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SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Beth R. Crisp

IN RECENT YEARS, BOTH CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT CHURCHES in Australia, the US and elsewhere have found themselves embroiled in allegations of sexual abuse—allegations which have often been substantiated. Reports in the secular and the religious press of these allegations have been so numerous as to have become a constant blur on the horizon. We have heard much about investigations, about the tragedies affecting individuals and communities, about financial settlements, and about clergy being ousted from pastoral roles. But after the public scandals have died down, the pain for many lives on.

It is often assumed that sexual abuse almost inevitably leads a person to leave the Church and abandon belief in God, whether or not the context in which the abuse occurred was a religious one. Certainly, feeling abandoned by God is a common reaction among survivors of such abuse, and abuse has indeed contributed to some people's leaving the Church or having less involvement in organized religion.¹

But although, understandably, survivors of sexual abuse often opt to leave the Church, the experience of abuse may also lead to greater religious involvement.² Indeed, some have conjectured that a celibate religious life may be appealing to women with an experience of sexual abuse in childhood.³ Even without entering religious life, however, women who have been physically, emotionally and/or sexually abused

¹ See for example: Diana M. Elliott, 'The Impact of Christian Faith on the Prevalence and Sequelae of Sexual Abuse', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 9 (1994), 95-108; David Finkelhor, Gerald T. Hotaling, I. A. Lewis and Christine Smith, 'Sexual Abuse and its Relationship to Later Sexual Satisfaction, Marital Status, Religion and Attitudes', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 4 (1989), 379-399; T. A. Hall, 'Spiritual Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Adult Christian Women', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 25 (1995), 129-134; Donna Kane, Sharon E. Cheston and Joanne Greer, 'Perceptions of God by Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: An Exploratory Study in an Underresearched Area', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 21 (1993), 228-237.

² See Elliott, 'The Impact of Christian Faith'.

³ John T. Chibnall, Ann Wolf and Paul N. Drucko, 'A National Study of the Sexual Trauma Experiences of Catholic Nuns', *Review of Religious Research*, 40 (1998), 142-167.

by men have for centuries been seeking to live out holy lives and looking to spiritual directors to advise them.⁴

The focus of this article is on people who have sought to maintain their faith even after experiences of abuse, and to develop a spirituality which can accommodate such experiences. While there is now a growing literature which explores how survivors of sexual abuse experience liturgy⁵ and interpret scripture,⁶ explicit accounts of 'daring to do theology from a sexually abused body'⁷ are surprisingly rare, especially given that sexual abuse is an experience shared by many women and by some men.⁸ Some survivors of abuse do theology through explorations of their faith in prayer with the encouragement and support of a spiritual director, despite an absence of references to sexual abuse in much of the standard literature on spiritual direction.⁹

A Process of Exploration

Like too many people I know, I am a survivor of sexual abuse. The abuse happened a long time ago; I got on with my life; and for well over a decade and a half I tried to minimise, if not ignore, the impact that it had had on me. The intervening years were busy, as I trained to be a social worker, completed a PhD, and established myself in an academic career, as well as doing other things. But, eventually, a seemingly unrelated crisis made me confront the reality of the abuse that I had experienced so many years before.

⁴ Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Nancy Nienhuis, 'Battered Women and the Construction of Sanctity', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 17 (2001), 33-61.

⁵ See for example: Jim Cotter, 'You Can't Be Serious', *Theology and Sexuality*, 13 (2000), 55-61; Janet Fife, 'Sexual Abuse and the Spirituality of the Christian Survivor', *Contact*, 130 (1999), 20-26; Jennifer M. Philips, 'The Prayer of the Eucharistic Community and the Abuse Survivor', *Sewanee Theological Review*, 40 (1996), 78-84.

⁶ Beth R. Crisp, 'Reading Scripture from a Hermeneutic of Rape', *Theology and Sexuality*, 14 (2001), 23-42.

⁷ Jane M. Grovijahn, 'Theology as an Irruption into Embodiment: Our Need for God', *Theology and Sexuality*, 9 (1998), 29-35, here 29.

⁸ Although estimates vary considerably, some researchers have estimated that approximately forty per cent of females have some experience of sexual abuse over their lifetime. See Chibnall and others, 'A National Study'.

⁹ Interestingly, almost two decades ago, it was recognised that candidates for religious life who revealed a history of sexual abuse would pose a challenge for formation directors, but the implications of sexual abuse for spiritual direction in other contexts has received little attention. See John Allan Loftus, 'Victims of Abuse as Candidates', *Review for Religious*, 45 (1986), 725-738.

A while later, I decided that I wanted to learn more about Ignatian spirituality. I mentioned this to a Jesuit scholar and friend, who suggested that it was something I couldn't just read about, and that I should find myself a spiritual director. Some years on, and despite moving from Melbourne to Glasgow, I am continuing my explorations, and I have been involved with a number of directors, either on an ongoing basis or for short periods on retreat.

Although my reasons for seeking spiritual direction came from my desire to develop my spirituality, and I did not see it as a substitute for some form of therapy, I have on many occasions found myself discussing with directors the impact of sexual abuse on my spiritual explorations. Perhaps this is to be expected if we do not limit our experience of God to our intellectual faculties, but allow ourselves to experience God in all things, including our bodies:

The spirituality of embodiment has to do with how we experience the vitality of God's spirit within us and within the creation in all that we do in Christian life A spirituality of embodiment stresses an attentiveness to, but not a romanticisation of, the body. The body can hurt and be hurt, it can curtail our activities and limit our thought and even our prayers; it forms our world.¹⁰

If the body can be experienced as a source of limitation, a deepening spirituality which is inclusive of bodily experiences may also stimulate growth. One might even go further and agree with Winnie Tomm, who has suggested that spirituality 'is ensouled in embodied consciousness and facilitates transformation of both sensing and reflecting'.¹¹

While I have been grateful to spiritual directors who have encouraged me to make connections between my religious experience and the experience of having my body violated, I have also been conscious that, as a result of my professional training, of my personal experiences and of my interest in sexual abuse, I have often known far more about the impacts of abuse than my spiritual directors have. As a consequence, the origins of this paper lie in my own attempts to make sense of the issues which have arisen for me as a survivor of sexual abuse who has sought spiritual direction. However, this is not an

¹⁰ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 68.

¹¹ Winnie Tomm, 'Embodied Spiritual Consciousness: Beyond Psychology', *Feminist Theology*, 30 (2002), 8-29, here 9.

autobiographical paper, and while some of the discussion has emerged from my personal experience of spiritual direction, other issues are drawn from reading, from the many conversations I have had with survivors of sexual abuse, and from professionals whose work involves dealing with the impact of sexual abuse.

Entering into the Process of Spiritual Direction

**Sexual abuse
involves a
violation
of trust**

Some people have experienced sexual abuse within the setting of spiritual direction itself; survivors have reported such abuse both within religious communities¹² and in other settings.¹³ Yet, even if neither the reality nor the fear of a repetition is present, survivors of abuse may perceive entering into a relationship with a spiritual director as a surrender of control, and this may be a problem for them.¹⁴ Experiences of sexual abuse invariably involve a violation of trust and of the boundaries of intimacy. Hence, some survivors of abuse may have difficulties with spiritual direction, since it involves intimate conversations in which they must entrust another person with insights into the workings of their soul. It may be even more difficult for them to allow someone else to 'direct', if this is perceived as submission to another person, for they will perceive such a concept as objectionable in itself.¹⁵

Although there are some who would dispute such an idea, many survivors of sexual abuse suffer symptoms which may be consistent with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whether or not there has been a formal diagnosis. Disordered thoughts are quite normal among sufferers of PTSD, and this may include a distrust of one's own soul and emotions. It is not uncommon for survivors of sexual abuse to report believing that their soul has been destroyed or damaged.¹⁶ Hence, some survivors may need reassurance that the seemingly strange places to which their explorations of prayer may have taken them are actually very normal. Furthermore, they may fear that what is

¹² Chibnall and others, 'A National Study'.

¹³ Margaret Kennedy, 'Sexual Abuse of Women by Priests and Ministers to whom they Go for Pastoral Care and Support', *Feminist Theology*, 11 (2003), 226-235.

¹⁴ Marilyn A. Ganje-Fling and Patricia McCarthy, 'Impact of Sexual Abuse on Client Spiritual Development: Counselling Implications', *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 74 (1996), 253-258.

¹⁵ Cotter, 'You Can't Be Serious', 55.

¹⁶ Ganje-Fling and McCarthy, 'Impact of Sexual Abuse', 255.

discussed with a spiritual director could be construed as a sign of madness or mental instability. Such fears could result in self-censorship, so that issues which are important to the directee, but considered risky by them, are not revealed to the director.

Another effect of PTSD for some survivors is a loss of the ability to think quickly. Hence, they may feel unable to give immediate answers to the challenging and probing questions asked by an insightful spiritual director. Feeling under pressure to respond, they may give answers which leave the director with an impression that they are being flippant and not taking the process of spiritual direction seriously. But what may seem to be resistance to profound engagement may actually be an attempt to save face, by not revealing an inability to think both quickly and deeply. As directees may not have the confidence to request that they take important questions 'on notice', an effective director may well be one who does not insist on instant answers, and invites the directee to think through an issue over the following days or weeks.

Other not uncommon issues for survivors of sexual abuse are low self-esteem and low self-confidence, which may manifest themselves in relationships both with God and with other human beings, including spiritual directors. In the context of spiritual direction these issues could appear in a number of ways: the directee may mistakenly believe that they are not capable of engaging in the process; they may wonder why a director would make time for them on a regular basis; or they may feel unable to disagree with the suggestions of a director. Hence, issues of abuse may have an impact, not only on entering into the process of spiritual direction, but on continuing the process, whether or not a directee ever discloses their history of abuse.

A Space to Speak

Survivors may live for years or even decades without disclosing the experience to anyone, and yet that does not make the experience any less real. Threats from the perpetrator of death, should the victim ever disclose sexual abuse, are not uncommon; moreover, disclosing one's status as a survivor may provoke a far from positive response, and may even result in further victimisation. Furthermore, many survivors of



Crucifixion, Shoalhaven, by Arthur Boyd

sexual abuse have encountered Church institutions which want to pretend that sexual abuse does not happen within the confines of Christianity or to committed Christians. Such attitudes may also have contributed to the silencing of individuals, and to their having become unable to speak about the impact of sexual abuse on their religious experience,¹⁷ even though that impact may have been profound.¹⁸

When survivors of sexual abuse perceive themselves to be in a safe space, they may begin to discuss, perhaps tentatively, the effects of abuse on their spirituality. By not flinching (at least outwardly) or trying to change the subject, an effective spiritual director may provide

¹⁷ Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 56.

¹⁸ Marie F. Fortune, 'The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective', in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, edited by Joanne C. Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

a much needed and healing space in which the survivor can overcome their having been silenced. 'Rape by the pen is not the same as rape by the penis', as Cheryl Exum has written.¹⁹ But the process of speaking about sexual abuse can nevertheless be highly distressing, and it is essential that survivors do not find themselves pressed to disclose more than they believe is necessary or more than they feel comfortable revealing. Hence, while it may be important to ascertain whether a directee who has disclosed abuse has adequate sources of support, labouring the point could be counterproductive.

For many survivors, the feeling that one has been heard and accepted is crucial:

As each experience is individual each person needs to be heard at the heart of their individuality and pain. They need to be enabled to express 'voices of fear and threat' within the context of a caring relationship. Thus it is important that when survivors turn to the church for help they are met where they are, and not with a prescribed formula²⁰

Ignatius wrote of the need for openness between directors and directees (Exx 17), and the findings of a study in the USA provide further reasons for allowing survivors of abuse to discuss their experiences within the context of faith. This research found that religious women who have grappled with the experience of sexual abuse and sought to take control of their lives show significantly higher levels of spiritual maturity than those who have exhibited feelings of fatalism or hopelessness.²² Consequently, preventing women from speaking about their experiences of sexual abuse in spiritual direction may be counterproductive for spiritual growth.

¹⁹ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1993), 170.

²⁰ Louise Carr, 'Feminist Theological Approaches to (the) Sexual Abuse of Children', *Feminist Theology*, 12 (1996), 21-42, here 34.

²² Caroline E. Smith, Duane F. Reinert, Maryanne Horne, Joanne M. Greer and Robert Wicks, 'Childhood Abuse and Spiritual Development among Women Religious', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 34 (1995), 127-133.

Relating to God

The spiritual effects of sexual abuse vary; one may have difficulties with prayer and with imagining God as father; one may feel that one's relationship with God has been disrupted; one may even think of leaving the Church.²³ Research has found that, when compared with a control group who report no sexual abuse, women survivors are more likely to feel or to have felt that God was distant from them at some stage in their lives, more likely to feel anger towards God, and more likely to feel that God disapproved of them.²⁴ Another study has found

**A history
of sexual abuse
is no reason not
to seek spiritual
direction**

that Mormon women who have been sexually abused are significantly more likely to have a concept of God as wrathful and distant, and are less likely to perceive God as kind or loving.²⁵ Similarly, Catholic women who have been abused have reported significantly more problems in relating to God than their non-abused counterparts. In particular, they may feel less sure of God as loving, or less sure that God is able to respond to their prayers.²⁶ Furthermore, sexually abused women find it harder to accept God's grace and love.²⁷

It has been suggested that sexually abused women find it more difficult than others to discern the will of God, and that discernment for them becomes particularly problematic.²⁸ There may well be a challenge here for some directors. Nevertheless, a history of sexual abuse is not a sufficient reason for excluding survivors from the opportunity to seek spiritual direction. Within the Ignatian tradition use of the imagination is one way of furthering our understanding both of God and of ourselves, and a history of sexual abuse does not prevent one from using one's imagination and placing oneself in biblical scenes.²⁹ Some survivors of sexual abuse find that they can identify

²³ Chibnall and others, 'A National Study'.

²⁴ Kane and others, 'Perceptions of God'.

²⁵ Ann F. Pritt, 'Spiritual Correlates of Reported Sexual Abuse Among Mormon Women', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37 (1998), 273-285.

²⁶ Stephen J. Rossetti, 'The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Attitudes Toward God and the Catholic Church', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19 (1995), 1469-1481.

²⁷ Hall, 'Spiritual Effects'.

²⁸ Hall, 'Spiritual Effects'.

²⁹ R. Ruard Ganzehoort, 'Religion in Rewriting the Story: Case Study of a Sexually Abused Man', *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11 (2001), 45-62.

with the various survivors whose stories are recorded in biblical texts.³⁰ Others have likened their experience of abuse to that of crucifixion; the painful image of Jesus on the cross is one with which they can identify personally.³¹ Furthermore, Jesus' crucifixion was followed by resurrection, and this continues to be a beacon of hope for survivors of sexual abuse.³²

Characteristics of the Director

Although there may be particular issues which are more prevalent among survivors of sexual abuse, I do not propose that spiritual directors need to be experts on sexual abuse. Nevertheless, since it is estimated that a considerable minority of the adult population in western countries have experienced one or more incidents of abuse, directors should expect that some directees will be survivors, irrespective of whether they disclose this. Furthermore, directors should expect that experiences of abuse might emerge when they relate to survivors, and they should be sufficiently mature not to stifle dialogue in which directees are seeking to create links between their lived experience and their understanding of God. As David L. Fleming notes in his contemporary reading of the *Spiritual Exercises*:

When we find ourselves in a time of temptation or desolation, the director is meant to be a kind listener and a gentle support. The director should help to expose the ways in which the powers of evil attempt to block our ability to respond to God. The director reminds us that God continues to be at hand even at such times with the necessary grace of strength and light.³⁴

³⁰ See for example Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

³¹ Susan Thistlewaite, *Sex, Race and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990).

³² Thistlewaite, *Sex, Race and God*.

³⁴ David L. Fleming, *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), modern reading of Exx 7.

³⁷ Philips, 'The Prayer of the Eucharistic Community'.

This does not, however, mean that there will not be times when a discerning director should encourage a survivor to seek some specialist counselling in order to resolve other issues.

I have sometimes heard the suggestion that it would be preferable for women who are survivors of sexual abuse to have a spiritual director of the same gender. One reason for this is the underlying assumption that another woman is more likely to understand the experience of sexual abuse. Another is the assumption that a woman who has been sexually assaulted by a male might feel more comfortable confiding in another woman than in a man. But such assumptions ignore the fact that many women have had no direct experience of sexual abuse, and some men have. More importantly, rigid formulas as to where survivors should seek spiritual direction, however well-intentioned they are, may recall the experience of loss of control or choice arising from the abuse itself.

Experiences of sexual abuse, even though they may have been highly significant in the life of a survivor, are just one of many factors which have contributed to their development. For some, compatibility or other factors may be far more important when seeking spiritual direction than whether the director has a good understanding of sexual abuse and its potential impact on spiritual development. Hence, I would argue that for survivors of sexual abuse, the process of finding an appropriate spiritual director should be little different from how it is for anyone else. Finding a good match may in practice be a matter of idiosyncrasy, but it will always involve respect, some points of connection, and the potential for the director's relationship with God to grow as a result of their encounters with the director.

Beyond Stereotypes

In this paper I have begun to explore some of the ways in which an experience of sexual abuse can impact on the process of spiritual direction, especially for female survivors. Many of the issues which have been raised may also apply to male survivors of sexual abuse, but I have far less knowledge of the issues for male survivors, and I do not want to make claims which I cannot verify.

Sexual abuse is an issue which churches cannot ignore without compromising the spiritual development of survivors and others affected by it. In particular, spiritual directors need to be aware that

abuse may be an issue for some directees, even if no explicit disclosure is forthcoming. Yet while directors must remain aware of this possibility, it is crucial that they look beyond stereotypes to see the essence of each person whom they are directing. Survivors are not all the same, and what is an issue for some will not be for others.³⁷ The challenge for all of us is to continue to find ways to support survivors of sexual abuse as they seek to deepen their relationship with God. It is hoped that this paper will encourage others to share their insights so that we may all learn more about this issue, which has received too little public recognition.

This article is written with thanks to many people in Melbourne, Glasgow and elsewhere, who, knowingly or unknowingly, have been part of the journey it expresses.

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