

Spiritual Abuse and Religious Life

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Preliminary note

The subject of spiritual abuse we are discussing today is not a marginal one. It is not a minor form of abuse. As if sexual abuse were a great and terrible evil and spiritual abuse something more innocuous. Both are equally serious, in fact, in a sense spiritual abuse is even worse. Why?

Firstly because spiritual abuse and sexual abuse in the Church are closely linked (virtually every case of sexual abuse in the Church is preceded by spiritual abuse and often the lines are blurred),

secondly, because spiritual abuse itself inflicts a trauma as severe and long-lasting as sexual abuse.

But the most serious aspect of spiritual abuse is that it affects the very core of Christian life: faith and the most important premise of faith: spiritual freedom.

For these reasons, spiritual abuse is not a marginal issue for the Church, nor is it a marginal issue for religious orders, whose survival is threatened by this phenomenon. In many cases, now known to many of us, religious life has been hijacked and stolen by people who chose and choose it as the ideal structure to attract idealistic young people, make them dependent and use them, exploiting and tormenting them in many ways. Just think of Marcial Maciel, Brother Ephraim, Thierry de Roucy or Gino Burrelli and many others.

It turns out that, unfortunately, religious life is particularly vulnerable to spiritual abuse. Therefore, anyone who wishes to preserve and defend religious life in its depth, richness and beauty must address this phenomenon and remedy this vulnerability.

In the long run, this means more than cultural change. That is, solid reforms are required in the area of canon law and the law of religious people.

I sincerely hope that these reforms will take place. And I feel very honoured to be able to speak with you, because I believe that you play a decisive role not only in the fight against spiritual abuse but also in the defence of true religious life against people who use it as a trap to facilitate access to exploitable young people.

Spiritual abuse is the violation of inner freedom

I will start with a definition: what is spiritual abuse? Depending on your professional experience, you will define the term differently. This morning we have already heard a psychological approach. As a theologian, I want to take a theological approach and definition. It also seems to me that the scope of the question becomes particularly clear when enriched by a theological perspective.

What then is spiritual abuse? Spiritual abuse is the violation of another person's inner freedom and as such it is at the same time and also the violation of his or her personal relationship with God - which is necessarily based on his or her inner freedom. Without freedom, the foundation of faith is lost. Without freedom, faith cannot come into being - and if inner freedom is destroyed, faith and dedication to God are destroyed along with it.

Formulated with reference to *Gaudium et Spes*: spiritual abuse is a violation of the "most secret core" and "sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths" (GS 16, AAS 58 (1966) 1037).

This is why the violation of a person's inner freedom is terrible, because that freedom is the necessary and indispensable condition of faith - and also the condition of every personal relationship, every friendship, every intellectual and spiritual development.

One can say that an imposed act of faith is a contradiction in terms. If a person's faith is not free, it is not faith. And here we are dealing with a theological principle on which there is a global consensus, a situation that rarely occurs. I don't think anyone seriously disagrees with that. And it follows with logical necessity that this also applies to every single act of faith: a forced act is not and can never be an act of faith. Indeed, forcing it is cruel, not only because forcing can hurt a person emotionally, but also because such forcing directly wounds a person's relationship with God, obscures his or her view of God, and in extreme cases condemns a person to a godless life.

It is easy to understand why spiritual abuse is incompatible with a life devoted to the evangelical counsels; just as interior freedom is the prerequisite of faith and every single act of it, so interior freedom is the logical and necessary prerequisite of religious life and every single vow and especially every act of obedience: a religious life that is not freely chosen or not lived with interior freedom is not, in fact, religious life.

What does Freedom mean?

What does freedom or the violation of freedom mean in this context, if we consider freedom as a precondition of acts of faith and of religious life itself?

Of course, freedom here is not only understood formally or in a legalistic sense: not being in chains is not enough to be inwardly and spiritually free. One person can be in chains and be spiritually free while another can literally hold keys, mobile phone and money and at the same time be internally trapped and not free at all. Possessing that inner freedom means really wanting to do what you do, and not just doing it by force or for lack of alternatives. To be inwardly free means to be able to make a decision about one's own life, aware of the scope and implications of that decision for one's own person, and to assume the responsibilities attached to that decision.

To be spiritually free means not to delegate one's interiority, one's spiritual, emotional, intellectual life to someone else who directs it from the outside and in the meantime erases the individuality and depth of my person in such a way that neither God nor the people around me recognise me anymore.

Being spiritually free means living my spiritual life with all the fullness of my irreplaceable and complex individuality and finding equally individual answers to my singular questions.

Inner freedom and outer freedom

Before going into the specifics, I would like to make one last distinction: that between inner freedom and outer freedom. When we speak of freedom as a prerequisite for faith, we always mean a person's inner freedom. It is absolutely essential to understand that in the external sphere - in all that concerns common life and prayer - there can be restrictions and compromises of personal freedom: for example when we do things for the benefit of others, even if we do not like it, things that, if we were free to decide for ourselves, we would not do. Because outwardly, we have to strike a balance between the needs of all.

Internally, on the other hand - in everything that concerns a person's intimate and personal life - there must never be such compromises, i.e. things that you do for the benefit of another, even if you do not share them and would have preferred not to. Never. Because in personal interiority no one else has a say. Not the superior. Not the sister. Not even the founder. Only

God. And neither the superior nor the sister nor any priest nor even the founder can hear the voice of God inside a person better than he or she can hear it herself. Here, in his or her intimacy, he or she is alone with God. And whoever enters here by force or deception is a thief and a rapist.

But often, very often, superiors or sisters or fellow brothers sneak into this inner sanctuary, where in reality they have nothing to do, and cross the boundary between the outer and inner realms, perhaps not out of malice or with evil intentions, but simply out of habit or carelessness; and although, in these cases, the consequences are not very serious, they are still abuses that sometimes cast a long shadow over the whole of one's life. Let me give an example.

Once upon a time, a religious man asked me the following question:

He explained that we have a rule that the youngest, i.e. the one who entered last, must clean the toilet in order to grow in humility. And he asked me: does this rule constitute spiritual abuse? I replied, No, that he has to clean the toilet, that single fact, is not an abuse. But the justification that he should do it to grow in humility, that is an abuse. The question of who cleans the toilet is a matter of the outer realm, which must be resolved pragmatically! If not, we end up in a spiral of absurdity! As if the toilet does not need to be cleaned because it needs to be cleaned, but because a certain brother is still too proud. And then how much presumption in wanting to judge whether that poor brother needs to grow in humility compared to the other brothers.

Please understand me well: I do not even want to say that cleanliness cannot have a spiritual significance. But what meaning cleaning the toilet has for that young brother is nobody's business but his own. A religious community must regulate these external things in the external sphere, on a reasonable and pragmatic level, without using the inner life of its members as a pretext.

In the external sphere there can and must always be compromises. But in the inner realm, things are different: In the inner realm, in relation to a person's inner freedom, to that "core", no one has a say.

The separation of inner and outer forum is a central norm of canon law by which the ecclesiastical legislator seeks to protect inner freedom. Religious, like all persons in the Church, have the right to choose freely their spiritual accompaniment and their superiors have no say in this decision, just as spiritual directors cannot give superiors information about the inner life of those entrusted to them. Canon 630 of the CIC is very clear because it states that "superiors are to recognize the due freedom of their members regarding the sacrament of penance and direction of conscience", that "superiors are not to hear the confessions of subjects" and that "superiors are forbidden to induce the members in any way to make a manifestation of conscience to them."

In many cases, however, this rule is systematically undermined. It happens that the superior claims for herself the office of spiritual director and responsible for the formation of the sisters, without giving them a choice - and when things go wrong, her biological brother is the prescribed confessor for all the sisters, to whom they must go every month, while brother and sister periodically have a confidential conversation about the sisters' spiritual progress. Such a system seriously undermines the freedom of the sisters and can have terrible consequences for individuals and the Institute. When such relationships become the standard, it is a serious and fatal violation of the inner freedom and rights of the women religious involved. When external and spiritual direction come under one authority and are not distinctly separated, it is a warning sign. And often in such communities there are serious and very serious forms of spiritual abuse.

Three forms of spiritual abuse

Spiritual abuse usually occurs gradually and is not immediately pervasive. A person's inner freedom is not directly attacked. Instead, it is obstructed. The worst abuse and acts of violence occur when the victim has lost awareness of his or her inner freedom and dignity, i.e. when he or she is no longer able to defend himself or herself. To better understand this slow process, I distinguish three forms of spiritual abuse: neglect, manipulation and, finally, explicit violence. I will give an example for each of these three forms. These are real-life, recent examples, experiences that religious people in Europe have suffered in just this way. And they are not the worst cases I could relate. I am not interested in scandalising. There are much worse cases as you probably know. But rather I have chosen the following examples because I think they best illustrate what spiritual abuse is and what it means for religious.

Spiritual neglect

Spiritual neglect occurs where people's spiritual freedom and self-efficacy are not supported. When they do not have access to the spiritual food they need. And when what is given to them, although perhaps good for others, does not help everyone equally, because the personality and situation of some is clearly different from that of others. This form of neglect is experienced by religious who do not have adequate spiritual formation, but must resign themselves to spiritual responses that do not help them. Religious whose community is strongly marked by a limited or meagre spirituality, and religious marked by a personal experience that requires special spiritual support are not considered. In most cases, it is not that they are totally lacking in spiritual nourishment, but what they receive does not meet their need. It is like offering a glass of milk to a person with lactose intolerance. What they receive does not nourish them. On the contrary, it harms them. There are many religious who live in such a state of neglect, while superiors and leaders do not care or do not even notice or accept with indifference that the people in their community are being neglected, remain hungry and lacking in spiritual resources, sometimes blaming the victims themselves. And why? Because perhaps the superiors have themselves been neglected spiritually and do not know any better.

The tragedy is: spiritually neglected people cannot manage their life's path well. With every attempt to move forward in some way with or in spite of their meagre and inadequate resources, they hurt themselves - and sometimes others.

I give just one example, you will think of many others:

It is the story of a young nun who was approaching her first profession. Her formator was at the same time her spiritual director and superior. She taught the young nun that the vow of chastity had no practical reason but a purely spiritual one; it was rooted in love for God. But the nun could not grasp the meaning of that phrase. What use would it be to God that she remained virgin? What good was it to have no close friends? (In fact, even close friendships were forbidden in the community because it was believed that they endangered the undivided love for God). The superior gave the young sister a text which said that to take a vow of chastity was "to look at the flower on the roadside, but not to pluck it", even that sentence seemed to her a mockery. Certainly, no life decision could be based on such a banal metaphor. But what could she do? She approached the day of her profession in a state of inner perplexity.

Spiritual manipulation

While spiritual neglect means indifference to the spiritual life of others, spiritual manipulation means taking control of and dominating the spiritual life of others by any means, but often without admitting it and preferably without them knowing it.

Those who spiritually manipulate others make them believe that they have acted according to their own convictions when in fact it was the manipulator who induced them to act, and often by applying certain techniques. That is, they are not really acting of their own free will, but doing what he wants. For example, they take a certain view of life or make a certain decision, say a certain prayer or give money, because the manipulator wants them to.

These techniques - sometimes used instinctively and unconsciously, other times consciously and cold-bloodedly - consist of emotionally charged utterances, the transmission of partial information or invented facts, the formulation of moral judgements, subtle threats or the playing out of power imbalances or relational dynamics. All with the aim of dominating a person's inner life and spiritual life; indeed, to dominate the spiritual life of as many people as possible.

When the founders or superiors of an order are manipulative, often the whole community is permeated by a manipulative atmosphere. In such a community hardly anyone remains inwardly free.

The subtle pressure starts even before one enters: everything is done to convince a person to enter. The victim is led to believe how well he or she fits into the order's lifestyle, how loved he or she will be, how wonderful life in the community is; if the candidate shows hesitation or asks difficult questions, he or she reacts with disappointment or by predicting a dark future and conjuring up ominous scenarios; and so on.

Saying no is not a legitimate answer. A manipulator will never accept this. He attracts people and once they submit to him, he makes them do anything. He will make them work day and night, he will make them completely give up contact with old friends. He will convince them to stop taking vital medicines, to rob their own parents, to manipulate and pressure brothers and sisters in his name and by using his example. He will take women to bed with him and tell them that it is a particularly deep spiritual relationship. And when he has impregnated them, he will make them abort (I don't know if you have heard of such cases. I can assure you that they are real. I am working these months on a research project dealing with such cases). All this is done in the name of a higher good to which the manipulator gives an authoritative name: The Way or the Kingdom or the Charism or the Work or who knows what.

Spiritual manipulation is like brainwashing or a narcotic. Only when the effect wears off do the headaches, impositions and indecencies of the manipulator become manifest. It is then often incredibly difficult and almost unbearable to realise the terrible harm one is suffering or the danger one has run into or which has involved other people.

Here again I give just one example:

This is the story of a young religious man. In his community an excursion had been planned for some time with the aim of making a pilgrimage, but the weather forecast for the day was bad, and everyone in the house knew about it. The young religious thought to point this out to their superiors who did not seem to be considering a change of plan. They replied that it would be a powerful act of trust in God to set out in spite of the bad weather, and that God would protect them. Most of the brothers seemed to agree. Enthusiastic and convinced that they were making an act of faith, most of them went out without the proper equipment. On the way they were caught in a heavy thunderstorm, and the rain was so heavy that it made visibility impossible. The group of religious scattered. Before long, the city streets and underground stations were flooded. Only five of the 30 brothers who left reached their destination. Others had to face a dangerous situation. Some were saved by a tree where they took shelter from the flood waters. When all the brothers returned home in the evening, the superiors did not change their interpretation of the events: the day was a great blessing for the community.

Explicit violence

Finally, explicit violence. Those who exercise explicit spiritual violence are not content to subtly influence the will of others, but override it openly and brutally. This form of spiritual violence is only possible if the victim has already been neglected and spiritually manipulated before: unlike other forms of spiritual abuse, the victim often knows and is aware that the superior is overriding his or her will, rights and needs, suffers from this violence and feels wronged, but because he or she has previously been made to believe that the superiors are always right and that his or her needs are worthless or even corrupt and evil, he or she cannot resist violence. On the contrary, she will try to justify the actions of her superiors and defend them.

In other words, the superiors who use this form of violence torture people who are already weak, who have almost no strength to resist and cannot defend themselves. They break the bruised reed and snuff out a smoldering wick (Is 42:3; Mt 12:20). Some pretend - and some probably actually believe it - that they have only the best interests of their brothers or sisters in mind, to lead them beyond themselves, to bring them closer to God. Others probably quench their lust for domination and vent their sadistic tendencies.

Explicit spiritual violence is often particularly cruel.

It hits people where it hurts most. Superiors who act cruelly break the relationships that religious people have with their friends and families. For example, forcing them to give up their last family photos or to burn them in front of their superiors (such things happen more often than one might think). Forcing people to fast or work beyond their limits and putting their physical and mental health at risk. Forcing members of their community to undergo exorcisms or certain contraindicated pseudo-medical therapies. All this is done by making people believe that it is God's will, and by inducing them to glorify suffering even through an uncritical reading of Jesus' passion: Jesus has been crucified, now it is your turn. Those who are not ready to be humiliated and tormented by their superiors are considered comfortable, as if they did not understand religious life.

For the religious who experience this form of abuse, the pain of emotional and physical discomfort is still compounded by spiritual suffering. They have been led to believe that they are inadequate in the eyes of God and that they will fail.

Again, I give only one example and you probably know others:

A nun told me this story. Once, during a stay with her parents, she received a confession from her brother, who told her that he was homosexual and asked her to keep it a secret, especially from her father. They both knew how difficult it would be for the father to accept his son's homosexuality. One had to wait for the right moment when the son could reveal himself to his father. Naturally the sister promised him that she would act as agreed.

As soon as she returned to the convent, the sister had to report to the superior, telling her, as usual, everything that had happened, including her conversation with her brother. The superior ordered her to write a letter to her father informing him of her son's homosexuality. The young nun was shocked and asked why; she was told that she had to do it out of obedience, having taken the vow. She did so even though she felt so bad, because of the knowledge that she was betraying her brother, that she literally threw up. And as she wrote the letter she felt as if she were being raped. Unfortunately, she saw no way out, believing that she had to act in this way because of the vow of obedience.

Conclusion

I come to the end.

Religious life is wonderful if the spiritual freedom and autonomy of the persons who live it is preserved. When founders and superiors believe that they have to break the persons entrusted to them so that they obey without retort, when they destroy their interior freedom and abuse it, it is terrible. For then it is no longer religious life, but something like a form of slavery or a prison.

As I said at the beginning: to avoid this, a simple cultural change, a curriculum or making appeals is not enough, because the good superiors willing to listen already abstain from spiritual abuse. The question to be addressed is how to deal with those superiors/religious who are impervious to appeals. There is a need for a solid canonical reform to avoid impunity of abuses, and the separation of the external and the internal forum should not only be formally prescribed, but guaranteed and strengthened. Transgression must be able to be sanctioned.

Religious, all religious, must live in legal certainty. I do not think it is too much to ask. Above all because it is nothing less than the future and survival of religious life that is at stake.

Thank you for listening.