

Spiritual Abuse in Certain Christian Religious Groups: Preliminary Reflections*

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The article seeks to present spiritual abuse and the untold harm it causes. While cognisant of the fact that this kind of abuse can occur within any faith context, the focus of this study is the possible existence of the phenomenon within certain Christian religious groups, such as lay associations and movements, although it can take place within other more formal ecclesial structures such as dioceses, parishes, and institutes of consecrated life, too. The features of spiritual abuse are outlined, together with the urgency concerning an increased awareness about it. The Catholic Church, at a universal level, is in the process of delving more deeply into the phenomenon as it seeks to prepare useful guidelines with the aim of safeguarding the vulnerable who may be potential victims of this kind of abuse. The subtlety of the latter is coupled with the fact that it may be conveniently disguised under the cover of spiritual input, practices and prayer, as well as personal and communal spiritual relationships.

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Concerns Regarding Spiritual Abuse¹

Recent reflections and discussions within Church circles have raised concerns on potential cases of spiritual abuse of the vulnerable. Spiritual abuse within religious groups is a deeply troubling phenomenon that entails the misuse of spiritual authority to manipulate, control, or harm individuals. This abuse, unfortunately, often hides behind the guise of religious righteousness, leaving victims with a feeling of confusion, as they suffer from the potential scars of emotional wounds, and struggle with existential questions in relation to their faith.

Although most Churches have been very proactive when responding to other forms of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, an official safeguarding policy on spiritual abuse by Church authorities is still in its genesis due to the complexity of the phenomenon. Certain religious leaders, whether clerical or lay, have been known to cause alleged spiritual distress to different categories of individuals. Those who have been negatively affected are the spiritually and psychologically vulnerable. When a certain tone and language are used and whenever the teaching

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¹ A number of online sources were useful in the initial reflections leading to the preparation of this article: <https://sojo.net/articles/what-spiritual-abuse-church-and-how-do-we-heal-it/>; <https://sola.network/article/recognizing-patterns-of-subtle-spiritual-abuse/>; <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/signs-spiritual-abuse/>; <https://www.thehotline.org/resources/what-is-spiritual-abuse/>; <https://psychcentral.com/health/spiritual-abuse/>.

of the Church is taken “to an extreme” by faith leaders, untold harm affects individuals who consequently feel helpless, unworthy, and sinful. Other individuals may experience scrupulosity. Like other forms of abuse, spiritual abuse is a pattern of behaviour that exerts power and control over another person.

David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen (1991/2005), and Fernández (2022) on Spiritual Abuse

Johnson and Van Vonderen define spiritual abuse as:

... 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. ... Spiritual abuse can occur when a leader uses his or her *spiritual position* to control or dominate another person. It often involves overriding the feelings and opinions of another, without regard to what will result in the other person’s state of living emotions or spiritual well-being. In this application, power is used to bolster the position or needs of a leader, over and above one who comes to them in need. ...

Spiritual abuse can also occur when *spirituality* is used to make others live up to a “spiritual standard”. This promotes external “spiritual performance”, also without regard to an individual’s actual well-being, or is used as a means of “proving” a person’s spirituality.

[...] [T]he results of spiritual abuse are usually the same: The individual is left bearing a weight of guilt, judgment or condemnation, and confusion about their worth and standing as a Christian. It’s at this point, we say, that spirituality has become abusive.

[...] It’s possible to become so determined to defend a spiritual place of authority, a doctrine or a way of doing things that you wound and abuse anyone who questions, or disagrees, or doesn’t “behave” spiritually the way you want them to. When your words and actions tear down another or weaken a person’s standing as a Christian—to gratify you, your position or your beliefs while at the same time weakening or harming another—that is spiritual abuse. (Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991/2011)

When reading the descriptions offered about different cases reported in the media in recent years, it is evident that the exercise of authority by faith leaders when warning and/or condemning the faithful in case of behaviour (due to disciplinary/doctrinal motives) which is canonically liable to such action may come very close to the description used by the authors cited above. In fact, according to the aforementioned definition, faith leaders may be at risk of committing spiritual abuse instead of exercising correctly their authority. On the other hand, measures validly and rightly taken to safeguard the Church’s unity should not be liable to the accusation of one causing harm to the individual who is subject to the measures taken. The aim of this article is to focus on the alleged spiritual abuse perpetrated by certain faith leaders and persons exercising any form of authority within a Christian setting, although what will be stated here is applicable to their counterparts in other religions, too.

Although the work by Johnson and VanVonderen is a pioneering work, published over 30 years ago, today there are finer definitions of spiritual abuse. Samuel Fernández (2022) asserts:

Spiritual abuse in the Catholic context is the misuse of spiritual authority that controls the victim to the point that the abuser, taking the place of God, obstructs or nullifies the victim’s spiritual freedom. This type of abuse is perpetrated by an individual or a system supported by the Church as trustworthy. Hence, it always has an ecclesial dimension. This kind of abuse can harm the person at the spiritual, psychological and physical levels.²

The article by Fernández contains an excellent overview of different views of spiritual abuse. It points out that there are normally three features of spiritual abuse: the misuse of spiritual power, the harm that it causes to the victims, and a benefit that the abusers seek for themselves, and then seeks to add a fourth, ecclesial, dimension

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which, wittingly or unwittingly, gives credence to the abusive individual or system.

As can be seen from the literature review, above, spiritual abuse includes manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, controlling behaviour in a spiritual or religious context, the literal interpretation of Scripture or homilies and spiritual talks to control behaviour, superiority or elitism, the requirement of obedience to the abuser, and the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” authority (Maltese Episcopal Conference—Conference of Major Religious Superiors, 2024). Most of these are evident—to a greater or lesser extent—in several cases which were brought to the media’s attention in recent years. The Catholic Church has acted decisively and taken the necessary decisions, in certain cases even leading to drastic measures. The symptoms of the spiritual trauma which ensue often include a lack of self-confidence and self-respect, and difficulty with decision-making.

In the third chapter of their book, Johnson and Van Vonderen list a number of areas that victims of spiritual abuse typically struggle with:

- You develop a distorted image of God.
- You may be preoccupied with spiritual performance.
- You have a distorted self-identity of yourself as a Christian.
- You may have a problem relating to spiritual authority; i.e. by tending to extremes of compliance or defiance.
- You may have a hard time with grace.
- You may have a problem in the area of personal boundaries, an unclear understanding about “death of self” teachings and “rights”.
- You may have difficulty with personal responsibility, i.e. extremes of under-responsibility or over-responsibility.
- You may suffer from a lack of living skills, i.e. developing a “bunker mentality” of isolation from the world.
- You may have a hard time with trust.
- You may have a hard time admitting the abuse.

In light of what has been asserted by Johnson and Van Vonderen, it has to be stated that the last characteristic just mentioned

is common among spiritual abuse victims for several reasons:

1. In an abusive system, you are told that you are “the problem” for noticing that there is a problem. That makes it hard to expose the abuse, even after you’ve left the system.
2. Second, admitting the abuse out loud—or even thinking that what you experienced was abuse—often feels like you’re being disloyal to family, to church, even to God.
3. Third, those who have experienced spiritual abuse as “normal” have lost track of what “normal” really is. Therefore, to call it spiritual abuse feels crazy or overreactive.
4. Natural human denial is another factor. Denial is actually a God-given ability to delay feeling strong emotional, psychological, or spiritual pain. We are not talking about conscious forms of denial, like lying, blaming, minimizing, or rationalizing. We are referring to the automatic numbness that occurs when the amount of pain associated with a situation is too much to bear all at one time. People who experience spiritual abuse often cannot believe it is happening to them. It is so inconsistent with everything that is supposed to be happening in families and churches that the excruciating pain of it is short-circuited.
5. A most serious and most intriguing extreme of this is repression. [...] We have also seen spiritually abused people who get extremely agitated or afraid when talk approaches their past family or church experiences, even though they have no concrete memories of abuse. In this case, their response is like an emotional negative programming.
6. Finally, there is shame. Once a person is no longer in an abusive situation things become much clearer. They can’t believe they didn’t see it sooner. Very often they experience a great deal of shame—a sense of defectiveness—for having

allowed themselves to get into a situation that was so obviously abusive. (Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991/2011, Chapter 3)³

Recent investigations by specially-appointed commissions within the Catholic Church have revealed that in the context of the alleged cases of spiritual abuse, one observes the use of religion and spirituality as a manipulative tool. Rather than keep their spiritual practice to themselves, spiritual narcissists weaponize it to control or harm others, although the latter often ensues unintentionally.

Several scientific studies, as those referred to above, attest that situations of spiritual abuse often include:

- A religious or spiritual leader leveraging his/her position of authority as a means of coercion. During their ministry, abusive religious leaders have been known to use their position in trying to convey their own ideas, for example, on the afterlife, the fate of victims in tragic situations, paranormal phenomena and conjugal morality by instilling fear and causing anxiety;
- Insulting or ridiculing someone's spiritual beliefs;
- Using spiritual beliefs to manipulate someone;
- Rationalizing the abuse through religious doctrines or Church teachings which are presented in a fundamentalist way;
- Making someone perform spiritual practices against his/her will;
- Using someone's spiritual beliefs to create guilt or shame;
- Using spiritual beliefs to withhold necessary medical care, for example exhorting people not to have recourse to vaccines or other therapeutic measures in dealing with a variety of illnesses, including terminal ones.

In light of the evidence which is being unearthed from cases which have seen the light of day, it transpires that spiritual abuse can take place on multiple levels simultaneously. It could be present in actions or attitudes by one person on another, when it could even appear to be consensual. In several cases, one observes elements of narcissism on the part of the perpetrator or perpetrators. One also comes across the possibility of trauma-induced "mystical" phenomena which would coincide with unresolved psychological trauma, where dissociative states may be mistaken for genuine divine and/or satanic communication.

In the cases of alleged spiritual abuse which have been uncovered, the so-called spiritual phenomena are not genuinely mystical. In the case of most religious leaders accused of spiritual abuse, the indication is that most are found to suffer from narcissistic personality disorder. They support and encourage the spiritual fantasies of their co-perpetrators, while the latter fan the former's desire for extraordinary supernatural phenomena "on demand". In most cases, the leading perpetrator requires the support and encouragement of the spiritual fantasies of his/her closest associates in what is, more often than not, a tightly-knit group. It could also be the case that the co-perpetrators are consistently "fed" by the chief perpetrator who, in turn, is the one who discerns and makes the co-perpetrators aware of their allegedly mystical powers.

Unfortunately, several victims seem to be solidly enmeshed in varying, yet rigid, degrees within such unhealthy and potentially toxic systems, beliefs, and behaviours, with the possibility of suffering and harm. Thus, at a second level, spiritual abuse could involve, not only a person but, also, a wider community—which often seems to be the case. Then, at a third level, one is bound to reflect on the harmful influence upon the wider community through various religious or sacramental or quasi-sacramental celebrations, "holy" experiences, or

³ The cited list is a very perceptive one to those who have been involved in investigations of alleged spiritual abuse. Another insightful recent work is the following: Demasure, K. (2022). "The loss of the self—Spiritual abuse of adults in the context of the Catholic Church". *Religions*, 13(6), 509. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060509>.

spiritual instances, such as sermons, sacramental confession, talks, and messages on the traditional and social media, as well—in certain cases—alleged apparitions of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the saints.

Cases have been reported consisting in what is called *folie à deux*—a rare shared psychotic disorder involving two or more people who share a delusion or false belief, as these are transmitted from one person to another. Psychosis, which can be present to greater or lesser extents in various mental health disorders, such as schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder, is characterized by a loss of contact with reality, frequently featuring *hallucinations*, whether visual, auditory, tactile etc., that is, perceptions of what is not present, *delusions*, that is, unshakable beliefs in something that is not real, or both. In any case, this would have to be proved by means of psychological assessments of the individuals in question.

From reported cases in different parts of the world, it is evident that the perpetrators and co-perpetrators often mutually support each other's spiritual phantasies and desire for alleged supernatural phenomena. There are many known cases when such "spiritual" phenomena as experienced by the perpetrator and/or co-perpetrator/s cannot be explained as mere hallucinations and thus it is questionable whether they could be seen as the "primary" or "inducer" of the delusion. Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder would also *not* provide hallucinatory phenomena on demand and in specific locations and times as experienced by certain subjects. Psychiatrists often suggest that *narcissistic personality disorder* might feed these phenomena.

Spiritually abusive leaders will often platform themselves as charismatic apostolic leaders who can, in the long run, possibly be a source of confusion to those serving under them. Spiritually abusive leaders tend to use their platform to delineate those who are "in" from those who are "out." Unsuspecting believers are usually drawn to these leaders for their "strong" leadership and apparently (pseudo-)spiritual qualities.

During instances of "apostolic" spiritual abuse, it is often the case that the least emotionally-intelligent person (i.e., the abuser) thinks he/she is the most emotionally-intelligent person in the room. What's worse is that those around them often believe them in their claims. But emotional awareness should never be confused with emotional self-awareness. Ministry leaders who can "read a room" and gauge the general feeling of a congregation are often the most prone to commit spiritual abuse and skilled at manipulation, oftentimes without them even realising it.

The Possibility of Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Investigators have often indicated the presence of a *narcissistic personality disorder*, although this would have to be proved by means of assessments carried out by a psychologist/psychiatrist. One of the features of narcissistic personality disorder in particular is that the perpetrator is the cause of deep suffering to others. With respect to certain religious communities prone to spiritual abuse, there is room for grave concern because of the close-knit nature of these communities or sub-groups within them. In certain cases, it has been known that such communities are often organised in concentric circles around the personality of the chief perpetrator who normally enjoys cult status, often with close "satellites", and possible "doorkeepers" who exercise control on who can have a personal (privileged) encounter with the leader or leaders. The whole system of these groups is unhealthy and potentially toxic with no real room for dissent or criticism and with the clear possibility for undue influence, suffering, and harm.

With respect to a wider community of adherents, there may be instances of anguish, fear, distress, hurt, lack of boundaries, and unacceptable behaviour leading to "harm" across a wide spectrum. A number of assertions by religious leaders who practically have cult status are easily discernible as potentially traumatising and re-

traumatising and conducive to an increase in fear, anxiety, shame, guilt, hopelessness, and possibly even the risk of far worse consequences on the potential victims.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

It has to be stated that while for some individuals the beliefs and practices proposed by the leader/s of religious groups or those in authority in formal church structures are a source of consolation, for others they can become the cause of great personal confusion and distress. Given, however, that the members/adherents are not forced to stay in the group, they always have the option to leave without further consequences, although some find it difficult to leave. However, one should not underestimate the possibility of psychological, existential, and spiritual traumas with which they will continue to struggle. The local church authorities ought to show concern about the harm experienced by members of the faithful, especially those who are more vulnerable than others.

Even if the leaders/perpetrators advance extreme moral and doctrinal opinions and stress the element of fear, this is simply a manifestation of their sincere beliefs. At most, the abuse would consist in them not being aware of the consternation and the anxiety caused by parts of their input. In this case, it is really the local Church authorities who are responsible for limiting any online and broadcasted programmes by the leaders, their talks and addresses, so as not to give credence to their words and actions. These faith leaders ought to be distanced from their group, although this may turn out to be challenging to implement.

Cases of spiritual abuse are to be taken seriously and speedily addressed by those in authority within the different Church Traditions. What may seem to be pious words and practices in the eyes and ears of certain individuals may turn out to be very harmful to the vulnerable. The harm caused to just one vulnerable person is, in itself, sufficient reason to investigate the actions of leaders who are allegedly committing spiritual abuse. Adequately and professionally addressing spiritual abuse with honesty and compassion will pave the way for healing and ensure that faith communities truly reflect the values they claim to profess. Indeed, every instance of abuse is unacceptable. One abused person is already one too many.

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