



THE PLACE WHERE YOU  
STAND IS HOLY GROUND:

*Recognizing and Preventing Spiritual  
Abuse in the Catholic Church*

Paul Fahey  
September 2022

## **Endorsements**

"Paul Fahey has written a clear, well-researched, and illuminating essay on the reality of spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church. As Fahey shows, spiritual abuse occurs when there is manipulation through guilt or some other form of psychological control. Some religious leaders have unrecognized narcissistic tendencies, and they give people the impression that their voice is the voice of God. Fahey provides examples of vulnerable people who have been harmed by spiritual abuse (while respecting confidentiality). This essay should be read by religious leaders, seminarians, and priests who need to be attentive to the reality of spiritual abuse."

*Dr. Robert Fastiggi Ph.D.*

*Bishop Kevin M. Britt Chair of Dogmatic Theology and Christology  
Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit MI*

"Because of the deception that is part and parcel of spiritual abuse, it can be difficult to identify. This article gives us both a lens to see and tools to respond to spiritual abuse. With this article ministry leaders will now be equipped to cultivate a more safe, healthy, and effective ministry."

*Dr. Timothy Hogan Psy.D.*

*Author, "The Gift of Cultural Hurricanes: Tools to Rebuild Authentic Spirituality"  
Part-time faculty at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit MI*

## **About the Author**

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# ***The Place Where You Stand is Holy Ground:***

## ***Recognizing and Preventing Spiritual Abuse in the Catholic Church***

It is through the Church, the sacrament of salvation, her Scriptures, her Tradition, her prayers, and her liturgies that all people can encounter the living Christ and experience his love, healing, and transformative grace. But what happens when the men and women tasked with mediating God's grace, appointed to preach God's word and preside over the sacraments, do so with carelessness or malice? What untold harm can be done when the place of healing becomes a source of harm? The goal of this article is to help clergy, lay ministers, and all faithful of goodwill to recognize, prevent, and appropriately respond to spiritual abuse in the Catholic Church.

In the past few decades, most of the focus on abuse that happens in the Church has zeroed in on the protection of minors from sexual abuse. This is absolutely necessary. However, sexual abuse is not the only abuse that those with spiritual authority can inflict on others, and children are not the only people who are vulnerable. This article will first define and explain what spiritual abuse is before focusing on one particularly insidious form of abuse: the abuse of conscience. From there, this article will explain the inherently vulnerable nature of pastoral relationships and outline the trauma and other negative consequences of spiritual abuse. It will end with practical suggestions for clergy, lay ministers, and anyone involved in the Church to prevent spiritual abuse and respond to those who have been wounded in a way that promotes healing without causing more harm.

### ***Personal Note***

I want to offer a personal note before I get too far. I have been Catholic my entire life, and I have personally experienced spiritual abuse and the abuse of conscience. Sometimes this abuse was inflicted directly by leadership acting with malice, sometimes I was harmed by leaders being careless or negligent, and sometimes the damage happened indirectly via a Catholic culture that did not respect my conscience. I have also worked as a lay minister in the Catholic Church for several years, and I have unfortunately contributed to that same religious culture that put others at risk for spiritual abuse. Through this article, I hope to help make faith communities places of healing, respect, and personal growth, safe from coercion, shame, and harm. The examples given in this article come from personal experiences or the experiences of others who have shared their stories with me. Some details have been changed to protect privacy.

While these are anecdotal, I believe they are helpful illustrations of the concepts being explained. I should also note that while this project focuses specifically on the Catholic Church, spiritual abuse can and does happen across religious denominations and communities (Oakley et al., 2018). The general principles presented here are relevant for faiths other than Catholicism.

Finally, I want to dedicate this article to Saint Joseph, the Protector of the Church and the Terror of Demons. He, as Pope Francis (2020b) recently expressed, is a model for how to love others without the desire to possess or control them (section 7). May Joseph's intercession help purify and renew the Church "so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the earth" (Vatican Council II, 1964, chapter 2, section 15).

## **What is Spiritual Abuse?**

The term “spiritual abuse” only came into use in the early 1990’s, but the concept of people abusing their power and coercing others in religious contexts had been discussed for decades previous (Oakley et al., 2018). One of the key difficulties for those working to recognize, prevent, and respond to spiritual abuse is that there is not a universally understood definition of spiritual abuse (Oakley et al., 2018). After a 2017 survey of Christians in the U.K. about spiritual abuse, a group of researchers reached this definition:

*Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism (Oakley et al., 2018, p. 151).*

This can be compared to the definition of spiritual abuse reached by Fernández (2022), though his is specifically speaking about abuse in the Catholic Church:

*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 (Fernández, 2022, p. 9).*

Some of the key themes in these two definitions include the following: a religious context, the use of religious beliefs or authority to control others, the abusive person having a position of power, the relationship to psychological abuse, and the reality of actual harm done.

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***Spiritual abuse is possible wherever there is the opportunity for someone to leverage spiritual beliefs or practices to control others.***

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These definitions also implicitly refute a common misconception of spiritual abuse—that it only happens in cult-like environments. While individuals in cults can certainly experience spiritual abuse, it can, and does, happen in normal religious environments as well (Marich, 2021). A 2013 survey of adult Christians in the U.K. found that 75% of respondents felt damaged in their religious communities because of coercion, manipulation, or the misuse of power (Oakley et al., 2018). Spiritual abuse is possible wherever there is the opportunity for someone to leverage spiritual beliefs or practices to control others.

## Abusers

While asymmetrical power dynamics are a key aspect of spiritual abuse, spiritually abusive relationships are not consigned to just pastor/congregation contexts. Spiritual abuse is possible between masters and disciples, parents and children, or really between any member of a religious community against another (Marich, 2021; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014). That being said, a common factor of those who have been spiritually abused is the presence of religious leadership who in some way represents God, was appointed by God, or who speaks with authority on God's behalf (Ward, 2011). Because they symbolically represent God, these leaders have significant power over others; often, disobeying them is seen as disobeying God (Ward, 2011).

Also, these leaders are often narcissistic, have little accountability, and treat others like dependent children (Ward, 2011).

In addition, Marich (2021) found three common traits of spiritual abusers. The first is that they have deep feelings of insecurity that present as narcissistic tendencies, such as having an inflated sense of self-importance, feelings of entitlement, arrogant behavior, or being envious of others. The second trait—and this is crucial to note—is that abusers rarely intend to harm others; more often, they genuinely believe that their control and manipulation of others is for the other person's own good. Third, abusers often use language of trust and love to manipulate others, promising healing, community, or enlightenment to lure people in. It is important to note that, regardless of the disposition of the abuser, spiritual abuse is defined by the harm experienced by the victim, not the intention of the abuser (Fernández, 2022). In his research, Ward (2011) compared healthy spiritual leadership to toxic spiritual leadership (see Table 1).

Healthy Spiritual Leadership	Toxic Spiritual Leadership
Healthy leadership is both aware of and sensitive to uneven power dynamics.	Toxic leadership may be aware of uneven power dynamics, but either dismisses or exploits their power for their own gain.
Healthy leadership accepts every person as having inherent value and dignity.	Toxic leadership accepts and values others based on their behavior.
Healthy leadership desires to integrate the biological, psychological, and spiritual aspects of the human person.	Toxic leadership prioritizes the spiritual aspect of the human person so much that the biological and psychological are ignored.
Healthy leadership works in cooperation with others.	Toxic leadership exploits others for their own gain.
Healthy leadership encourages every individual to freely express their spirituality in their own unique, personal way.	Toxic leadership discourages any spiritual expression that is not their own.
Healthy leadership is aware of and admits their own weaknesses and failures.	Toxic leadership is not aware of and refuses to admit their weaknesses and failures.

In the Catholic Church, while charisma can make it easier for someone to gain power over others, spiritual authority is ecclesial; it is granted to someone by the Church (Fernández, 2022). The institution gives ordained clerics and lay ministers authority and power. This ecclesial stamp of approval not only puts Catholic ministers in a position where they are capable of abusing others, but also it means that any harm they do with that spiritual authority reflects back on the entire Church. Fernández (2022) says succinctly, “proper or improper exercise of spiritual authority in Catholic culture is never an issue between two individuals; it always has an ecclesial dimension” (p. 6).

An example of leaders using their power in a spiritually abusive way can be seen in this experience of Catholics who participated in a small community led by a lay couple. This local group was part of a larger, worldwide ecclesial movement. The local leaders would often tell the community that everyone was free to make their own decisions; however, when someone made a decision other than what the leaders told them, the individual would be publicly confronted and forced to explain themselves in front of the entire community. The leaders would also demand that members reveal deeply personal experiences in front of the group, with the implicit threat that not doing so would prevent that person’s spiritual growth or would harm the community. When a particular member was unable to attend a community event because of a work commitment, the leaders manipulated the language of virtue and vice to shame that person and told them that the reason they were not taking that weekend off work was because they were too prideful.

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***They had difficulty perceiving the difference between the voice of God and the voice of the leaders in their conscience.***

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While the local leaders were lay people, the ecclesial movement was approved by the pope, and each community was endorsed by their local bishop. Everything the leaders did and said was presented as having the backing of the Church. The leaders assumed so much spiritual authority that they invaded the consciences of the individual members. This caused internal dissociation for the individuals who were confused or challenged by some of the things that were happening because they had difficulty perceiving the difference between the voice of God and the voice of the leaders in their conscience. They believed, at least in part, that the will of the leaders represented the will of God, this created an interior crisis every time they were asked to do something they were not comfortable with.

***Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse***

It is also important to understand that while spiritual abuse can happen in conjunction with other types of abuse, like sexual abuse, other forms of abuse are not required for someone to be spiritually abused (Doyle, 2009; Gubi & Jacobs, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018). Spiritual abuse can be a form of psychological abuse independent of accompanying sexual or physical abuse, and it can negatively impact someone as much as or more than physical abuse (O’Leary, 1999; Oakley et al., 2018).

Further, because of the levels of trust and intimacy that are involved in pastoral relationships, and because those relationships are often freely entered into, spiritual abuse can resemble abuse in domestic relationships (Childers, 2012).

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***Because of the spiritual nature of the abuse, those who are being abused are significantly disempowered, as saying “no” to the abuse feels like saying “no” to God.***

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However, while spiritual abuse certainly includes aspects of psychological abuse—like shaming, blaming, controlling, and intimidating behaviors—spiritual abuse is distinct precisely because it happens within a spiritual context. This can make the coercion more intense (e.g. “God is telling you to do this,” or “You will go to hell if you do not do this.”) and it can negatively affect people at a spiritual and existential level by harming their relationship with God or their sense of ultimate meaning and purpose (Doyle, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018). Further, precisely because of the spiritual nature of the abuse, those who are being abused are significantly disempowered, as saying “no” to the abuse feels like saying “no” to God (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). It can often be difficult for those who have been abused to seek help because they doubt their community will believe them or because they may think that saying something will displease God and cause negative eternal consequences (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009; Marich, 2021).

The language of virtues and forgiveness can also be used to manipulate others and perpetuate abuse.

Abusers themselves can use these concepts to control the people they are abusing by asserting that reporting the abuse is uncharitable or unforgiving. Third parties, spiritual authorities, or mentors can also perpetuate abuse; they may insist that someone being abused stay in that abusive situation out of an obligation to forgive their abuser or discourage someone from speaking out against abuse because doing so would be calumny or cause division in the community. However, using the concepts of forgiveness and virtue in this way is a distortion of the truth. As Pope Francis (2020a) taught in *Fratelli Tutti*, forgiveness does not mean “renouncing our own rights,” nor does loving an abuser “mean allowing him to keep oppressing us.” Rather, “true love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make him cease his oppression; it means stripping him of a power that he does not know how to use, and that diminishes his own humanity and that of others” (para. 241).

Additionally, individuals can be spiritually abused by acts of commission and acts of omission. In what survivors have described as “bullying” behavior, spiritual abuse can happen when those with authority intimidate, reject, threaten, ignore, ridicule, or emotionally manipulate others (Ward, 2011). An example of spiritual bullying is a priest using his spiritual and ecclesial authority to publicly slander a parishioner in order to exercise control over the parish. While this spiritual bullying can be categorized as acts of commission, spiritual neglect, an act of omission, is also a form of abuse (Ward, 2011). This neglect occurs when the leadership, as representatives of God, present themselves as having solutions

for everything, but then do not act when a group member is in need. In a Catholic setting, spiritual neglect could look like a bishop refusing to use his authority to intervene in a situation where he knew a priest was abusing others.

### **Cultures of Abuse**

Specific beliefs, values, or practices in a religious community can also create an environment or culture that makes individuals more susceptible to spiritual abuse. The belief that love and acceptance are dependent on how someone behaves or that an individual's worth is measured by their activity in the group and the obedience they show to leaders are some indicators of a potentially abusive spiritual culture (Ward, 2011). Other teachings or beliefs that lend themselves to a spiritually abusive culture include the following: someone can only be loved by God if they behave a certain way; God will always heal me or others if I ask; religious leaders can always be trusted and must be submitted to; if I have enough faith, God will bless me with financial prosperity; the more I do for God now, the more I will be rewarded in the afterlife (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). Environments prone to spiritual abuse can also include practices like disciplining or publicly shaming members of the community (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009).

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***"For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary."***

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### **Abuse of Conscience**

In a letter he wrote after news broke of former Cardinal McCarrick's abuse of children and adults, Pope Francis (2018) repeatedly condemned the "abuse of conscience." This is a particularly insidious form of spiritual abuse that can go undetected by both victim and abuser while causing severe harm to people at their very psychological and spiritual core.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, 1997), compiling the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, defines the conscience this way:

*Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths (para. 1776).*

As can be seen in this passage, Fernández (2021) says that there are two dimensions of the conscience taught by the post-Conciliar Church. The first is a moral dimension, that is, the conscience is the place where an individual comes to recognize the objective moral law and know how to respond to it in their particular circumstances. The second is a relational dimension, specifically, an individual's capacity to meet with and hear God. In other words, the conscience is both "the seat of freedom of judgment" and "the place of encounter with God and self" (Fernández, 2021, p. 560).



The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, 1997) goes on to teach that an individual must form their conscience by being attentive to Scripture, guided by the Church's teaching, and helped by the advice and example of others. Fernández (2021) explains that an individual forms their conscience by seeking the will of God and listening to the word of God mediated through the People of God, the Church.

can be well-intentioned, though just as damaging—to think that the revelation being mediated is the will of God itself, thereby replacing, instead of forming, the consciences of others.

It is in this interplay between the individual conscience and the will of God mediated through the Church that the abuse of conscience can happen. Fernández (2021) says:

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***The abuse of conscience, unlike other forms of abuse, actually undermines the individual's capacity to hear God and make judgements, and it can even prevent them from recognizing the abuse they are experiencing.***

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However, because God's revelation is mediated through human experience and language, there are always limitations in an individual's ability to express and understand God's will. In order to allow one's self to be formed by God's will, which is mediated through the Church, an individual must make their conscience open to being changed; that is, they must make themselves vulnerable. This creates an interplay between the ecclesiastical mediation of God's revelation and an individual's conscience, their ability to understand and respond to that revelation.

Fernández (2021) outlines temptations and responsibilities concerning personal consciences. At the individual level, there exists the temptation to avoid the vulnerability required to form one's conscience, but that will only lead to a person's conscience growing stagnant and malformed. There is also the temptation to renounce the responsibility that comes with freedom, to give up self-determination and let someone else make all the decisions. At the ecclesiastical level, there is the temptation—which

*Abuse of conscience occurs when the ecclesial mediation transgresses its limits, so that it gains control of and replaces it. For instance, it is perpetrated when representatives of the Church impose the will of God on the followers who have opened their conscience to them. In fact, when ecclesiastical mediation becomes absolute, it transgresses its limits and contradicts its aim and meaning. The leader no longer represents God, but supplants Him, and makes wrongful use of the name of the Lord (Ex 20:7). Thus, conscience loses its freedom to judge and the follower can no longer be alone with God in his or her conscience (p. 563).*

By invading the sacred place where an individual hears God and freely responds, the abuser presumes to speak on behalf of God and assumes the individual's freedom for themselves (Fernández, 2021). Therefore, the abuse of conscience, unlike other forms of abuse, actually undermines the individual's capacity to hear God and make judgements, and it can even prevent them from recognizing the abuse they are experiencing.

This abuse causes the victim to confuse the voice of God with the voice of their abuser. This provokes in the sufferer a “struggle between what their own conscience dictates and what is dictated by the representative of the Church who has invaded their conscience” which in turn causes “severe personal dissociation” (Fernández, 2021, p. 566).

An example of this internal dissociation, this confusion between the voice of God and the voice of an abuser, can be seen in the story of a young man who was trying to know if he ought to be a priest or if he ought to get married. Throughout his entire life, he had heard from his family, his parish, his pastors, the stories of saints, and even his religious education textbooks that if he really wanted to be holy, he had to become a priest. The priesthood was held up as the best vocation. However, this young man experienced years of existential distress because if God’s objective will was for him to be a priest, but he did not actually desire to be a priest, then he felt he could not trust his own desires. In fact, he felt he should be suspicious of his desires. Now, the damage done to his conscience was not from one individual, but from the Catholic culture he grew up in, but harm was done nonetheless.

To be clear, while abuse of conscience can be perpetuated with malicious intent, it can also happen whenever someone with ecclesial authority presumes to speak on behalf of God in such a way that they supplant God’s word instead of mediating it (Fernández, 2021). Some specific examples of abuse of conscience include ignoring the difference between

the internal and external forum, or between subjective conscience and culpability and the objective moral law, when giving someone spiritual guidance. It can also include telling someone that God is asking them to do something, telling them that a particular action will damn them to hell, or stating that the Church teaches a particular thing when there is not an actual written teaching on that matter. Abuse of conscience can also be supported by theological ideas such as the belief that human persons are so corrupted by sin that they cannot trust their own consciences, which causes human freedom to be viewed with suspicion and discourages anything less than blind obedience to authority (Fernández, 2021).

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One more example of abuse of conscience is from a married woman. She had been Catholic her entire life and strived to follow all of the Church’s teachings, in particular the Church’s moral teachings about sexuality. For years, the priests, apologists, and theologians who helped form her conscience taught a sexual moral code that went well beyond what was actually written in the Catechism or other papal texts.

However, these stringent moral rules were presented to her as if it were the Church's teaching. Even beyond that, she was taught that any violation of these rules was mortally sinful, that one infraction would cut her off from God, prevent her from receiving Communion, and that not confessing this very personal matter in the Sacrament of Reconciliation would damn her.

Like in the other example, the abuse here came from a Catholic culture more than from one abuser. But again, the damage was still severe. The internal dissonance caused by not being able to trust her own conscience, alongside the threat of hell if she did not follow the overly stringent moral code, provoked psychological distress and depression symptoms. The threat of separation from God prevented her from being able to break out of her cognitive dissonance. This experience was described as feeling like she was imprisoned by her own beliefs, beliefs she did not want and was not even sure were true.

### ***The Inherent Vulnerability of the Pastoral Relationship***

A key element of spiritual abuse is the inherent power imbalance, and therefore the inherent risk of abuse, in pastoral relationships (Fernández, 2022; Leimgruber, 2022). Fernández (2021), argues that vulnerability is a "necessary condition of discipleship" because there is always an element of someone letting their guard down before a person who is viewed as a spiritual master (p. 567). Fernández (2021) says:

*The disciple opens his or her conscience to a master who has an ecclesiastical support*

*and, in the face of sacred power, instinctive resistance gives way. Therefore, this kind of vulnerability is not to be seen as a deficiency of the disciple, but a necessary condition of discipleship, which always implies an asymmetrical relationship (p. 567).*

Because of this, it is inappropriate to strictly view vulnerability as something belonging to the individual being abused (Leimgruber, 2022).

Just as the pastoral relationship itself is intrinsically vulnerable, the experience of guilt is as well. The feeling of guilt includes the opening up of one's conscience, the recognition of having done something wrong, and the desire for things to be different. Guilt can motivate people to examine their consciences and make changes. It can also motivate someone to seek out a minister for counsel or go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In seeking counsel, a person is doubly vulnerable, both because of the pastoral relationship and because of their guilt. In the confessional, however, there is the added layer that the spiritual authority, the priest, has power over the other person's forgiveness and salvation. The radical vulnerability in these situations must be accounted for and protected; otherwise, people are not only susceptible to intentional abuse, but they are also extremely vulnerable to being harmed by pastors who are legalistic, lack compassion, or are simply not careful with their words and actions.

An example of spiritual abuse in the context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be seen in the story of a Catholic woman in her late twenties with four young children and two recent miscarriages.

She suffered from severe depression, but when she found out she was pregnant she stopped taking the medication necessary to manage her symptoms. While she was pregnant with her fourth child she made the decision to be sterilized after the child was born because the constant flux in hormones following three pregnancies within six months (two of them ending in miscarriage) left her in a persistent state of fear and anxiety about what a seventh pregnancy would do to her mental health, her marriage, and her already struggling relationship with her small children. Her decision to be sterilized was not made lightly.

Furthermore, due to her mental illness, it likely was not a decision made with full

freedom. She truly believed it was her only option. She avoided attending Mass for several months after she went through with this procedure, but eventually her heart was open to going to confession and practicing her faith again. However, in the confessional, her pastor refused to give her absolution because, in the course of the few minutes she was there, he reached the conclusion that she was not sufficiently sorry for her sin. While this priest was likely not acting with malice, his lack of compassion and sensitivity caused very real harm in that situation. His carelessness with the power he wielded in that confessional caused immediate and severe consequences for the woman's faith and her trust in the Church.

Safeguarding Behaviors	Dangerous Behaviors
Empowerment: Everyone in the community is empowered.	Blame: Individuals blame others for negative behaviors in the community.
Supervision: There is continued supervision of anyone with a leadership role in the community.	Accountability: Members of the community feel required to share personal details of their life against their will.
Support: The community supports individuals who have been harmed through control or manipulation.	Damage: Individuals use fear, shame, acceptance, and rejection to control or manipulate others.
Training: The community values and trains people to work as a team.	Inability: Individuals are unable to work with others, are unable to receive criticism, and get defensive when challenged.
Awareness: The community encourages everyone to be knowledgeable of scripture so that they can challenge others who use scripture to promote their own agendas.	Scripture: Scripture is used to promote personal agendas or desires.

Policies meant to protect religious communities from spiritual abuse ought to expand their view beyond just protecting vulnerable groups of people like children to also trying to make the whole environment safer for everyone. Based on research that was done in the U.K., Oakley & Kinmond (2014) proposed that religious communities ought to create guidelines based on behaviors that are potential risk factors for spiritual abuse along with corresponding healthy behaviors that can safeguard everyone in that community from potential abuse. These juxtaposing behaviors are presented in Table 2.

## **Consequences of Spiritual Abuse**

As everything discussed so far demonstrates, spiritual abuse is actual abuse and causes real harm (Marich, 2021). Spiritual abuse is a kind of trauma, and like all trauma, it can cause a host of negative symptoms (Marich, 2021). Like other forms of psychological abuse, spiritual abuse can cause as much or more harm to a person as physical abuse (O'Leary, 1999). Like other forms of trauma, spiritual abuse can overwhelm a person's normal coping mechanisms and have long-term negative effects on someone's brain and nervous system (Panchuk, 2020). Even if someone's trauma may not meet the full diagnostic criteria for PTSD, the effect of spiritual abuse can include PTSD symptoms like dissociative reactions, intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, hyperarousal, and hypervigilance (Marich, 2021; Panchuk, 2020). These symptoms can impact a person's quality of life and can lead to significant impairments. Further, places, rituals, and people that were once supportive to someone can become triggers of past traumatic experiences (Doyle, 2009).

Spiritual abuse also harms the spiritual dimension of an individual, including how they relate to others, how they relate to the Church, and how they relate to God (Fernández, 2022). Because of how spirituality is manipulated, and because of the ecclesial dimension of authority within the Catholic Church, spiritual abuse can cause an individual to believe that God and the Church condoned the abuse they suffered (Fernández, 2022). Spiritual abuse can distort a person's normal source of comfort and security into a source of harm. Depending on how much

someone who has been abused believes that the person or group that abused them represented God, the person may believe that it was God who abused them (Panchuk, 2018). The places, communities, and symbols that once brought them support can become triggers of pain and anxiety (Doyle, 2009). While religion and spirituality are widely understood to be positive for a person's mental health, religious and spiritual struggles can cause a host of negative mental health symptoms along with psychological distress (Brooks, 2020). Spiritual and religious struggles happen when a part of a person's beliefs or religious practices become a focal point for conflict and other negative thoughts and feelings (Exline et al., 2014). These struggles predict elevated psychological distress, depression, anxiety, PTSD symptoms, and suicidal ideation (Evans et al., 2018; Wilt et al., 2016).

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***Spiritual abuse can cause an individual to believe that God and the Church condoned the abuse they suffered.***

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The layers of consequences from spiritual abuse are illustrated in the story of a young woman who experienced ongoing spiritual abuse after a confrontation with her employer, who was also her pastor, led to her termination. For several weeks, the priest very publicly shared details and lies about the circumstances of her termination. As a result, she not only lost her employment and the related security of finances and health insurance, but also her church community and spiritual support system. This woman tried to do

everything “right” to get herself through the difficult situation, including continuing to attend Mass at a different parish and going to twice-weekly therapy. However, the spiritual abuse caused major blows to her psychological and spiritual health.

There were two levels to her trauma: the first was the spiritual abuse by the priest, and the second was the lack of intervention by Church authorities. That second aspect made the Church at large

to Mass. Whenever she tried to pray, she would often end up ruminating about her experiences and feel deep emotional distress.

Catholicism and her relationship with God had been central to this woman’s identity for her whole life, so when it was no longer a safe space for her, her sense of self was destabilized. The very spaces and habits that had brought her peace and comfort for years now threatened her internal sense of safety.

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seem unsafe. It made her feel that any priest anywhere in her diocese could treat her that way, and that the bishop would not take action to protect her. This provoked severe anxiety during Mass in the form of spiraling thoughts, racing heart, tension, and hyper-vigilance. After several months of repeated negative experiences at Mass, she began to fear that forcing herself to go to Mass in the short-term would cause her to stop going in the long run. Additionally, because she had always heard that the Catholic Church was established by God and is the Bride of Christ, the fact that those in “God’s institution” had perpetrated the abuse and allowed it to continue made this woman feel leery of God. Even though she knew God had not committed the abuse, God was so intimately tied up in Catholicism for her that she felt the same anxiety about God as she did about going

### ***Preventing Spiritual Abuse***

In the Catholic Church, it can be difficult or impossible for an individual to effect change on institutional structures like Canon Law or diocesan policies. However, anyone in the Church can help change the Catholic culture that underpins the institutional structures. By knowing what spiritual abuse, abusive spiritual leadership, and toxic spiritual communities look like, anyone can, in whatever capacity God is calling them, work to report abusive behavior, advocate for victims of abuse, and intentionally demonstrate and demand healthy spiritual relationships grounded in respect and freedom of conscience.

Further, anyone in the Church who is faced with someone seeking spiritual counsel, direction, or encouragement is in

a position to change Catholic culture. By respecting the freedom and dignity of the people they are accompanying or counseling, anyone can begin inoculating their community against abuse by modeling what healthy spiritual relationships look like.

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***"Healthy pastoral relationships ought to help others form and trust their consciences, not replace them."***

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Essential to this effort is recognizing the inherent vulnerability and power imbalances that exist within a pastoral relationship. Once someone knows the power that they have in a situation, they can use that power in a responsible way to prevent harm and respect the dignity of others. Healthy pastoral relationships ought to help others form and trust their consciences, not replace them. Rather than presuming to speak for God, they should empower others by encouraging them to listen to God's voice in their conscience. Good religious instruction proposes the truths of God's revelation and invites others to respond as they are, welcoming questions and giving others the space to wrestle and ponder these things in their hearts. In their new Directory for Catechesis, the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization (2020) instructed catechists on the importance of respecting the freedom of others. While this instruction is specifically meant for catechists, it can apply to any pastoral relationship in the Church. The Directory for Catechesis states:

*The catechist, on account of his service, holds a position relative to the people he*

*accompanies in the faith and is perceived by them as a point of reference, who exercises a certain form of authority. It therefore becomes necessary that this role be lived out with the most absolute respect for the conscience and person of the other, avoiding every kind of abuse, whether of power, of conscience, financial, or sexual. Catechists, in their programs of formation and through an honest dialogue with their spiritual guides, should be helped to identify the correct ways of living out their authority solely as service of their brothers. Moreover, in order not to betray the trust of the persons assigned to them, they should be able to distinguish between the external forum and the internal forum and should learn to have great respect for the sacred freedom of the other, without violating or manipulating this in any way (Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization, 2020, para. 142).*

### ***Responding to Spiritual Abuse***

Even without being mental health professionals, clergy, lay ministers, and those who offer spiritual counsel to others are in a key position to help those who have been spiritually abused by helping them recognize and acknowledge their experiences (Childers, 2012). However, it is essential to listen without getting defensive about the Church or about the particular priest or minister who the other person has said abused them. Non-judgemental and empathetic listening is especially important in this work. By validating the harm that someone else has experienced, ministers can help begin the healing process even before a person sees a counselor (Childers, 2012; Marich, 2021). Also, because spiritual abuse can take away the comfort and security that someone had previously found from their

spiritual beliefs and practices, ministers are in an ideal position to respond to them and “witness that religion has a healthier, more vibrant and life giving component than the abusive situation the individual has experienced (Childers, 2012, p. 41). However, because of intense trauma or other mental health symptoms, those who offer ministry or spiritual counsel need to know the boundaries of their competency and be ready to refer individuals to mental health professionals (Childers, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

Spiritual abuse is real abuse and can cause real harm. While spiritual abuse is possible in any faith tradition—and is unfortunately not an uncommon experience across denominations—it is not widely understood or something that most individuals are aware of. It can cause significant psychological distress and even impairment while also leaving the religious dimension of a person in shambles. Spiritual abuse can damage a person’s capacity to relate to God, drive them away from the Church, and inoculate their heart against the truth and goodness of the Gospel. The abuse of conscience can cause internal dissociation in which the individual feels imprisoned by their own beliefs. In the Catholic Church, abusers can exploit the hierarchical structures of the institution to gain power over others and avoid accountability. Further, different aspects of Catholic culture—like clericalism, overvaluing obedience to authority, and being suspicious of the role of the individual’s conscience—can create environments that attract abusers and disempower victims.

However, healthy Catholic communities and cultures can not only help people heal after they have been spiritually abused, but also prevent abuse from happening in the first place. Awareness of spiritual abuse and the power imbalances inherent in pastoral relationships can help protect the Church against abusers. Further, the more that people are able to recognize toxic and narcissistic traits in spiritual leaders, the more those leaders can be held accountable and prevented from damaging the people in their care.

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***Like Moses before the burning bush, when we encounter another and offer them spiritual counsel or accompaniment, we are standing on holy ground and must approach their conscience with the utmost reverence and respect.***

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I hope this article encourages ministers to tread softly in their pastoral work and contributes to creating healthier faith communities. Like Moses before the burning bush, when we encounter another and offer them spiritual counsel or accompaniment, we are standing on holy ground and must approach their conscience with the utmost reverence and respect. May Jesus Christ free his Church—all of us—from the desire to control others so that we are able to love all our brothers and sisters without any ulterior agenda.



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