


## Article

# Victims Are Not Guilty! Spiritual Abuse and Ecclesiastical Responsibility

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to show that victims of spiritual abuse are not guilty of what they have undergone and that, in the Catholic setting, the Church has an institutional responsibility for it. With this objective, after the Introduction (1), the paper analyses the definition of spiritual abuse (2); tackles several topics stemming from the analysis of definitions, such as the nature of spiritual power and its effects (3), the issue of vulnerability (4), the institutional dimension of spiritual abuse in the Catholic setting (5), and the disputed topic of intentionality (6). The article provides a conclusion that aims to summarize the results of the analysis (7).

**Keywords:** spiritual abuse; abuse of conscience; vulnerability; institutional responsibility

## 1. Introduction

Abuse of conscience, or spiritual abuse, can occur in any religion or faith-based community; however, it takes on different features, dynamics, and strategies depending on the specific institutional settings in which it occurs; therefore, although it is not a phenomenon exclusive to Christianity, it is worth studying in the Christian context. In the Catholic Church, spiritual abuse is shaped by certain specific institutional elements; namely, religious orders, the universal magisterium, canon law, vows of obedience, papal infallibility, and the efficacy of sacraments, among others; therefore, spiritual abuse in the Catholic context deserves a dedicated analysis.

Abuse of conscience or spiritual abuse is a complex phenomenon, and common sense is not enough to understand it. People who hear about incidents involving spiritual abuse through the media tend to figure out how this could happen and attempt to guess the causes of this destructive phenomenon. Moreover, Christians who have positive experiences in the Church find it difficult to understand and even accept that these things could actually happen. Consequently, people imagine that the victims were naïve, that they should not have trusted their spiritual adviser, that they were too confident, that they chose the wrong person, or that they belonged to the wrong community. ‘People imagine that victims have tacitly consented or were complicit, consciously or unconsciously, in the harm they have suffered’ (Poujol 2015, p. 25). Hence, they think: ‘I would not have let myself be deceived in such a way’ or ‘This will not happen in my Christian community’. In addition, some people envision that victims have a particular ‘psychological profile’, and they suppose that the victims allowed themselves to be abused because they were immature or had some affective deficiency; they were looking for someone who would direct their lives for fear of making decisions or for an unbalanced desire for certainty. The idea behind all these thoughts is that some personal deficiencies made them vulnerable to abuse.

This phenomenon corresponds to what the Ryan’s classic study calls ‘Blaming the Victim’ (Ryan 1976). According to this theory, victims produce a discomforting dissonance because they threaten the belief that the world is fundamentally fair and rational; hence, victim-blaming is a psychological defense to reduce this dissonance (Harber et al. 2015). Accordingly, in an ecclesiastical context, victims are blamed because they threaten the holiness of the Church. If they are guilty, the Church is safe.



**Citation:** Fernández, Samuel. 2022. Victims Are Not Guilty! Spiritual Abuse and Ecclesiastical Responsibility. *Religions* 13: 427. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050427>

Academic Editors: Ute Leimgruber, Doris Reisinger and Antonio Muñoz-García

Received: 10 March 2022

Accepted: 6 May 2022

Published: 9 May 2022

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The tendency to blame victims finds support in some civil and ecclesial documents and protocols that speak about the protection of children and ‘vulnerable adults’. Again, at first glance, this expression supports the presumption that spiritual abuse happens to victims because they are vulnerable. Consequently, people who are not considered ‘vulnerable adults’ seem to be safe. These ideas ‘unjustly place the blame on those who have suffered abuse’ (Chartier-Siben 2021a). Thus, paradoxically, these tenets suggest that victims of spiritual abuse are somehow guilty of what they have suffered.

However, these widespread ideas that have no scientific support must be rejected. Therefore, the aim of this article is to show that victims of spiritual abuse are not guilty of what they have undergone and that, in the Catholic setting, the Church has an institutional responsibility for it. With this objective, after the Introduction (1), the paper analyses the definition of spiritual abuse (2); tackles several topics stemming from the analysis of definitions, such as the nature of spiritual power (3), the issue of vulnerability (4), the institutional dimension of spiritual abuse in the Catholic setting (5), and the topic of intentionality (6). The article provides a conclusion that aims to summarize the results of the analysis (7).

## 2. How Is Spiritual Abuse Defined?

The first problem related to the definition of this phenomenon is its very name. The more common moniker for this phenomenon is ‘spiritual abuse’, but some authors speak about ‘abuse of spiritual power’ or ‘religious abuse’, whereas others use the expression ‘abuse of conscience’, especially in Catholic settings. Do these expressions refer to the same phenomenon or does each of them indicate a slightly different but overlapped subject? In my view, ‘spiritual abuse’, ‘abuse of spiritual power’ and ‘religious abuse’ are almost synonymous, whereas ‘abuse of conscience’ is a slightly more specific kind of spiritual abuse that harms the conscience of the believer (Fernández 2021). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, the differences between these kinds of abuse are not relevant; therefore, I use ‘spiritual abuse’ because it is the broader and more frequently utilized expression.

The second problem is that of the definition itself. How is spiritual abuse defined? What are its essential features? (Oakley and Kinmond 2013). The pioneering book on this subject is that of Johnson and VanVonderen entitled *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Johnson and VanVonderen 1991). In it, the authors stated: ‘Spiritual abuse is the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment’ (Johnson and VanVonderen 1991, p. 20). In addition, the same authors provided a description: ‘Spiritual abuse can occur when a leader uses his or her spiritual position to control or dominate another person. It often involves overriding the feelings and opinions of another, without regard to what will result in the other person’s state of living, emotions or spiritual well-being’ (Johnson and VanVonderen 1991, pp. 20–21). These preliminary definitions are generic and have prompted further reflection. A couple of years later, another author offered the following definition: ‘Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds’ (Blue 1993, p. 12). These definitions focus on three elements: the misuse of spiritual authority, the act of taking advantage of a follower, and the harm that it brings to the victim. A short book published in 1994 described it as follows: ‘By spiritual abuse, I mean that I will deny their spiritual freedom by telling them there is only one way to God’ (Linn et al. 1994, p. 12). Although this definition is quite generic, it highlights a central topic: the loss of freedom.

An academic book that deals with the relationship between psychology and spirituality provided the following definition: ‘Spiritual abuse is misuse of power in a spiritual context’ (Wehr 2000, p. 20). Accordingly, spiritual abuse would be a type of abuse of power that takes place in a spiritual context. The same aspect is highlighted by a paper that affirms that spiritual abuse occurs when people use ‘their power within a framework of spiritual

belief to practice and satisfy their needs at the expense of others' (Hall 2003, p. 33, quoted in: Oakley and Kinmond 2013, p. 30). Thus, spiritual abuse revolves around power.

Alongside the issue of power in a religious context, another important element is underscored: abusers seek their own benefit. Another article defined spiritual abuse as 'A misuse of power in a spiritual context, whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership' (Ward 2011, p. 901). Again, the misuse of spiritual power and the damage that it provokes are emphasized. The short book *Spiritual Abuse: Unspoken Crisis* offered a functional definition: 'Spiritual abuse is when a Christian leader causes injury to others by acting in a self-centered manner in order to benefit themselves' (Nelson 2015). These words focus on the harm that befalls the victim and the perpetrator's intentionality. According to Keller, one type of 'religious abuse occurs when abusers use religion to justify their actions' (Keller 2016, p. 74). Although it is not explicit, the author suggests that abusers use religion for their own benefit. A similar description was given by the book *Broken Trust*: 'Spiritual abuse happens when people use God, or their supposed relationship with God, to control behavior for their benefit' (Diederich 2017, p. 36). This definition revolves around spiritual authority, the limitation of freedom, and the abusers' benefit. An academic article in the field of counselling adopted the following definition: 'the act of an individual in a position of religious leadership/authority to gain power and control over individuals or collective groups' (Cashwell and Swindle 2018, p. 183; Gubi and Jacobs 2009). Another work stated: 'Abuses of spiritual power are psychological abuses performed in a way far from being anodyne: "God" is used as the lever to put pressure on people's conscience in order to subjugate them, or even reduce them to a real state of slavery' (De Dinechin and Léger 2019, p. 19). This description has three elements: spiritual power, the abuser's intention, and the victim's loss of freedom. Moreover, another author stated: 'Spiritual abuse involves using the sacred to harm or deceive the soul of another' (Langberg 2020, p. 127). An important step forward is the work of Lisa Oakley and her colleagues. After extensive research conducted in 2017, in the UK, involving different Christian denominations, she proposed a new definition based on empirical evidence:

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior 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 and Humphrey 2019, p. 31)

This definition includes many aspects of the definitions mentioned in previous works and is based on the results of scientific research. In addition, it incorporates a description of spiritual abuse and its consequences, thus providing elements to help recognize it.

In summary, three features of spiritual abuse are highly apparent in these definitions: the misuse of spiritual power, the harm that it causes to the victims, and a benefit that the abusers seek for themselves. The first and the most frequent characteristic is the misuse of spiritual power, which is expressed in different terms by the authors; therefore, spiritual abuse revolves around the misuse of spiritual power. The second characteristic mentioned by most definitions is the harm that spiritual abuse causes to the victims. This damage involves the spiritual or religious dimension of the person: 'It changes their experience of "self", their understanding of who they are as a person, their relationship with others—and often with God, their ability to trust and even their sense of ontological security' (Oakley and Kinmond 2013, p. 89). What are the consequences of spiritual abuse? 'Although the impact of religious abuse is like other types of mental, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, the element of the sacred is a unique component' (Cashwell and Swindle 2018, p. 184). Thus, on the one hand, spiritual abuse harms people, similarly to other types of abuse, and on the other hand, the fact that spiritual abuse involves the name of God, means that it

hurts people on their religious level. According to the literature, the effects of spiritual abuse can be classified into five categories: (a) loss of freedom—a real state of slavery, (b) distortion of the image of God, (c) undermining the systems of meaning-making, (d) the impact on the ability to trust in others and oneself, (e) and the construct of depression (Poujol 2015; De Dinechin and Léger 2019; Johnston 2021). There is a third feature that is present in some definitions, namely, that of intentionality. A number of authors stated that perpetrators commit spiritual abuse while seeking to benefit themselves, and therefore, intentionality is presented as a critical feature of spiritual abuse.

It is worth noting that none of these definitions—at least explicitly—mention the concrete institutional setting of spiritual abuse—only the context of faith is pointed out. One article presented spiritual abuse as a form of betrayal trauma that has an institutional character (Cashwell and Swindle 2018; Freyd 2008). How is this absence explained? Perhaps, since these authors did not focus on a particular Christian denomination, they did not analyze the specific institutional setting that fosters spiritual abuse; therefore, from these reflections emerge four topics that delineate the structure of the following pages: the nature of spiritual power or authority, the topic of vulnerability, the institutional dimension of spiritual abuse in the Catholic setting and the issue of intentionality.

### 3. Spiritual Power: Its Nature and Effects

As previously stated, the studied definitions indicate in different words that spiritual abuse is committed by virtue of spiritual power: ‘spiritual authority’, ‘power in a spiritual context’, ‘power in the context of a spiritual belief’, ‘divine position’, and others. Moreover, expressions such as the ‘use of religion’, the ‘use of God’, or ‘a supposed relationship with God’ express the same concept; therefore, spiritual abuse is a type of abuse of power and consists of the perverse use of asymmetry of spiritual power (Murillo 2020). On the one hand, this means that it is not the power that hurts, but its perverse use. Abuse is not a consequence of power but its misuse; the problem is not the asymmetry but its perverse use. On the other hand, the misuse of spiritual power touches on the religious dimension of human beings. Thus, it is a specific kind of abuse. In fact, it differs from other types of abuse because the victim seems to experience that ‘God is behind or in agreement with the damaging behavior’ (Oakley and Humphrey 2019, p. 58). For example, abuse in the film industry, sports, and Churches have important common characteristics, but they are not the same kind of abuse in different contexts. Abuse in Hollywood and in the Olympic Games have the same essential features, although they take place in different settings. By contrast, when abuse is perpetrated in the name and by virtue of a spiritual authority, it holds victims from within and damages their spiritual dimension. That is why it demands a definition in its own right (Oakley and Humphrey 2019). This distinction does not claim that one kind of abuse is more serious than another. It is not fair to measure and compare abuse. My contention is that the misuse of spiritual power touches on the religious realm of human beings and provokes a particular type of harm. In this type of abuse, ‘the abuser acts in the name of an absolute principle, which the mistreated person recognises as absolute’ (Berceville 2019), and ‘God is used as the lever to put pressure on people’s conscience’ (De Dinechin and Léger 2019, p. 19). A Twitter dialogue illustrates this difference well. Lauren posted a tweet about *gaslighting* in the Church. Someone replied that manipulation is everywhere, not only in the Christian context, and genuinely asked whether there is a difference between the toxic behavior in the Church and that in family, work and other contexts. Lauren answered: ‘Gaslighting is damaging enough. However, when they connect their gaslighting to your connection to God, claim to speak for Him, question your eternal destinations, making you question it yourself, the damage is incalculable’ (@laurchastain22: 21 February 2022). Emotional manipulation is devastating, but when an alleged divine authority is involved, it hurts people at their religious level, which is a very deep dimension of human beings.

It is worth mentioning that the testimonies of victims are eloquent: ‘In our lives, our abuser was a God substitute’; therefore, spiritual abuse causes damage ‘to the person in the

name of God' (Oakley and Humphrey 2019, pp. 57–58). A mother who wanted to tell a minister that her boy's mentoring has to stop, declared that she was frightened of 'what God would do' and that 'she was scared of going against God'; the boy also stated that 'if he said he did not want it [the mentoring], then he would feel he was going against God' (Oakley and Humphrey 2019, pp. 61–62). Certainly, the abuser takes the place of God in the faithful's conscience. In this context, 'contradicting the superior means contradicting God' (De Lassus 2020, p. 116). The superior takes the place of God. Thus, a contemplative nun affirms: 'I joined the monastery to be in the presence of God, and I ended up living in the presence of the superior' (De Lassus 2020, p. 283). It is not uncommon for superiors to pronounce phrases such as 'God told me' or 'Our Lady spoke to me in prayer' (Sorlin 2018; De Lassus 2020). In summary, spiritual authority differs from other types of power because it touches the spiritual dimension of the person. Hence, its misuse is a specific type of abuse. This kind of abuse, which harms at the spiritual level, causes damage at the psychological and physical levels as well.

#### 4. Spiritual Power and Vulnerability

Why is a believer susceptible to abuse by a spiritual leader? This question raises the issue of vulnerability, which is a complex concept. The word 'vulnerability' has different meanings and 'is a notorious vague term' (Herring 2016, p. 5). Civil and Church documents use the expressions 'vulnerable people' or 'vulnerable adults' to indicate a particular group of people who, by reason of age, illness, or disability, are unable to take care of themselves. In fact, ecclesiastical documents speak about the protection of minors and 'vulnerable persons' (Francis 2019a). The Apostolic Letter *Vos estis lux mundi* provided the following definition: 'vulnerable person means: any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist the offence' (Francis 2019b, Art. 1, §2 b). This definition, which corresponds to what is called 'special vulnerability' (UNESCO 2005), differs from 'radical vulnerability' in that indicates a common human condition (Montero 2022). If this difference is not taken into account, the expression 'vulnerable persons' could suggest that only a special group of people is susceptible to abuse, and all other adults are safe; however, spiritual abuse does not stem from any deficiency on the part of the victims. Anne Lannegrace, a member of the committee for sectarian deviations within the Catholic Church of the French Bishops' Conference, tackled this issue. She affirmed that it is usual to think that victims of abuse of spiritual power have more fragile personalities than others and that they are easy prey for abusers or predators; however, this is not always true. It has been found that eminent personalities who are not susceptible to accusations of weakness of character can be abused by perverse leaders (Lannegrace 2018). In addition, Oakley and Kinmond affirmed that their research does not support claims of a specific personality type of abused individuals (Oakley and Kinmond 2013). This means that even people who do not belong to the so-called 'vulnerable persons' category are vulnerable to spiritual abuse. It is necessary, then, to take into account the distinction between special and radical—or general—vulnerability.

From an anthropological point of view, radical vulnerability falls under the human condition. It is not a deficiency of a given group but a common characteristic of human beings. It comes from the Latin term *vulnus* (wound). Vulnerability is a possibility, not a fact (Montero 2022); it indicates the possibility of being wounded. Therefore, radical vulnerability indicates the ability of being exposed to others, whereas being exposed to others implies the possibility of being wounded. Vulnerability 'leaves humans open to being blessed and hurt, to good and evil' (Langberg 2020, p. 19). It makes people open to others and susceptible to love and to abuse. Being open to others always implies a risk. For this reason, vulnerability, as such, is not a deficiency. To be receptive and, therefore, vulnerable, is a necessary condition for genuine human life. Invulnerability and absolute autonomy are not authentic human ideals. Understood in this way, radical vulnerability makes possible the authentic development of human life in encounters with

others; however, it is important to nuance a sharp distinction between these kinds of vulnerability because radical vulnerability always manifests itself with concrete special vulnerabilities (Montero 2022).

In the Christian context, vulnerability is a condition for discipleship. One who is not open to and affected by the call of Jesus is not able to follow Him. The disciples must be open to be affected. In fact, Ignatius of Loyola praises those who are willing to be affected, 'los que más se querrán afectar' (Ignatius of Loyola 1985, n° 97). Once again, the ability to be affected, that is, vulnerability, is not an imperfection but a necessary condition of discipleship. Openness to others makes spiritual abuse possible; therefore, generous persons are more at risk (Lannegrace 2018).

Consequently, spiritual abuse can happen because of human openness to others, not due to some sort of deficiency on the part of the victims. This conclusion rejects the wrong tenet, which postulates that what makes abuse possible are some characteristics of the people who suffer it. This unjust tenet fosters victim blaming and, worse, self-blame. A survivor shared that it took her 15 years to recognize that the cause of the abuse she suffered 'was not my stupidity' (De Lassus 2020, p. 335). This perverse process has been called the inversion of guilt, that is, victims bear the responsibility that should have been the offenders' (De Lassus 2020, pp. 331–33).

### 5. Spiritual Power and Institutional Support in the Catholic Church

As stated above, spiritual abuse consists of misusing 'spiritual power'. This particular type of power differs, for example, from physical power, because it should be subjectively recognized to be legitimate. Borrowing Weber's terminology, spiritual authority has some features of long-established and charismatic rule; this type of authority relies on a recognized long-established order of the institution and the admitted merits of the leader (Weber 2019). Spiritual leaders only have authority over the people who recognize them; therefore, this authority has a relational nature; it relies on voluntary recognition and not on physical coercion.

Where does this recognition come from? The authority of sect leaders is not taken for granted. There are neither institutions nor traditions that support it. For this reason, they must display charismatic qualities to attract people and gain followers. Their authority then relies on their personal features. By contrast, in the Catholic Church, spiritual power does not stem only from personal charisma but also from the long-established order. In Catholic culture, the institutional aspect is crucial to the point that it guarantees the authority even of leaders who do not have charismatic qualities. For example, ordained ministers and appointed superiors have a recognized authority in the Church, regardless of their personal qualities. This institutional authority can certainly increase by virtue of the charismatic gifts of the leaders, but the institutional support is sufficient to back their authority. Catholic leadership always needs some kind of ecclesiastical support.

The critical issue is not whether the power holder is a member of the clergy or not, but whether he or she, lay or ordained, is backed by the Church as her representative. In fact, 'religious abuse may also occur when the perpetrator is not a clergy member' (Cashwell and Swindle 2018, p. 183; cf. De Lassus 2020). Thus, clericalism is a very important factor, but not the center of the problem: spiritual abuse revolves around the spiritual power supported by the Church, no matter who misuses it. Accordingly, proper or improper exercise of spiritual authority in Catholic culture is never an issue between two individuals; it always has an ecclesial dimension. Hence, spiritual abuse 'has to be placed in a complex system' (De Dinechin and Léger 2019, p. 163; Leimgruber 2022).

Furthermore, since the Christian faith is not individualistic, Catholic teaching calls on the believer to listen to the voice of God through ecclesiastical mediation. As part of the People of God, believers are called to live their faith and to hear the voice of God through the Church. Catholic teachings and the culture direct the faithful to trust ordained ministers, superiors, and in general, supported spiritual leaders. Unfortunately, Catholic

culture often tends to absolutize the ecclesiastical mediation and forget that it must interact with other mediations, especially that of the personal conscience (Fernández 2020).

What happens when this spiritual authority backed by the Church is misused? To what extent is the Church part of the spiritual abuse? Is it possible to claim that spiritual abuse in the Catholic setting is just an issue between two individuals? There are different answers to these questions. Regarding the wider crisis of sexual abuse, abuse of power and abuse of conscience, the bishops of France stated that they ‘recognize the institutional responsibility of the Church for the violence suffered by so many victims’ (Conférence des Évêques de France 2021). On the flip side, Chilean bishops stressed that the responsibility for the abuse belongs to the perpetrators (Conferencia Episcopal de Chile 2021); however, since spiritual abuse consists of the misuse of a spiritual authority, which, in the Catholic setting, is always backed by the Church, it is never an issue between two individuals, but always implies an ecclesiastical responsibility.

Beyond the theological and ecclesiological arguments developed above, the testimonies of victims and survivors are eloquent on this point. A survivor says that his abuser ‘was sheltered and protected by Catholic doctrine’ (Prochaska 2022, p. 67). People trust a spiritual leader because the Catholic Church backed him or her as someone trustworthy. The claims of survivors can be illustrated as follows: ‘I trusted him because he was a representative of God, supported by the Church’; ‘I believed that what she told me was the will of God because she was my legitimate superior’. The faithful are taught to trust the Church and her representatives. Phrases such as ‘people who obey do not err’ or ‘the voice of the bishop is the voice of God’ are repeated in the Catholic culture (Fernández 2021); therefore, victims should not be blamed for trusting ecclesial representatives. On the contrary, when spiritual abuse occurs, the Church should be held responsible for encouraging believers to trust in people who, eventually, did not deserve such authority grounded on ecclesiastical support.

## 6. Intentionality, Individuals and Systems

### 6.1. Abusive Individuals

The problem of intentionality has a significant implication in understanding the institutional dimension of spiritual abuse. As stated above, some authors affirmed that it occurs because abusers wish to benefit themselves. It is evident that using spiritual authority for personal benefit is abusive; however, is the abuser’s selfish intention an essential characteristic of spiritual abuse? In other words, does the intentionality of the abuser belong to the essence of the offence? Nelson put the emphasis on the perpetrator’s selfishness: ‘The harm caused by spiritual abuse is the by-product of selfish “ministry” activity. Therefore a good definition of spiritual abuse should include the aspect of selfishness’ (Nelson 2015). Perpetrators often misuse their spiritual power because they look for a benefit, use followers for their own sake, and exploit the victims to satisfy their needs. Selfishness is recurrently behind abuse. Accordingly, some authors attempted to outline the profile of abusive individuals. Narcissism, selfishness, clericalism, manipulative personality, egocentrism, and other characteristics are presented as key attributes (Poujol 2015). This is frequently the case, but is it always the case? Is the perpetrator’s quest for personal gain always behind the abuse? Moreover, other definitions focus on the harm that spiritual abuse produces in the victims. The key question is then whether spiritual abuse should be defined by the perpetrator’s actions or by the victim’s harm. The vast majority of authors defined spiritual abuse by the damage that it brings to the victims. Accordingly, what defines spiritual abuse is the harm suffered by the victim and not the intention of the perpetrator. Moreover, ‘it seems questionable that research supports the notion of intentional harm as a defining feature of abuse’ (Oakley and Kinmond 2013). My contention is not that intentionality is irrelevant; it is most certainly relevant for assessing the imputability of this fault and for other reasons; however, from the victim’s perspective, the crucial topic is not the good or bad will of the perpetrator but the damage caused by the misuse of spiritual authority.

## 6.2. Abusive Systems

This conclusion raises a further question: can spiritual abuse occur without the perpetrator's perverse intention? In other words, is it possible to harm a person by an unintentional misuse of spiritual authority? The answers to these questions have crucial implications for ecclesiology and canon law; however, to provide a complete answer to these issues, empirical and ethnographic research is needed, in addition to theological reflection. Unfortunately, there appear to be no such studies on this specific topic in the Catholic setting. Nevertheless, it is possible to draft a provisional answer based on the testimonies of victims and survivors, and on the theological reflection and preliminary results of an ongoing research (*Encuesta nacional de adversidad y abuso sexual en la niñez*, Centro CUIDA, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile 2022, forthcoming).

In the Catholic setting, spiritual abuse can occur even if the person who causes it is not looking to benefit. There are indeed abusive individuals, but there are also abusive systems in the Church. There are Catholic institutions, communities, statutes, and cultures that facilitate abuse (Chartier-Siben 2021b). Catholic culture tends to absolutize the spiritual authority of her representatives and her teachings. To identify the voice of the ecclesial representatives with that of God, or the regular teaching of the Church with that of God is abusive. For example, in a religious community that professes a narrow idea of obedience, even if the superior is not moved by selfishness, she can misuse her spiritual authority and harm the nuns severely. In this case, behind the spiritual abuse, there is no perverse individual but an abusive system. There are not only abusive individuals but also abusive structures, practices, institutions, and teachings. Again, a spiritual director who mechanically imposes as the will of God his rigid understanding of the moral teaching of the Church, even with good will, misuses his spiritual authority and can harm believers. When a Christian community identifies the conclusions of the general chapter, the writings of the founder or the decisions of the bishop with the very will of God, it can become an abusive system. When the distance between God and his mediations is lost, abusive systems can emerge. For instance, a rigid application of the objective moral law that does not pay attention to concrete situations and gives no room for discernment could harm the faithful deeply. Once again, the spiritual authority of these institutions is backed by Catholic culture. A victim of abuse stated: 'I joined that community because it was Catholic, recognized by the Church, with canonical statutes signed by bishops. When we made our vows, it was in the presence of the bishop' (De Dinechin and Léger 2019, pp. 171–72). People trust a community because the Catholic Church backed it as trustworthy. No matter the intentionality of the agents, the misuse of spiritual authority can engender grave damage to the faithful. In summary, spiritual abuse can be caused by both abusive individuals and abusive systems.

## 7. Conclusions

Spiritual authority, as a relational power, affects only those who recognize it as legitimate. Generally, this recognition depends on the charismatic qualities of the leaders and their institutional support. In sectarian settings, the authority of the leader is dependent only on his or her personal qualities. On the contrary, in the Catholic context, institutional backing alone is sufficient to give spiritual authority to leaders who are recognized as representatives of God and the Catholic Church; however, having charismatic qualities can reinforce their spiritual authority. Due to this ecclesiastical backing, the exercise of spiritual authority in the Church is never a private matter between two individuals; it always has an ecclesiastical dimension. In addition, since spiritual abuse is defined by the damage that is engendered in the victims, it can also be caused by abusive systems, even when there is no abusive individual. In this case, there is an ecclesiastical responsibility as far as the Church supports these systems. Thus, the misuse of spiritual authority in the Catholic setting always implies an institutional responsibility; therefore, the institutional aspect and the concept of the representative of God and the Church must be integrated into the definition of spiritual abuse in the Catholic setting. The following definition could



work for other Christian denominations if the idea that institutional cultures differ from community to community is taken into account. Thus, I offer a definition of spiritual abuse in the Catholic setting:

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.

In conclusion, victims are not guilty of what they have suffered. On the one hand, what makes spiritual abuse possible is not a fault of the victims but their openness to others. To trust and to be open to others implies vulnerability, which is a condition, not a deficiency of human beings. Therefore, victims are not guilty; they are abused not because they are defective but because they are humans. On the other hand, victims are not guilty because they trust persons and institutions supported by the Catholic Church. Victims of spiritual abuse are not to blame. The blame lies with the abusive individuals who have misused their authority for their own benefit and with the abusive structures that have harmed the believers. More empirical research is necessary to identify the structures, theological ideas, strategies, and mechanisms that foster spiritual abuse in order to prevent it; therefore, the Church has an institutional responsibility for spiritual abuse as far as she invites the faithful to trust people and institutions that, eventually, are not trustworthy. The Church, then, must guarantee that her representatives and structures—cultures, rules, statutes, teachings—do not foster abuse but care.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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