SPIRITUAL ABUSE

A brief introduction to the subject
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What can you expect now? THREE preliminary notes, FOUR main aspects of the subject, FIVE concluding notes.

Preliminary note 1:
What is spiritual abuse? There is still no precise definition that everyone can agree on. For the moment, I propose a working definition:
Spiritual abuse is a collective term, or as we say in the Anglo-Saxon world, an "umbrella term", for various forms of emotional and/or power abuse in the context of spiritual, religious life, especially in forms of accompaniment (confession, spiritual direction, etc.) and in communities.
A definitive definition is not yet in sight. But this also applies to sexual abuse, although it is much better studied. Generally speaking, in psychology there are often these marginal blurs.
Addressing spiritual abuse began in the United States in the more evangelical, charismatic sphere, where what we call parishes are smaller communities. Today I will speak mainly on the subject of spiritual abuse in the context of Catholic religious life, i.e. new movements or traditional communities, religious orders, congregations, secular institutes, etc. However, accompaniment is included in this in an analogical way.

Preliminary note 2:
One may question as to whether "spiritual abuse" is the right word (not an easy discussion in an international context with so many translations). One can also think of the term "religious abuse" as an alternative. One can ask whether the word "abuse" is not too reminiscent of sexual abuse. With this terminology, the vocabulary of "perpetrator" and "victim"/"survivor" is also easily brought into the discussion. In Germany, where we talk about "sexualized violence", there is also the word "spiritualized violence", in order to make it clear that abuse is never spiritual in the strict sense, but that spirituality is used for purposes unrelated to spirituality and that it is violence. The Pope sometimes calls the phenomenon "abuse of conscience".
One may argue about questions of terms, but more important than arguing about words is to address the issue itself, even if it is easier to argue about words than to address reality.

Preliminary note 3:
There is an intersection between spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. When boundaries are violated in one area, the inhibition to do so in another area may diminish. But of course there is sexual abuse without spiritual abuse (example: the father sexually abusing his daughter in an atheist family) and spiritual abuse without sexual abuse (all the things we talk about today that can happen without sexual acts and feelings). Spiritual abuse does not become bad only when it leads to sexual abuse, although unfortunately at present it can often be read that way. Spiritual abuse is inherently horrible; indeed it can lead to suicide. However, I believe that the fundamentals, the basic socio-psychological dynamics, the basic psychological structures are similar in both forms of abuse. It is always an abuse of power.

Main part

Since there is usually not much time for the topic "spiritual abuse", I was looking for a very simple image that would make the topic descriptive. The crosshairs in a rifle came to mind. Abused people end up as targets in the crosshairs.
You see the image. For ease of translation I do not give you a diagram but show you the image with my arms.

Aspect 1:
The first characteristic of spiritual abuse is the violation of boundaries. Perhaps this is the first thing that comes to mind. The violation of spiritual boundaries violates the person's privacy. The person loses the protective space that his/her dignity deserves. This is where the most intimate things of the spiritual life take place. In the communities this takes frighteningly often the form that accompaniment is only offered, even allowed, within the community. Here the areas of *forum internum* and *forum externum* become confused, which in canon law are strictly separated. The leadership takes over the accompaniment - or the accompaniers pass on to the leadership what they have heard in pastoral care. Especially in the new and still small communities incestuous structures very easily develop, according to the model: A, a priest, accompanies B, B accompanies C, C accompanies D - and everyone goes to confession with A, who may also be in the leadership.

It sometimes happens that superiors call an external spiritual director and say that they know Brother X or Sister Y is accompanying. Don't let yourself be drawn into such a trap. Leaders who find they get nowhere with such techniques eventually abandon the attempts.

The seal of confession can be broken in a specific way that clearly contradicts canon law, i.e. the seal of confession also applies to the person confessing. I did not understand the meaning of this until I started studying spiritual abuse. How easy it is for a confessor who encounters the person not only in confession to more or less veiledly pressure him/her with weaknesses he knows from confession. Similarly, this also applies to the processes of accompaniment.
In this context obedience becomes an instrument of power and domination.

Aspect 2:
Apparently contrary, there are also very strict boundaries in systems of spiritual abuse, boundaries to the outside. They limit man and his freedom with prohibitions of contact. These can be manifest, clearly stated. But they can also be conveyed more subtly, through nuances and raised eyebrows. These contact prohibitions refer to other people, who do not belong to the community. Maybe an exception is allowed towards people who have to be 'conquered' for their own project - but only for this purpose. The narrow boundary applies not only to individual persons but also to other institutions and groups. The cooperation of one's own group with other groups or communities is not sought, not desired, not even within the Church. Not infrequently, prohibitions of thought are added, clear canons of what is permitted to be read. Whoever believes that the spiritual life can be lived today with only the catechism or the works of the founder is mistaken. In such a community seminars, courses and retreats are only offered internally. Everything else is suspect, or at least judged and condemned as not conforming to the charism. In some communities this closes access to the spiritual treasure of knowledge and experience of the sound tradition of the Church.
Between the violation of boundaries and the prohibition of contact, there is a space of lack of freedom, what Erving Goffmann calls "the total institution" and which is often quoted along with Robert Lifton's thoughts on "brainwashing" or "thought control". There is much that could be expanded upon here. I will just read you the list of criteria for total institutions. You will already recognize much of what I have just said, more follows in aspects 3 and 4:

- Control of the milieu (controlled relations with the outside world; prohibition of contact, reading and deepening).
- Confession (confession of present and past transgressions in the community, which are then used against the person who gave them up)
- Mystical manipulation (the group has higher goals than the rest of the world)
- Self-sanctification through purity (pushing the individual to strive for an unattainable perfection)
- Aura of a sacred science (the beliefs of the group are sacrosanct and perfect)
- Overloaded language (new meanings for words to promote black and white thinking)
- Doctrine about the person (the group is more important than the individual)
- Spared existence (insiders are saved, outsiders are doomed to destruction).

The extent to which the models just mentioned can be applied to sects is being discusseed - and we are also moving in such a field, be the appearance ever so orthodox. The structures of communities with spiritual abuses are similar to those of a sect - and if one looks a little closer, this also applies to the teachings and theories, the doctrine, which often seems so Catholic at first sight. But at least the Catholic "et ... et" is neglected.

A word about this dynamic: it does not 'work' at all only behind the walls of a monastery. Isolation from the world can be implicitly imposed by structures. Those who - and I am not exaggerating - are prescribed an hour of oral prayer every day, attendance at Holy Mass, an hour of adoration and missionary work every weekend, in addition to a normal job, simply no longer have time to meet people outside the community and to think about other things. Just look at the profession formula in a community which says "I promise to devote all my time to prayer and the apostolate". This is not humanly possible!
In these first two aspects we are in the more psychological-sociological field.

Aspect 3:
If we consider what underlies the tension I have just described, we come to the dimension of depth psychology, the more individual one.
Because there is on the one hand a certain exaltation, more psychologically expressed, an idealization. The community is presented as elitist. "From here the hoped-for salvation will finally come to the Church!". How dangerous this is in times when the Church is actually in need of salvation, how seductive, even for Church leaders! The exaltation starts with the leadership: It is perfect, enlightened by God (more or less directly), therefore unassailable. Anyone who has a problem is turned into a problem. I repeat: Anyone who has a problem is turned into a problem. Often the leadership itself - in the sense of the second aspect - is not very familiar with the spiritual tradition of the Church. To experienced and informed Christians, some things then seem rather simplified. The practice of the congregation participates in this idealization. One's own practice is presented as the only right one. Even doctrine seems to be the only perfect one. That and only that is the way to salvation, the way that surely leads to heaven. This dynamic is often narcissistic. Out of a low self-confidence that 'sees itself in black' follows an attempt to save self-esteem through exaltation. More on this in a moment.

Aspect 4 must necessarily follow from this. The one who idealizes devalues others. In a system of spiritual abuse, man does not count. His needs are bad and must be cut off, suppressed or deleted. Perception, especially the perception of one's own feelings, is cut off, disavowed, confused. What, I would say, most serious Christians consider a great achievement, the discovery of the individual, of individuality, is blatantly neglected here. By way of illustration, try to think of, let alone experience, Ignatius of Loyola's discernment of spirits without perception of one's emotions. This devaluation gets the face of humiliation (which then corresponds to

exaltation in the third aspect): failure is not expected in such a system. There is no right to failure there. But this is inhuman, because it ignores the "on the way" character of the Christian faith, which is a message of permanent conversion.

Between idealization and humiliation, a space of constant frustration opens up. Because perfection, which must be achieved at all costs, can never be attained. Because who would be flawless? What is missing in this model are shades of grey. Here there is only black and white. But this is precisely the dynamic of idealization and devaluation. They almost always occur together. "Splitting" is what psychology calls this. It is considered one of the most immature defense mechanisms. Splitting is a process that happens in borderline syndrome, but also in narcissism. The person who, for biographical reasons, experiences himself as inwardly black and bad, puts on a shiny silver shell, exalts himself, and degrades others, if they do not adore him. Tragically, this silver shell is made of Teflon and therefore almost impossible to get into. Thus the supposed blackness cannot be discovered - and therefore cannot be redeemed. It is true: The Church lives by high ideals. But by themselves they do not make life possible. It needs the other pole, reality with its feelings and needs. The Jesuit Luigi Maria Rulla, founder of the Institute of Psychology at the Gregorian University, sees in a successful tension between ideal and reality the most forgotten basic tension of life. It is like a guitar string. If it is not taut, of course, it does not give any sound. But if it is too tight, if the ideal is over-emphasized, then the string breaks, goes 'pling' once, and no longer makes a sound. If you now consider that it is precisely perception that is clouded in these forms of spiritual abuse, you are very close to the basic dynamic of spiritual abuse.

Let us now turn to the connections of the various aspects:
- At this crossroads of boundary violation and limitation, devaluation and idealization, alleged superiority is used to **justify** violations of privacy.
- This is at the same time interpreted as a **help** for the condemned person who is held back in his weakness.
- External contacts seem **unnecessary** because the perfect community offers everything one needs.
- Finally, the negative image of man offers the justification that prohibitions of contact would **protect** people.
This creates a crosshair that becomes increasingly difficult to escape.

At the same time, there are signs, so to speak warning signs, in which the opportunities for help are contained:

Aspect 1: Many of the rules in communities that violate boundaries violate canon law. Warning light! This is where a thorough reading of the statutes, especially when they are presented for approval, can save people and vocations. Even the most subtle forms that are not written down must be measured against canon law, even if this is more difficult.
It is the task of the Church, of the Magisterium, to watch over such developments. As long as the Magisterium reserves the right to approvals, the Magisterium also has the duty to use these procedures for the good of people. In this the spiritual tradition is clear, see the last canon in canon law.

Aspect 2: The confinement and isolation in such structures can be seen in the fact that no experts are brought in. And precisely in this they would be a help. Not all kinds of experts are needed at the same time - but without experts the members are deprived of important resources.

Aspect 3, idealization becomes particularly clear when dealing with drop-outs. Often they can provide important help and contribute with their perceptions. Those who forbid members to have contact with ex-members are probably dangerous.

Aspect 4, humiliation and idealization, is shown by frequent breakdowns of members. Some things just cannot be done and are impossible to manage. Strengthening these people helps to upset and weaken the system and at best heal it.

Here I start with the concluding notes:

Concluding note 1: Possible aids
What can be done? The first thing is to become aware, as an affected person, but also as someone who observes such developments, who accompanies people through such dynamics. It is therefore important that the accompanying persons have their own accompaniment and, if possible, supervision, collegial intervision, whatever you want to call these forms of reflection. It is important to train the inner senses and encourage people to trust their own perception again. Then follows the step of talking, within the community and beyond. If all else fails, one has to turn to Church authority, but even that can be partial. If necessary, one must keep oneself and/or others safe. The important thing after leaving is to learn that certain 'negative' feelings are completely normal. One has - because it was a total institution, covering all areas of life - lost almost all areas of life. This takes time and one can only start again very gently. As they say in the English-speaking world: "It is easier to get out of a cult than to get the cult out of you".

Concluding remark 2: Group dynamics
This idealism, which is good and normal in itself, needs the counterbalance of sobriety, sound doctrine and tradition. Personally, as a novice, if I "flew away" idealistically, my Prussian novice teacher would bring me back to the carpet. In a new community that is being formed - and it only has the strength to do so if it is full of ideals - young members, perhaps newly converted or 'newly called', meet newly converted, newly called leaders in a highly emotionally charged community structure. It is then easy for this to build up to a level that is unhealthy for each other. I see it as an indicator of danger if a new community is willing to be challenged, both from within and without. Even our old religious orders, now sober and sometimes bourgeois, often had these initial phases. Even the great saints, think of Francis or Ignatius, were often excessive in their asceticism in the beginning. Even the Church itself had to learn a lot in the beginning - and after 2000 years it is still not finished.

This immediately leads to concluding note 3: Perpetrators
Unlike sexual abuse, not all spiritual abuse has a malicious intent. Above all, perpetrators of spiritual abuse are not necessarily and always wicked. However, they do gain from it. Most often it is in power and control, entirely in narcissistic logic. In any case, such an abusive dynamic is temporarily anxiety-reducing - but simply not effective, so that the anxiety comes back through the back door, worse, for both perpetrators and victims; the more unconscious it is, the more dangerous.

Concluding remark 4: Victims
Victims of such groups are often young members with little experience. Their idealism is exploited, they do not know how to distinguish between the difficulties required by the Gospel and what is a self-constructed narrowness that does not serve life. In this context, "young people" are both those who are young in years and those who are fresh in their faith. Other vulnerable people are those who are fragmented, either because they have never been able to build a stable structure, or because they are currently in a difficult phase of life. Personal

strength is the best protection! If personal strength is lacking, the tight structure of a community, which takes my mind off things, is tempting at first. Also, initially it is a relief when I can escape the inner pain of fragmentation through external rituals.

And another group of people is at risk, which partly overlaps with the groups just mentioned: People who have always lived in abusive systems are particularly at risk. Because there is the psychological truth, initially surprising but eventually plausible, that people prefer what they know to what may be better but alien. There is the so-called 'central emotional position' in which we have settled and which we find infinitely difficult to leave. So those who are already accustomed to abusive structures may try to escape them, but often end up in a very similar community dynamic.

Concluding remark 5: In accompaniment

Although I have now spoken predominantly of community, these dynamics apply in a very similar way to the processes of accompaniment – with the solace that escape is often easier there: those who accompany are exalted and those who are accompanied are devalued. On the one hand, boundaries are not respected, the privacy of the person, also in the spiritual sphere - and on the other hand, strict demarcations are made, for example not to talk to other people and not to change the accompanying person.

The subject of spiritual abuse is not new, although the word is new. There are texts about it in the tradition. But perhaps it is also true that our sensitivity today is greater. It has probably grown as a result of reflection on sexual abuse, and much of what we learned there can be applied to the dynamics in the community and also to the Church as such. We hope to use what we have learned for the good of all, especially for the good of the victims, and to prevent other people from falling prey to dangerous groups.