

7 points on spiritual abuse

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1

Spiritual abuse consists in controlling and restricting spiritual life

- Spiritual life includes all spiritual convictions, actions and developments:
 - What to believe.
 - How to perceive, experience, and approach God.
 - What kind of spiritual language to use.
 - If, when, where, and how to pray.
 - Which life path to choose.
 - How to interpret certain life events.
 - Whose spiritual guidance to follow.
- When a person is not free in their spiritual life, they may experience spiritual abuse.
- If a person claims a „right“ to intrude into another person spiritual life by asking unwanted questions, by manipulating or coercing another person to perform certain spiritual acts or accept certain spiritual interpretations of their life (against their will), this is spiritual abuse.

2

Spiritual abuse destroys faith

- Spiritual life is the „inner life“ of the soul. It is „the most secret core and sanctuary“ of a person. There they are “alone with God“, whose voice echoes in their depths (Gaudium et Spes).
- Spiritual life includes a person’s conscience and relationship with God. This relationship must be built and develop freely.
- Freedom is the foundation and condition of faith. Forced faith is a contradiction in terms (as is forced love).
- Attacking, manipulating, weakening, suppressing or destroying a person’s inner freedom means attacking, manipulating, weakening, suppressing or destroying the very foundation of their faith, and their ability to lead a spiritual life.

3

Spiritual abuse is baked into catholicism

- Theoretically, some norms and institutions of the catholic church protect the inner life of the faithful.
- But for the most part catholic norms, institutions and culture undermine the spiritual freedom of the faithful since church government claims a „right“ to control the spiritual life of the faithful to “protect” the “faith of the Church”.
- For example, mandatory, coerced confession is a common experience for many catholics, especially children.
- Coerced obedience to superiors even in intimate matters of personal faith and in cases of reasonable doubt is another.
- In general, free development and growth of spiritual life is hindered and restricted through limited spiritual resources and little diversity of church-recognized spiritual leaders, as through the punishment of spiritual practices that are considered diverting.

4

Spiritual abuse in the catholic church is particularly bad for women and children

- Traditional spiritual resources and practices in catholicism reflect a patriarchal order.
 - God is portrayed as a male figure, and spiritual authorities are mostly male
 - Traditional biblical metaphors based on gender and age imply power relations: bridegroom/bride; father/children etc.
- Women and children are assigned subordinate places. Spiritual freedom is even less foreseen for them than for lay-men. Typical life events and experiences of women and children are absent from common catholic spirituality, or are perceived only through a male (clerical) gaze.
- The spiritual roles, role models and life paths available to women and children are few and include practically only variants of subordination, service, silence, willingness to suffer and forgive.

5

In religious contexts sexual abuse is intrinsically linked to spiritual abuse

- Sexual abuse is often preceded and accompanied by acts of spiritual abuse.
- The perpetrator uses his spiritual role to lead the victim into submission, making them docile and trusting of his words while teaching them to distrust themselves and their own inner voice.
- Most perpetrators in a religious context use a spiritual frame for their sexual actions:
 - God wants it (as a punishment, a divine union, a test, a blessing...)
 - It is the victim's fault (they're possessed by demons or just so inherently bad that the perpetrator cannot "resist").
- In many cases spiritual abuse also follows sexual abuse: Victims are bullied into "forgiving", they are shamed spiritually for going public, for wanting justice, or financial compensation.

6

Spiritual abusers are spiritually poor people

- Anyone who believes in earnest that they can or must mould someone else's spiritual life according to their own ideas has a very narrow understanding of spirituality.
- They confuse spirituality and dogma. Or, what is worse, they confuse themselves with God (or rather with their narrow image of God).
- They have no understanding of the enormous range of spiritual traditions, resources and possibilities that catholicism has to offer.
- They have no spiritual tools to deal calmly and respectfully with other people and their different spiritual backgrounds, needs and practices.

7

Spiritual abuse
can only be
broken by
spiritually rich
and independent
people

- To overcome spiritual abuse, one needs to reject the spiritual “authority”, “teaching” and practices of the abuser.
- This step is most likely to succeed if there is access to other spiritualities and alternative resources that the survivor has discovered for themselves, in other words; they have taken the first steps towards freedom and spiritual self-determination.
- The more spiritual traditions and resources someone knows, and the better they know themselves, the more likely they are to develop a healthy spirituality.
- Those who are spiritually well nourished are best protected from becoming perpetrators or victims.