] there and back. Everything was strictly divided into groups, and I had to accompany children to confession that I didn't even know and so hadn't developed any kind of relationship with. The children were stressed and afraid – that time a girl even vomited. For me as a young teacher it was a traumatic experience that I shall never forget.⁸

Spiritual manipulation can also undermine spiritual autonomy in such a way that makes free exercise of faith impossible and in the process produce serious consequences. Supposedly free decisions that are based only on the intoxicating atmosphere of an event, on one-sided, distorted or simplistic messages, on emotional or financial dependence or on the fear of disappointing someone are not free faith acts. As early as the late 1980s Hans Urs von Balthasar was observing a tendency to spiritual manipulation, especially in new spiritual communities:

We live in a time in which propaganda, advertising and promotional techniques have become powerful forces. It is a great concern to see how Christian communities today promote themselves, often even among young people, who can be caught by clever inducements. I have a whole (international) collection of letters of complaint from outraged parents, whose children have been stolen from them by a Church institution or movement.⁹

Finally *spiritual neglect*, that is, ignorance of the right to spiritual autonomy and indifference to the spiritual needs of a person, can be a form of spiritual abuse. In the end, spiritual autonomy is also a skill that must be learned in the course of life, like any other skill. To do this children and young people in particular, but also adults in particular stages of life, need support. When this is denied them, it may happen that they do not develop spiritual agency and are consequently vulnerable. As in the cases mentioned above, so too here sexuality can be a helpful analogy and metaphor. An autonomous sexual life, built on the paradigms of consent and free will, presupposes, in addition to a recognition of the moral right to sexual autonomy as a basis, knowledge about sexuality and an essentially open treatment of the subject; it also requires a safe space in which people can inform themselves. The same goes for that other area of personal intimacy. In order to mature in their intimate sphere and to learn to live and act autonomously, people in these areas need a fundamental recognition of their right to autonomy, basic knowledge of the issues, ability to express themselves, the freedom to gather a variety of experiences and a safe space to talk about these experiences, ask questions and find help. People who have been denied spiritual autonomy, spiritual learning and possibilities for spiritual development, either deliberately or because of ignorance or a lack of information in their environment, are thereby left limited in their spiritual agency. This can have serious consequences for their life choices and their mental health, and makes them particularly vulnerable for spiritual abuse.

1.4 The boundary between spiritual actions that are abusive and those that are not

The key criterion for determining whether a particular action is abusive

or not is the autonomy of the person who performs this action or on whom it is performed. This means in the first place that even traditional Catholic practices that have come to be rejected or fallen into disrepute because of their association with abuse (for example, confession or exorcism) do not necessarily involve abuse. Conversely, practices that seem risk-free are not automatically immune from becoming instruments of abuse. For example, even a spiritual conversation or a well-meant spontaneous prayer session can be abusive. What it is decisive is whether a spiritual action is imposed on a person or boundaries of their spiritual intimacy are violated. As long as a person performs a spiritual action of their own free will and remains free to end it without negative consequences from a third party, this action is not abusive. As soon as the crucial factor in the performance of the action is force, fear, pressure, manipulation, dependence or ignorance of alternatives or of their own right to spiritual autonomy, its voluntary character is no longer guaranteed or is at least questionable, and it may be a case of spiritual abuse.

2. Conditions that make spiritual abuse possible in the Catholic Church

In the Catholic Church there are specific spiritual actions and contexts in which the voluntary character is particularly often, sometimes possibly unintentionally or with the best of intentions, undermined or eliminated. These include spiritual direction,¹⁰ forms of directed examination of conscience such as printed guides for this,¹¹ above all the confession itself and radical ways of life, especially in more recently formed charismatic communities.¹² Valuable as it might be to examine these in detail, it goes far beyond the limits of this article. It is thus all the more important at this point to have a look at the systematic *basis* that makes possible spiritual abuse in the organisation of the Catholic Church.¹³

The underlying basis that makes spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church possible and normal is that there is no recognition that the faithful have a right to spiritual autonomy. This absence is based on a strand of tradition in the Catholic Church that stands in opposition to the tradition of freedom and regards a person's freedom as a danger to faith and believes it necessary to force their inner life into the grip of Church authority in order to protect the faith. This tradition derives from the inequality among believers, between laity and pastors, that is rooted in both canon law and

dogma and reserves to pastors the right to the use of violence in pastoral ministry and the exercise of authority. As a result, the faithful in practice mostly cannot appeal to a moral right to autonomy or a private sphere in questions of their own spiritual lives, but find themselves facing the inexorable claim of Church authority, not only in the way they live their lives in general, for example in getting married, but also to intervene in their inner spiritual lives, not least in highly personal, important and intimate issues that are connected directly or indirectly with their own spirituality and relationship to God.¹⁴

Similarly to what happens in questions of sexuality, in matters of spirituality too the Church's paradigm of authority is not a model of consent and autonomy, but follows a rule of allegedly objective truth imposed by Church authority. Accordingly Church law also recognises no rights to autonomy for the faithful, and consequently no concept of person-related abuse.

Freedom may be recognised rhetorically as a precondition of faith, but at the same time if it comes to different decisions from those prescribed by Church authority it is labelled 'a mistaken concept of freedom' and neutralised, allegedly to protect the faith.¹⁵ Relevant Church texts on freedom, authority and obedience are characterised by a specific form of Catholic dialectics: on the one hand they declare the importance of freedom and maturity for the faithful, but immediately distinguish between 'true freedom', consisting in the acceptance of the truth, which ultimately means subjection to Church authority, to which this truth is entrusted (this subjection, for example, is described as 'filial docility').¹⁶ Church authority contrasts this with a 'false view of autonomy', which is also described as 'wilfulness', 'egoism' or as 'attachment to personal ideas and convictions'.¹⁷ The possibility is of course not excluded that even ecclesiastical superiors may be misguided, but the Church does not make available a right of resistance or means for effective protection of their intimate spiritual sphere. Instead it urges religious, for example, in case of doubt rather to obey even if a specific act of obedience is 'to all appearances absolutely "absurd",... 'is very burdensome or positively impossible to perform' because 'it is not to be forgotten that the model is always Jesus of Nazareth, who even during his Passion asked God that his will, as Father, be done, nor did he pull back from death on the cross.'¹⁸

Effective protection against spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church would require that such arguments and the logic underlying them are abandoned. This means nothing less than resolving the dichotomy that has become classical in Catholicism, which sees human freedom as both the indispensable condition for faith and its greatest threat. Only when the autonomy of all believers acquires the status it deserves as the basis of faith and Church membership will the basis for spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church be removed.

Translated by Francis McDonagh

Notes

1. In Protestant and neo-pentecostal churches the phenomenon has been discussed for a number of years. See David Johnson and Jeffrey Van Vonderen, *The subtle power of spiritual abuse*, Minneapolis, MN, 1991. However, as long ago as the 1980s and 1990s there was writing about spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church, though the terms used were 'integralism', 'fundamentalism' or 'Catholic sects'. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Integralismus Heute', *Diakonia* 19.4 (1988), 221–229; Wolfgang Beinert, 'Katholischer Fundamentalismus: Häretische Gruppen in der Kirche?', Regensburg, 1991; Thierry Baffoy, Antoine Delestre, and Jean-Paul Sauzet, *Les Naufragés de l'Esprit: Des sectes dans l'Église catholique*, Paris, 1996. It is only in recent years that the phenomenon has been discussed in the Catholic world under the label 'spiritual abuse'. See Doris Reisinger, *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*, Freiburg, Basle, Vienna, 2019; Dysmas de Lassus, *Risques et dérives de la vie religieuse*, Paris, 2020; Céline Hoyeau, *La Trahison des Pères: Emprise et abus des fondateurs des communautés nouvelles*, Montrouge, 2021; Samuel Fernández, 'Towards a Definition of Abuse of Conscience in the Catholic Setting', *Gregorianum* 102.3 (2021), 557–574.
2. This argument is put forward by, among others, Dreßing and others: The concept of the 'sexual abuse' of children is disputed because, in the view of those affected, and of a number of writers, it implies a permissible 'use' of children. According to this view, for this reason the term 'sexualised violence' should be preferred, and they sum up their view in the trenchant statement: 'Instead of "sexual abuse" we should talk about "sexualised violence" (Harald Dreßing, Dieter Dölling, Dieter Hermann et al., 'Sexueller Missbrauch von Kindern', *PSYCH up2date* 12.1 (2018), 79–94: <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0043-106946>
3. I have written in greater detail elsewhere about the distinction between the person-related and the object-related (or antonymous) concepts of abuse: Doris Reisinger, 'Religiöse Eigenlogik und ihre Konsequenzen: Eine Analyse der katholischen Mehrdeutigkeit des Missbrauchsbegriffs', in Reisinger (ed.), *Gefährliche Theologien: Wenn theologische Ansätze Machtmissbrauch legitimieren*, Regensburg, 2021, pp 84–102.
4. This definition is adopted by others besides me (Reisinger, *Spiritueller Missbrauch*, pp 23–55), among others Dysmas de Lassus, *Risques et dérives*, 219–230; Marie-Laure Janssens and Mikael Corre, *Le silence de la vierge: Abus spirituels, dérives sectaires: Une ancienne religieuse témoigne*, Paris, 2017.

5. See Uwe Becker, 'Zwischen Befreiung und Autonomie: Freiheitsvorstellungen im Alten Testament,' in Martin Laube (ed.), *Freiheit: Themen der Theologie 7* (UTB 3771), Tübingen, 2014, pp 21–37.
6. Klaus Lüdicke, 'Die Nichtigerklärung der Ehe: Materielles Recht, Für Hörer der Vorlesung im Studiengang Kanonisches Recht an der Katholisch-Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Münster', Stand: 29. September 2010: https://imperia/md/content/fb2/d-praktischetheologie/kanonischesrecht/service/materialien_zur_vorlesung_nichtigerklärung_der_ehe_2010_ok.pdf
7. Lüdicke, 'Die Nichtigerklärung der Ehe', p. 53.
8. Brigitte Thomas, 'Meine langjährigen Erfahrungen mit der Schulbeichte', *Wir sind Kirche Österreich* 112 (2021), pp 10–11, quotation p.10.
9. Von Balthasar, 'Integralismus Heute', 225.
10. On this see Ute Leimgruber, 'Vulnerance of Pastoral Care', *Religions* 13.3 (2022), 256, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030256> [Accessed 1 August 2023].
11. On this see the notes on lectures about examination of conscience in: Magdalena Fischer, 'Pater XX', in Matthias Reményi and Thomas Schärfl (ed.), *Nicht Ausweichen: Theologie angesichts der Missbrauchskrise*, Regensburg, 2019, pp 19–31; Johanna Beck, *Mach neu, was dich kaputt macht*, Freiburg, Basle, Vienna, 2022.
12. In reports of victims of spiritual abuse confession constantly recurs as the site of violent intrusion into the intimate spiritual sphere and as a site of manipulation and the exercise of violence. See Barbara Haslbeck, Regina Heyder, Ute Leimgruber and Dorothee Sandherr-Klemp, *Erzählen Als Widerstand: Berichte über spirituellen und sexuellen Missbrauch an erwachsenen Frauen in der katholischen Kirche*, Münster, 2020; AVREF, *L'ombre de l'Aigle. Le livre noir de la Communauté Saint Jean*, new edition, Edition, 14 January 2021, <https://avref.fr/fichiers/Livre%20Noir%20St%20Jean%2014%20JANVIER%202021.pdf> [Accessed 1 August 2023]. An analysis of the problems of confession: Gunda Werner, 'Asymmetry in Confession as a Cause of Sexual and Spiritual Violence. Dogma Historical Resources for Making Changes to Confession in Terms of Clerical and Sacramental Theology', *Religions* 13.4 (2022), 307, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040307> [Accessed 1 August 2023]. To my knowledge there is still no detailed systematic collection and analysis of the written accounts of experience of confession.
13. See María Olivia Browne Mönckeberg and Nicole Contreras Meyer (ed.), *Vidas robadas en nombre de Dios. Historias de abuso de conciencia y poder*, Santiago de Chile, 2022; Hoyeau, *La Trahison des Pères*; Reisinger, *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*; Beinert, *Katholischer Fundamentalismus*.
14. Examples of this are numerous. The ones mentioned here are only those considering the problematic practice of infant baptism from the point of view of consent (see on this Mary McAleese, 'Children's Rights and Obligations in Canon Law: The Christening Contract', *Studies in Religion, Secular Beliefs and Human Rights* 14, Leiden and Boston, 2019), the obligation of children to make their first confession before receiving their first communion (on this see Jessica Scheiper, 'Beichten vor der Erstkommunion? Kanonistische Anfrage in pastoraler Absicht', in Lia Alessandro, Anja Middelbeck-Varwick and Doris Reisinger (ed.), *Kirchliche Macht und kindliche Ohnmacht: Konturen, Kontexte und Quellen theologischer Missbrauchsforschung*, Münster, 2023 (forthcoming, page references not yet available), and the ban on artificial contraception (see Norbert Lüdecke, "'Humanae Vitae": Ein Heikler Erinnerungsort', in Birgit Aschmann and Wilhelm Damberg (ed.), 'Liebe Und Tu, Was Du Willst? Die "Pillenzyklika" Humanae Vitae von 1968 und ihre Folgen', *Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte* 3, Paderborn, 2020, 31–70).

15. This is particularly clear in two consecutive sections of the Catechism, 1782 and 1782, and in the Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis Conscientiae*, dated 22 March 1986: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html [Accessed 1 August 2023]
16. Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience: Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*, Rome, 11 May 2008: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_20080511_autorita-obbedienza_en.html [Accessed 1 August 2023]
17. A document issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in 2011 entitled *The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy, An Aid for Confessors and Spiritual Directors* says: ‘The authority of the spiritual director is not one of jurisdiction, rather it is of counsel and guidance which, commands basic fidelity which can be a filial docility’ (104): https://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2011-08/08-13/sussidio_per_confessori_en.pdf
18. *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 26.