

Spiritual abuse in the Catholic church: Crisis contexts—contours—collusions—consequences

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All forms of abuse imply an abuse of power. Yet, what turns an abuse of power into spiritual abuse? This chapter focuses on spiritual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church—not because it could not happen elsewhere, but because it is only in a self-critical approach that one can deal with this issue appropriately.

In this crisis context, theological approximations and insights into ongoing discourses as well as psychological contributions to dealing with the abuse of power are required. These approaches lead to the proposal of a definition of spiritual abuse—and may and must result in various consequences, for example in the area of spiritual guidance.

Crisis Contexts—and coping with crises?

When talking about spiritual abuse, I think of a desperate woman whose (female) spiritual director urges her to remain in a marriage with a violent husband because this is what the Church expects from her; of a penitent child—what a wording—who is reminded of the secrecy of the confessional, impeding him or her from telling anyone what is happening there again and again; of a woman struggling with her pregnancy, which tempts the deacon of her local parish, who is aware of her situation, to launch an anti-abortion tirade in his first homily; of a young man seeking to discover his vocation and whose accompanist is set on putting him in the priestly garb; and of many other people I know from different settings, in particular in my role as a deacon and psychotherapist.

This initial choice of current and real-life constellations is meant to highlight a variety of things: that spiritual abuse is not equivalent to abuse by clergymen; that possible perpetrators among the

clergy are not only priests, but also permanent deacons; that spiritual abuse also happens without the involvement of the clergy; that spiritual abuse *can* be accompanied by sexual violence, as the example of the penitent child shows, but is not always, as the above example of the projection of a priestly calling shows. However, all forms of abuse imply an abuse of power. Yet, what turns an abuse of power into spiritual abuse?

In these crisis contexts I focus on spiritual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church—not because it could not happen elsewhere, but because I feel that it is only in a self-critical approach that one can deal with this issue appropriately.

The first to fall into crises are, of course, those affected by them. Crises are rightly considered to be stressful processes of change whose course and consequences are open-ended. Psychologically, they mark an interruption of the continuity of experience and action that had existed up to that point: the means available to those affected to cope with their challenges are no longer sufficient. Crises are ac-

accompanied by emotional destabilization as well as by a more or less strongly disintegrated organization of action: those affected stand there empty-handed and feel themselves in a dis-astrous situation, far from any good star (Latin: *astrum*). But abuse of power also reveals a serious crisis of the Catholic Church and the theology associated with it.

Coping with Crises—this is the title of the 2021 IAPT conference and of this book. Crisis phenomena include climate change, war crimes in numerous regions of our world, ethnocentric, politically and culturally fundamentalist movements, economic and social inequality as well as educational injustice, psychosocial catastrophes and personal strokes of fate, and much more. For the reasons mentioned above, crises as such act as threats—and not at all as opportunities. Coping with crises—this title makes me think of the concept of religious and spiritual coping as developed by Kenneth I. Pargament (1997) and taken up many times since then (Granquist 2002, McAdams and Albaugh 2008, Belzen 2015), also within practical theology (Stahl 2019). According to this concept, religiosity and spirituality can play an important role in coping with crises. Nevertheless, this role proves to be highly ambivalent because it can prove to be a resource in crisis management on the one hand and a risk on the other, thus further exacerbating crisis phenomena. In the context of abuse of power, however, religiosity and spirituality do not have their main role in coping with crises into which those affected have plunged, rather they have facilitated their development or even made them possible in the first place. Therefore Doris Reisinger calls the abuse crisis a single “cluster-fuck” (2022) of ecclesiastical power, concealment, and gaslighting. In psychology, gaslighting is the term used to describe a form of emotional abuse by which victims are deliberately unsettled, disoriented, and manipulated. This term comes from the title of the 1938 play *Gas Light*: in it, the British playwright Patrick Hamilton depicts this practice and makes it a publicly perceived and discussed topic. Doris Reisinger, however, can no longer believe in change and renewal—understandably. But the abysses that open up here do not at all absolve me as a practical theologian and pastoral psychologist from dealing with spiritual abuse of power (Kießling 2021a and 2021b).

I will add some *contours* to these *contexts*, first of all by means of theological approximations and insights into ongoing discourses, followed by psycho-

logical contributions towards a critical consideration of what is an abuse of power. The keyword *collusions*, that still needs to be explained, will lead to a proposal on how to define spiritual abuse. This results in *consequences* which I will outline in a three-pronged approach: with a view to theological reconsiderations, with a view to the reception of psychological insights, and with a view to spiritual accompaniment.

Contours

Theological approximations

People who tell us what spirit’s child they are, which spirit (*spiritus*) they draw from in their lives, offer insights into their spirituality. Life in the spirit, spiritual life, takes place within and outside traditional religiosity, which for its part provides opportunities to locate spiritual experiences and allows for a discernment of spirits. A life according to the Spirit is inspired by forces and impulses which do not originate in myself and that do not stay with me when they reach me—unless I seek to grab them and keep them for myself instead of bringing them to the light of the world—in all relationships in which, out of which, and for which I live. Against that backdrop it has to be understood that religious or spiritual abuse is not limited to my relationship with God while the rest of my world remains intact; it rather affects all my relationships and thus does unending damage.

So how can spiritual abuse be characterized from a theological perspective? What about the right to spiritual self-determination, especially in light of the human right to sexual self-determination? What do the testimonies of those affected draw attention to, what empirical evidence is emerging?

Spiritual self-determination is the title of a course offered by Doris Wagner (2019) at Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology. She emphasizes that, like any relationship, the relationship with God has to do with mutuality, so that people enjoy a right to spiritual self-determination in spite of every asymmetry—both in their relationship with God and in their relationship with a spiritual director, who commits abuse if he violates the spiritual autonomy of the persons entrusted to him by confusing his own voice with the voice of God.

According to Klaus Mertes (2017), however, it can also be the counselled person who confuses the voice of the accompanist with the voice of God—or,



inversely, as in the biblical story of Samuel (1 Sam 3:1-12), who hears God's call and takes the voice of God to be that of Eli, until the latter is able to differentiate between them—and, in a third variant, both human beings secretly and fatally take the voice of the spiritual director for the voice of God. That does not only mean an *infringement of the First and the Second Commandment*, but is at the same time an offence against a fellow human being.

Spiritual distress evolves over time when, at first, an accompanist appears to be the long sought-after, attentive listener, before the putative voice of God is uncovered as his own words and exposed as manipulation. Those on the verge of dying of spiritual thirst are happy when they are offered water, without noticing that it is poisoned. The accompanist's open arms turn out to be a trap when they originate from his personal neediness and have a toxic effect on the spirituality of the affected persons, giving rise to the same range of damage that is part and parcel of sexual abuse. For nowhere on earth does power appear more powerful than when it is accompanied by heavenly insignia.

Three forms of spiritual abuse are to be distinguished (Wagner 2019): *spiritual neglect, manipulation, violence*. The differentiation is not totally exact, but useful because it helps us to understand how things can happen which third parties—and retrospectively often also the affected persons—find inexplicable. When children have learned how to tap spiritual resources for themselves, they are well-protected against spiritual abuse; yet those who have not been able to develop spiritual self-determination may be vulnerable and hardly able to defend themselves, or may even be inclined to follow clear guidance they have long been waiting for, grateful for every fruit in their own spiritual desert, while enjoying some tentative benefits and failing to identify the manipulation that begins gently: think of the vibrancy and charisma of a person who intuitively courts those who tolerate his or her offensive behavior in a spirit of submission; think of emotional orchestrations based on distorted information; think of subtle intimidation and threats which disqualify uncertainty, doubt, and initial resistance.

Spiritual manipulation builds on neglect. The protective walls against the manipulator come tumbling down, if ever they existed. However, the walls that are built around that relationship become ever thicker and higher, so third persons hear no cry for help, if it can still be articulated. Even when

it is not associated with sexual violence, spiritual violence has the same effect as rape, as murder, is equivalent to soul murder, and can therefore lead to suicide (Kluitmann 2019). This painful insight is made plausible by the fact that spirituality shapes all my relationships, so that spiritual abuse can deprive those affected of all their connectedness and therefore drive them to suicide. I owe this understanding to sufferers I have accompanied. Although there is a drastic lack of research into spiritual abuse (Barnes 2020), impressive testimonies of those affected give some empirical evidence that sexual violence in the Catholic Church usually tends to be coupled with spiritual abuse, but not necessarily vice versa (Haslbeck, Heyder, Leimgruber and Sandherr-Klemp 2020). However, spiritual abuse is often an integral part of the planned initiation of contacts with potential victims, i. e., part of a grooming strategy with the aim of perpetrating sexualized violence.

I find the analogy striking between *spiritual neglect, manipulation, and violence*, on the one hand, and *sexual transgression, harassment, and violence*, on the other. Sexual transgression cannot always be pinpointed to an intention, nor can spiritual neglect. Sexual harassment, by contrast, serves a purpose, and so does spiritual manipulation. Sexual abuse is violence, and so is spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse does not only have fatal consequences when it culminates in sexual abuse, even though the structures are shockingly similar, and victims often report the concurrence of both. *Emotional abuse* (Kluitmann 2019) is implied by both. Loyalty, a common, possibly elitist, sense of mission and a certain spirit of sacrifice create strong bonds. Moreover, emotional abuse tends to be accompanied by a sense of shame and guilt—coupled with the victim's impression of not sufficing.

The systemic conditions fostering spiritual abuse are also similar to those of sexual violence: religious communities form closed systems when they offer their members only internal accompaniment and inevitably create a bandwagon effect in cases of spiritual abuse, by stopping people who may have observed or should have noticed something from having someone to turn to. This is where *forum internum* and *forum externum* mix—although a distinction is made between them in Canon Law. Under Canon Law, a father confessor may not avail himself of any knowledge obtained in the confession, not even towards the penitent—but what if that nevertheless happens in closed systems?

The understanding of spiritual abuse as a violation of spiritual self-determination takes us back to the concept of sexual abuse: it is only on the basis of the human right to sexual self-determination that the special moral reprehensibility of sexual abuse becomes unmistakably clear.

When I injure myself in an accident, I receive a wound where I felt sound before. However, for spiritual abuse and for “Sacred Wounds” (Pasquale 2015), this comparison is misleading, because violations of spiritual self-determination are not normally experienced by those who previously felt that they were self-determined and, in so far, sound. At least retrospectively, affected persons often become aware of their own ominous past that never allowed them to believe they had a right to spiritual self-determination. And the simple, yet appropriate description of spiritual abuse as the confusion of two voices and a breach of the Mosaic Law also needs to be embedded in a relational structure that is characterized by emotional abuse, although that is not a specific feature of spiritual abuse. “Spiritual and emotional abuse have much in common, but spiritual abuse bears a particular sinister twist, as principles and maxims of faith are wielded as weapons of command and control, and faith leaders abuse their power for the sake of feeding their own unmet emotional needs” (DeGroat 2020, 125). David Johnson and Jeff van Vonderen already put this painful insight into words 30 years ago: “In those religious systems where the sheep are there for the ‘needs’ of the shepherd, people’s lives get devoured” (1991, 170). The theological consideration of abuse, demanded by many, has gained momentum with the colleagues mentioned and others and must go further. Nevertheless, it can only go further if it opens up for insights from other disciplines.

After all, theologians will not be able to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. That is why psychological perspectives are indispensable when it comes to clearly outlining spiritual abuse. They have an independent role to play if the interdisciplinary interaction with theology is not simply to confirm the latter, but is to be understood as a dialogue between equal partners—in the sense of the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council (1965) *Gaudium et Spes* (36 and 62) and according to the understanding of interdisciplinarity in liberation theology (Boff 1986, Sánchez and Vigueras 2019, Adam and Schmiedt Streck 2021).

Psychological contributions

Humans as such are dependent on fellow human beings for the whole of their lives—on their love, their recognition. This acknowledgement is linked with both their most delightful and their most painful experiences. The latter fuel the longing to be freed from longing for attention. Some attempts to at least mitigate this dependency lead towards gaining, compelling, or buying love and recognition, ideally from a powerful position.

Psychologically, therefore, the focus will be on questions of power and powerlessness, the striking relationship between abuse of power and narcissistic phenomena, and the controversial relationship between narcissism and empathy.

In terms of social psychology (Bierhoff 2000), *power* is understood as an asymmetric relationship between the holder of power and the controlled person(s), that is, the capacity of an entity (person, group, institution) to exert influence on others as they wish—with the aim of controlling and changing their conduct and life, and, where possible, also overcoming resistance.

A *power motive* is a stable, consistent need over time, and in different situations, to pursue power-related goals and seek situations which make this possible. A distinction can be made between *socialized* power motives that lead to a curbed, contained, socially responsible use of power, thanks to a given inhibition tendency, and so-called *personalized* power motives, resulting in an unrestrained use of power without social compatibility.

A distinction can be made between different resources, sources of power and *means of power*:

power of sanctions by imposing rewards or punishment on a target person depending on his or her conduct, where the influencing person is able to control that, as in closed systems;

informational power of those who invoke convincing arguments, but also determine the flow of information;

power of experts attributed to a person’s specific knowledge;

referent power of the influencing entity with which target persons identify themselves because they regard the former’s characteristics as admirable and their conduct as worthy of emulation;

legitimate power, justified by formal social structures in which leaders are looked upon as authority figures.



Authority is endowed on a person in a position of power—thanks to their competence, traditional reputation or his or her own means of power.

Gaining love and recognition from power relationships is something that will work for a while, not least because one of its characteristic features is denial—on both sides: for powerful action ultimately loses its strength when its legitimacy is questioned, and in return, the insight that one has been deprived of one's own influence, and is powerless as a result, is hurtful.

Yet, the more I depend on relationships of power for love and recognition, act out my power motives, employ my means of power and emphasize my authority in relationships to others, the less weight I will attribute to those persons who have been domesticated and disempowered by me, and the less weight I will attribute to their love and recognition. I may remain the stronger party in such relationships, but my strategy does not work. A vicious circle begins: while I strive to obtain more power, the continuous experience of lack makes me feel *narcissistic* rage. Thus, this psychosocial dynamic develops its addictive character.

As a psychological concept (Freud 1997), *narcissism* typically implies exaggerated self-esteem, hypersensitivity towards criticism, quest for admiration, and dominant interaction patterns. It is true that persons with a narcissistic personality often appear attractive at first sight, but selfish and in love with themselves in the long run.

This is often accompanied by a lack of *empathy*. Did personalities with a narcissistic disorder fail to experience empathy from their parents and other important caregivers? Were they exposed to indifference and coldness? There is that persistent assumption of an unconsciously low self-esteem which calls for compensation by means of boastful grandiosity. Those who, in private, have a gloomy perception of themselves and their situation, seek admiration by putting themselves in the limelight and keeping everything dark out of the focus. This constellation does occur, but empirical evidence tends to point in a different direction (Keenan 2013; Bonelli 2018): it suggests that parents excessively praised their children, shielding them from all criticism, so their behavior appears abnormal because they lack frustration tolerance, though not self-esteem. As adults, these persons simply cannot imagine how and why the ever-present flow of praise, recognition and other “carrots” offered to them should stop all of a sudden. In my work with perpe-

trators of abuse I have come to realize how powerful their insatiable demands must have appeared to other persons who, being torn between feelings of good intention and submissiveness, fear the constant threat of an outburst of the narcissistically impaired person and thus let themselves be exploited and emotionally abused by someone who establishes interpersonal relationships exclusively as a source of admiration. The powerful person starves without his suppliers, but powerfully keeps them under his spell—a textbook example of a double bind! And here too, black-and-white thinking gives rise to a simplistic division of the world into admirers and no-goods.

Narcissistic *self-idealization* is accompanied by *self-immanence*, that is the inability to develop enthusiasm for other, possibly higher, values and ideals beyond one's own person, and a *devaluation of others*, making any cooperation impossible and disclosing the lack of empathy and emotional warmth, not necessarily as a missing *gift*, but rather as a lack of *willingness* (Bonelli 2018; DeGroat 2020).

The contemplation of narcissistic phenomena is not meant to raise general suspicion, but it may help to create awareness with the aim of seeing through various kinds of spiritual power imbalances—and a type of abuse that perverts the prayer “*Your* will be done” into the secret hope that “*my* will be done”.

And don't the long-term cover-up strategies at the level of the Universal Church show a sort of structural lack of empathy as a pastoral pattern?

Collusions: proposing a definition

I am anxious that spiritual abuse is understood as a specific relational pattern. This makes me think of the term *collusion*. It stems from the field of psychoanalysis and couples therapy (Dicks 2015), but is meanwhile being used beyond that realm. Collusion refers to an interaction pattern between two partners, based on corresponding relational conflicts. Their respective dispositions seem to fit like key and lock; both feel that they are meant for each other and come together under a tacit—and at the same time questionable—mutual arrangement. They are able to control immature desires and oversized fears of relationships by demanding the sort of behavior from each other that contributes towards reducing their own relational anxieties, while providing solutions to the problem of their respective counterpart: a person who is exceptionally fond of being cared



for intensively, spoiled, and nurtured narcissistically is a fit for a partner who likes to help—and who delegates his or her own unfulfilled narcissism with a perspective of basking in some of the other's glowing resplendence.

Collusions give a sense of exclusive proximity and indispensability to each other and are a prerequisite for some people to become engaged in a love affair at all. Such an arrangement remains largely unacknowledged between the players who are part of it, and may appear questionable to outsiders only, although most of the time the nature of their relationship goes completely unnoticed.

I look upon *spiritual abuse* as *collusion of a spiritual authority with a spiritual seeker which, under systemically advantageous circumstances, lets the power of the perpetrator grow and silences those who become victims in such a relationship*.

Consequences

Spiritual abuse turns out to be a systematic pattern of typically “coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context” (Oakley and Humphreys 2019, 31). Characteristically, “a spiritual authority invokes God, the ultimate authority, to *sanction* the abuse” (Diederich 2017, 54).

Abuse of power thus shows the Universal Church and its theologies in crisis. Coping with crisis—that was the meaningful title of the 2021 IAPT conference. But in a disastrous situation, every good star is far away and out of reach, especially when religiosity and spirituality not only cannot contribute to coping with or overcoming crises, but have even triggered them. Nevertheless, consequences are necessary: What is urgently needed is a fundamental change in theology and spirituality, in other words, a diaconal renewal that will raise questions about the office of the deacon and, in the future, of the deaconess, because they pursue a diaconal mission. What is also urgently needed is the recognition and reception of psychological insights—and, quite practically, qualified spiritual accompaniment that resists narcissistic dangers and shows empathy, even double empathy, as will be shown.

Spiritual considerations

In advance of the papal conclave in Rome, the later Pope Francis gave an address to the College of Cardinals in March 2013: “When the church does not

emerge from itself to evangelize, it becomes self-referential... The evils that, over time, occur in ecclesiastical institutions have their root in self-referentiality, a kind of theological narcissism” (Nelson 2013).

This fuels my skepticism about a tradition that attributes *repraesentatio Christi* specifically to the ministers of the Church (Werbick 1997). The term describes a relationship between archetype and image. Aren't representatives tempted to usurp what (or who) they represent? Above all, when the absoluteness of the represented figure is reflected in a quasi-absoluteness of the representatives and is meant to be asserted accordingly by them? Doesn't that deny every possibility to distinguish representation from usurpation? A usurpation which does not only threaten the one who is represented but, even more so, those people who turn to the official representatives?

In the Judgement of the Nations (Mt 25:31-46) I discern biblical criticism of this kind of usurpation, because here divine power and dominion are not at all reflected by secular power and dominion. There is no way of acquiring them at all, not even *ex officio*. Jesus Christ encounters those who are suffering and powerless and thus acknowledges their authority. For he who encounters the needy and marginalized people is precisely the person, in whom you encounter God Himself. This dynamic speaks against an archetype/image concept with its static appearance. The encounter with Jesus Christ is not a one-way street, and certainly not from the Church minister to the needy person. The Judgement of the Nations turns this idea upside down. Though calling for humility, it appears unsusceptible to spiritual presumption.

Since then, ecclesiastical practice and theology have been hindered from reproducing God's authoritative sovereignty in the Church's reigning sovereignty and from legitimizing ecclesiastical authority by claiming that it is derived, in an unbroken manner, from an autocratically conceived divine sovereignty (Werbick 1997).

The Judgement of the Nations is the prototype of a *diaconia* that incites solidarity. The longer I have been a deacon, the more vital appears to me a practice of representation, a *diaconia* of representation, which is clearly different from the understanding of representation criticized above. Solidarity does not take away the place of those who are targeted, but seeks to create space for their very existence. Representation refers to an effort that does not replace the counterpart, but sets him or her free.



My representative who believes, hopes, and loves on my behalf, because I am unable to believe, hope, or love, does not eliminate me so that I do not matter anymore. Instead, he walks ahead of me, and I follow, while others follow, too, because he turns around and looks at them. He shows esteem for them by looking at them. He suffers with those, and because of those, who don't follow. In his love, the representative is sensitive to their suffering. In his love, the representative does not coerce anything, but hopes for all: he gives those people, to whom he is a representative, time to return to their place. The representative does not harass them, he hopes for them. His love is representation shaped as hope. The representative makes himself dependent; he is aware that he cannot do what he hopes and for what he hopes but, precisely in this powerlessness, he is free to love. By connecting back to the persons represented by him, he is immune to abuse of power.

By talking of *diaconia*, I also touch on the notion of my own ministry. I am anxious that the diaconate takes on more and more *shape* as a permanent and independent ministry; I am anxious about its diaconal orientation, not in a *profiling* that would have to delimit it against other ministries and services.

Although I see an urgent need to modify the requirements for access to the ministry, the proposal which comes up time and again to ordain permanent deacons as priests is something that disturbs me and appears to me as partly offensive and partly treacherous: with a self-critical view of the ministry, I suspect that the possibility of priestly ordination might be tempting for one or the other fellow deacon, who secretly perceives his diaconal ministry as a preliminary step towards another ministry. When the proposal to ordain permanent deacons as priests comes from deacons, I therefore tend to take it for a sort of treason. When priests, bishops, or lay people make such suggestions, I sometimes feel offended. I am committed to my diaconal vocation and try to live up to it. Therefore, I am glad to have celibate men among my deacon brothers who testify, by their existence, that deacons and priests differ in more than just their form of life.

For the sake of a diaconal Church, I am concerned about why the quest is always for *virī probati*—and never for *mulieres probatae*. For one of the features of mighty clericalism (Demasure 2016) is that it is a male society that, as a closed system, resists being broken up by more men who, as deacons, are already part of the clergy. I strongly advocate for a female diaconate—and, following my research se-

mester in Latin America in 2019, also for seeking inspiration from the new paths of the Church in Amazonia, instead of putting the preservation of an outdated ministerial ideology above the welfare of the faithful. I look upon those efforts of renewal as a service to the Universal Church, not at all as a disassociation from it—and an opportunity to learn from international theology and spirituality. At the same time, the ecological, political, and cultural crises, to which the 2021 IAPT conference was dedicated, are coming up again with Amazonia and the Church there. But there, too, spiritual abuse is a pressing challenge (Figuerola Alvear and Tombs 2019).

(Non-) Reception of psychological insights

When theologians only take *other sciences* seriously, insofar as these confirm their beliefs, more theological narcissism is inevitable. Ways out of the crisis then certainly do not open up. I take it for my duty to call for spiritual detoxication if we, as the Church, do not want to perpetuate closed systems.

In the fight against clericalism, attention is admittedly focused less on deacons and more on priests, especially, of course, on priestly formation. But there is still a massive lack of recognition of psychological insights, as I would like to show by means of a prominent document of the Universal Church.

In *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* of 8 December 2016, the Congregation for the Clergy outlines, under the title “The Gift of the Priestly Vocation”, the program for a human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral priestly formation, marked by a self-critical spirit inspired by Pope Francis. In terms of pastoral psychology, it is also about how future priests can give esteem to other people, while they themselves cannot expect specific esteem for the form of life they have chosen.

Despite these crucial requirements and impulses, the above title reminds me of Marie Keenan and her observation that celibacy “is rarely conceptualized in seminary formation as a major human ‘loss’”. No grieving is facilitated or takes place. Instead, celibacy is presented as a ‘gift’, whereas the “losses of male sexual expression and fatherhood are largely ignored” (Keenan 2013, 234).

Furthermore, the document persists in explaining its position towards homosexuality—moreover, between questions of mental health and sexual abuse—which is scientifically untenable. Accordingly, men are not admitted to the priesthood “who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homo-

sexual tendencies or support the so-called ‘gay culture’” (Congregation for the Clergy 2017, No. 199). What is the purpose of expressly mentioning homosexual practice and culture, if mandatory celibacy is applicable to priests of every sexual orientation and if, in practice, men of homosexual orientation have been ordained nonetheless? And what do deep-seated tendencies refer to, if they do not imply a lack of interpersonal skills that is likewise found among persons of heterosexual orientation? Are they deep-seated, and therefore incurable, as opposed to possibly curable, homosexual “tendencies” which are “only the expression of a transitory problem” (No. 200), as *Ratio Fundamentalis* puts it? How is a candidate going to deal critically with his own sexuality under these circumstances?

Whatever an individual’s sexual preference is, it must be accepted. The only viable alternative is self-denial under the sanctioning power of an entity that thus deliberately puts up with favoring collusions which are characteristic of spiritual abuse.

Qualified spiritual accompaniment

In settings of spiritual accompaniment, neither the one who is accompanied, nor the accompanist, has access to the work of the Spirit. Instead, learning to *conduct* a dialogue, means to confide oneself to the third party, to rely on the guiding power of the Spirit—and at the same time to avert the danger that directors and directees become seducers and seduced. “He who is giving the Exercises”—there is not talk of a master or leader here—“ought not to influence him who is receiving them more to poverty or to a promise, than to their opposites, nor more to one state or way of life than to another”, one reads in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. In quest of the divine will it appears “more fitting and much better, that the Creator and Lord Himself should communicate Himself to His devout soul... So, he who is giving the Exercises should not turn or incline to one side or the other, but standing in the center like a balance, leave the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord.” (St. Ignatius 1914, No. 15).

These sentences contain incontrovertible theological quality standards. Because temptation originates from dependencies which, according to my experience, are unavoidable at some stage, when, in their despair, the accompanied persons attribute all the power and expertise to me alone. But then it is necessary to quickly share the responsibility again, which

was assumed by way of representation, and to ensure an *empowerment* of the guided persons (Coetsier 2021) who certainly have their own expertise and gifts, in which I place my trust as a representative, until they themselves are able to develop that trust again.

What is absolutely necessary is the qualified *supervision* of spiritual accompanists so as to identify their intrinsic motivations and needs, such as for recognition, proximity, or distance, and to prevent collusions. These needs of the accompanists, their own conflict situations, and frustrations provoke their experience of powerlessness. However, as persons who also see themselves as masters or leaders, they embody a contrastive or even deadly combination of power and powerlessness, and live “out of an unreflective script of private powerlessness whilst ministering in a site of unsupervised and unchallenged public dominance” (Keenan 2013, 238).

This is complemented by further psychological quality standards because those who act as accompanists practice *double empathy*: in seeking to sense not only the response of their counterpart, but also the response of God and the divine will. Double empathy allows a spiritual accompanist to turn to God in intercessory prayer, both in solidarity with the person entrusted to him and at the same time linking back to God and his kingdom. This habitus may prevent the accompanist from building his own kingdom and holding the accompanied person back from the power of God’s grace. Thus, those on a spiritual quest are not silenced, either by coercing them to remain with violent husbands, or by keeping confessional secrets about what was done to them, or by a “steamroller” sermon, or by putting them in a priestly garb, in and under which they fall silent. Instead, they should find their own voice—either for the first time or anew.

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