

Sexual Abuse: Spiritual Harm and Spiritual Healing

Most Reverend Geoffrey James Robinson DD VG, auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Sydney and Episcopal vicar for education, is joint chair, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Committee for Professional Standards, 126 Liverpool Road, Enfield 2136 NSW Australia. This paper was presented with passion on 25 July 1998 in Melbourne, Australia, at the second National Australian and New Zealand Conference, "Breaking the Boundaries: Professional Misconduct, Exploitation, and Offending by Health Care Professionals, Therapists and Other Trusted Practitioners, including Clergy," an initiative of In Good Faith & Associates. Other keynote speakers of the four-day conference were Ray Wyre, Gracewell Clinic and Institute, UK; Gary Schoener, Walk-In Counseling Center, Minneapolis; and Roman Paur, ISTI.

The word "spiritual" may be understood in the broad sense, far beyond the boundaries of any Church or religion or even of belief in some divinity.⁽¹⁾ There are certain fundamental questions that we are always asking ourselves, whether we are consciously aware of them or not: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose and meaning of my existence on this planet? We may understand the word "spiritual" to mean the answers we are giving to these fundamental questions, and that is how I understand the word in this paper.

The answers given to these questions by different individuals may refer to a divinity, or they may not. They may involve structures of religion, or they may not. They may be partial, or they may be an attempt at a more complete answer. But in all cases they express the spiritual dimension of our being, that dimension that seeks to give a basic meaning to all that we do and in some manner to link all the different facets of our life into one whole.

Part One: Spiritual Harm

We ask these big questions because they reflect one of the most profound drives within human beings, the search for meaning. Meaning is of the greatest importance to people. When they become bored with their job or their marriage or their lot in life, they begin to feel that their life is going nowhere,

that it lacks meaning. This can eat away at their sense of dignity and self-worth.

Meaning and Love

All meaning in life comes from love. For example, one person loves gardening, and by putting that love into practice eventually becomes "a gardener." Seeing the garden burst into a profusion of color and beauty each spring gives a sense of achievement and satisfaction. This then becomes at least a small part of the person's answer to the big questions of life, a feeling that part of the reason for the person's existence is to turn this small corner of the planet into a place of beauty and new life.

In the same way, other people become nature lovers, cooks, scientists, cat or dog lovers, stamp collectors, wine connoisseurs, golfers, historians, lovers of husband/wife and children or lovers of all people. Any person, object, activity or idea that we love contributes to this process. Our sense of meaning in life then comes from the sum total of the loves of our life. The more love there is, the more meaning there is. And there is no other source from which meaning can come.

Our sexuality is one of the most profound ways in which we both seek and express love at all times and in all circumstances, not just in sexual intercourse. It is, therefore, one of the most profound ways in which we seek meaning in life.

At the same time, love is the deepest longing of the human heart and comes from the very center of our being. It is so deep that no person or thing can fully satisfy it. Every time we experience love for anything at all we feel some satisfaction and sense of meaning in our lives, but we also know that we long for a deeper and fuller love and meaning. Ultimately we long for perfect love and perfect meaning, and this means reaching down to a place within our selves that is so deep that feelings no longer have names and longings can not be put into words. For many people, recognizing, accepting and embracing this longing for infinite love is part of the process of making meaning of their lives.

Sexual Abuse and Meaning

No matter how self-confident we may be, our systems of meaning are always fragile because they are made up of the many tiny fragments of our lived experience, the many loves, small and great, of our lives. Sexual abuse is a

bulldozer gouging a road through this fragile ecosystem of sexuality, love and meaning that person has been painfully constructing.

This is, I believe, the major spiritual harm caused by sexual abuse, the destruction of a delicate and elaborate system of meaning. What ought to be positive becomes negative, what ought to be love becomes a using of a person, what ought to be trustworthy can no longer be trusted. Many of the loves that had given meaning in the past become turned on their heads. The forces that brought all the different facets of life into one whole are no longer capable of doing so. The relationship is broken between sexuality and love, between trust and love, between meaning and love, so that love is no longer a unifying force.

In sexual abuse there is always spiritual harm because, no matter what other particular things may be destroyed, the abuse always destroys the person's sense of wholeness and connectedness, and hence the person's sense of meaning.

Professional Persons

Professional persons such as doctors, mental and social health workers, lawyers and ministers of religion should find their reason for existence in helping people. In any interview they are there for the sake of their patient or client, not the other way around. In a world in which the patient or client may be overwhelmed by fears and uncertainties, they should be sources of strength and support. Each one represents not just him/herself but the entire profession and the entire community. Their profession carries with it a powerful authority in the lives of people. The presence of such trusted professionals in a community is an important part of our making of meaning, for we love the many things that the community in which we live can give to us.

In sexual abuse these values are subverted. The patient or client is now there for the sake of the professional, who becomes a source of weakness, turmoil and the using of another. There is no sense of meaning when those who ought to be the most trustworthy become the least trustworthy, when those who should be rocks of strength become the cause of distress, when those who are entrusted with power and authority by the community use that power to abuse others, when there is no longer any firm ground on which to place one's feet. In all such cases there is always spiritual harm.

The Church Community

Because we long for perfect and infinite love, religious beliefs are an important part of the making of meaning in the lives of those who accept them. Religious beliefs claim to give some answer to the big questions of life, and the answer they give is based on love: we come from love, we are going to love, and love is the purpose and meaning of our existence on earth.

Sexual abuse by a direct representative of that religious belief, e.g., a priest or minister, destroys the answers that the religious beliefs have given up to that point. The power that has been abused is a spiritual power that allows a person to enter deeply into the secret lives of others and to make judgments about the spiritual state of persons and even about their eternal fate. The link between the minister and God can be impossible to break and it can easily seem as though the very God is the abuser. The abuse shatters the power of the symbols of that belief, e.g., the picture of a priest holding a host aloft can become a mockery. The search for perfect love within that system of belief becomes impossible.

Furthermore, our relationships A harm caused to any one of these relationships will have profound effects on the other two. We are perhaps more familiar with this truth as it applies to our relationship with ourselves and with other people. For example, as we come to realize that we are accepted by others, we become more accepting of our selves; as we become more accepting of ourselves, we have more energy to reach out to others.

This interdependence is true, however, of our relationship with God as well. As just three examples among many, anything that causes people to stop trusting in a loving God and to start fearing a more angry God will greatly influence their relationships with others and their idea of themselves; anything that causes people to fear all other people as potential abusers will adversely affect their idea of God and of themselves; anything that causes people to lose confidence in themselves or to see themselves as in any way contaminated and unclean will profoundly affect their relationship with God and with other people.

One effect of this interdependence deserves special mention. Within a Church community it is impossible to separate the victim's relationships with the abuser, with God and with the community. The abuser will invariably be a person of power and will have a far stronger position in the community than the victim. This means that the abuser will be far more important to the meaning making of the members of that community than the victim is. Making meaning of life is a long and arduous process and people do not like to see it upset. All too frequently their nonverbal, and even verbal, message to the

victim will be, "We were content before you spoke out. You are a threat to our very system of meaning-making. Go away, leave this community, and let us go back to our former certainties." The victim is then left without a community and feels ostracized, even excommunicated.

The harm is compounded if Church authorities react badly when informed of the abuse and the loss of meaning is even greater. There may be some realization in the victim that the abuser is an individual who has acted in a manner contrary to every belief of the Church community, but when the Church authorities themselves appear to condone the offense and reinforce its effects, it appears that the entire community is joining in the rejection. The magnitude of the effect on the victim's world of meaning must be seriously compared with the abuse itself.

Part Two: Spiritual Healing

In sexual abuse spiritual harm is the first to occur and the last to be healed. Damage to any one part damages the whole, and the whole can not be fully restored until each part has been restored. Spiritual healing, therefore, means helping a person to be whole again and to find a new world of meaning, a new set of satisfying answers to the basic questions of life.

The path to healing will be different for each individual, and no neat blueprint can be laid down that would be valid for all victims. In all situations we must obviously respect the needs and rights of the victim and assist rather than direct. The sense of meaning that they finally come to may be very different from the one they formerly had. To spell this out, I, as a Catholic bishop, may find my self in the situation of helping a victim to find a path in life that contains no trace of Catholic influence in it. If this is the path that the particular victim believes to be essential in order to reach wholeness, then respect for the dignity of the victim demands that I give the assistance I can.

Love and Meaning

A new world of meaning, a new set of satisfying answers to the basic questions of life, means a new set of persons, objects, activities and ideas that can be loved.

Sometimes, when we meet a victim, we will find some enduring loves from a past life before the abuse, sometimes we will see new loves that have arisen since that time, e.g., efforts to trust a fellow victim or someone who has shown kindness. I believe it is important to look actively for, recognize and welcome

any loves, great or small, that we find in a victim and to encourage their development. It is important to encourage a victim to relate to a group that will provide acceptance and love. It is important to foster in the victim the idea that, despite the abuse, there are still persons, objects, activities and ideas that can be loved, that are worthy of love, and that can contribute toward a new world of meaning.

Psychological and the Spiritual

Victims of sexual abuse are rightly referred to persons skilled in the sciences of psychology and counseling. It is rightly understood that these skills are essential in helping the victim to work through the conflicting ideas and emotions that assail them. It is good to keep in mind, however, that skills in psychology and counseling may not be sufficient to restore a victim to a sense of wholeness and meaning.

In particular, I know that many therapists can see religious ideas as exclusively part of the problem rather than in any way part of the solution. For some, most psychological problems have their origin in religion, and a cure must involve breaking away from the religious values that have caused the problem. (2)

It may be a surprise if I say that I have sympathy for such attitudes. I understand where they come from and I, too, have had to help people break away from harmful religious ideas.

Despite this, the therapist would do well to be aware that healing can go beyond the psychological into fields where he or she may not have adequate competence. As a good professional, the therapist may some times feel the need to refer.

This is particularly true where a victim's ideas of God have been distorted and warped by the abuse, but the victim has no desire to deny the existence of God or the importance of religious values in life. A Christian person who has been abused and who is struggling with questions of meaning in life can sometimes find both love and meaning in the idea of Jesus Christ as a fellow sufferer also caught into a seemingly meaningless world on the cross.

It is not enough to tell such a person, verbally or nonverbally, that religion is the problem, not the solution, and that life is better without any religion. Each person must be taken as he or she is, and it is essential that we help each victim to move along his or her own personal path towards healing. If a

decision is made to refer a victim to another person to deal with these more openly religious ideas and values, the choice of the kind of person to refer to belongs, of course, to the victim.

Forgiveness

In speaking of healing, the question of forgiveness cannot be omitted. The first thing to say is that for the victim the most important forgiveness is forgiveness of self-- forgiveness for having been powerless, for having trusted someone who did not deserve trust, for not having done more to prevent or resist the abuse. This can be a hard forgiveness to give, but it is essential to a true healing.

The second thing to say is that no one is ever justified in telling victims that they have a religious obligation to forgive the offender. The effects of abuse can last throughout life and frequently the offender has expressed no remorse or sorrow. There can be nothing whatsoever in the external circumstances that would lead a person to think of forgiveness. If forgiveness is to have any meaning at all, it must be the free personal choice of the victim.

There is such a thing as forgiveness given too early, and this forgiveness brings no satisfaction. People can expect that the fact that they have in all sincerity decided to forgive will take away their anger, and they can be disheartened when they are again overwhelmed by anger. They can start blaming themselves and think that there must be something lacking in their goodness if the anger still continues, when all that is wrong is that they have tried to forgive before they were in fact ready to do so.

A common mistaken belief is that forgiveness is a feeling, that is, people have forgiven when they feel good toward the offender, they have not forgiven when they feel bad toward the offender. (3) In fact, however, people have no direct control over their feelings. If a victim thinks of the abuse, he or she will feel angry and there is nothing that can be done to prevent this anger. To think of the abuse and not feel angry is simply not an option. If people have no direct control over their feelings, however, they have greater or lesser control over their thoughts and actions. Thus the only way a victim can choose not to feel angry is by choosing not to think about the abuse. At first this will be impossible, but with the passage of a long period of time, it can become more and more possible, and how much the abuse is thought about is a choice that a victim must gradually make.

When memory of sexual abuse comes to mind, the anger that is spontaneously felt is positively good and contributes to a sense of meaning because it is in fact part of the love of oneself. The anger is a defensive reaction, an affirmation of oneself and one's own dignity, an instinctive statement that what happened is wrong, that the victim is worth far more than that. Nevertheless, there is a difference between this good defensive reaction and the deliberate decision to think about the abuse in order to arouse the anger. There is a difference between the good anger that is an affirmation of oneself and the less desirable anger that fosters hatred. Forgiveness can easily coexist with good anger, even when it feels overwhelming; it can not coexist with the deliberate desire to hate.

Thus much of the decision to forgive is really to be found in the decision whether to think about the abuse or not. Timing is of the greatest importance. Some people have spoken of never having made a decision to forgive but of then waking up one day to find that they have in fact done so at some undetermined moment in the past. (4) People can also find that in between rage and hatred on the one hand and forgiveness on the other, there exists an arid gray area and that they can exist in this arid gray area for a very long time. (5)

The origin of words can tell us much about their meaning. The Greek word in the Gospels translated as "to forgive" has the more basic meaning of "to leave behind, to let be." (6) In relation to sexual abuse, this does not mean to deny the abuse or the debt it created. It does not mean to forgo attempts to have just debts paid. It does not mean to repress the memory or to prevent it rising to the conscious mind when ever this happens naturally. It means to come to a point where one is prepared to begin to leave the matter behind, to let it be, to do nothing to deliberately raise the memories and the feelings they evoke.

The Greek word comes from pre-Christian origins. In a number of Western languages, on the other hand, the word "to forgive" reflects a Christian origin, being made up of two words meaning "to give for." (7) I have just read of a woman whose daughter was murdered and who now, years later, has started writing to a man on death row convicted of another murder. She speaks of herself as being in the arid gray area, but it appears obvious that she has traveled some distance along the road of "forgiving for" the man who murdered her daughter, for she is attempting to understand how there can be a human being behind the face of a murderer, and through her letters she would like to help one such human being to grow. She still could not write to the murderer of her daughter, and she still could not even think of him without feelings of anger and loathing, but she has moved beyond the point of

deliberately fostering anger and loathing within herself, and her actions rather than her feelings are the true indicators of where she has come to on the road to forgiveness.(8) She is following her own personal path toward meaning-making and spiritual healing, and no one may take it away from her.

In his book *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, M Scott Pecks writes,

The process of forgiveness--indeed, the chief reason for forgiveness--is selfish. The reason to forgive others is not for their sake.... The reason to forgive is for our own sake. For our own health. Because beyond that point needed for healing, if we hold on to our anger, we stop growing and our souls begin to shrivel. (9)

Thus we should never tell victims that they have a religious obligation to forgive but, if the timing is right, we may suggest that to move toward forgiveness could be good for themselves. The most basic reason for this is that it can enable love and, therefore, meaning to enter more easily into their lives.

There is another forgiveness that is essential. Communities must forgive, in the literal sense of "give themselves for," victims who have disturbed their comfort and meaning-making by speaking out about their abuse. Within the Catholic Church I must accept that, if no victims had come forward, nothing would have changed. We must learn to be positively grateful to victims for disturbing us. If we feel that we have lost some meaning, it was a false meaning, and their revelation has opened the way to a fuller and more rewarding meaning.

Listening to victims of sexual abuse is the most profound spiritual gift I have received in the last several years. They have showed me how to find love in the most unexpected places and they have greatly widened my spiritual horizons. If a better Church one day emerges from this crisis, it is they who must take the credit for creating it.

The road to wholeness and a sense of meaning after sexual abuse is a long and difficult one. When the word "spiritual" is understood in the broad sense in which I have used it here, spiritual healing provides the goal toward which all forms of healing tend. Spiritual healing has made true progress when the world begins to make some sense again, when there is once again some basic sense of loving and being loved, and when there is hope that the future will bring more, not less, of these qualities of life. GR

1 The Macquarie Dictionary gives thirty separate meanings to the word "spirit" and ten to the word "spiritual." Some are directly religious, e.g., "the soul as separable from the body at death", but others give a broader meaning, e.g. "an inspiring or animating principle such as pervades and tempers thought, feeling or action" or "the soul or heart as the seat of feelings or sentiments, or as prompting to action." The fifth meaning given to the word "spiritual" is "of or pertaining to the spirit as the seat of the moral or religious nature."

2 M Scott Peck, a psychiatrist with a genuine interest in and feeling for the spiritual, writes, "I used to tell people only somewhat facetiously that the Catholic Church provided me with my living as a psychiatrist. I could equally well have said the Baptist Church, Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church, or any other." *The Road Less Travelled*. Arrow Books, 1990, p221.

3 This is one of the meanings of "to forgive" given by dictionaries, e.g. "cease to feel resentment against."

4 This was a statement made to me by an anonymous victim and published here with permission.

5 *The Tablet*, 27 June 1998, pp 841-842.

6 See the entry *aphiemi* *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W Bromley, The Patemoster Press, Exeter, UK, 1985, p 88.

7 French *perdonner*, Italian *perdonare*, Spanish *perdonar*, *vergeben*. While these languages owe much to Greek and Latin, in this word they reflect < Christian history more than their usual Greek and Latin origins. While Latin has the word *condonare*, the more usual word for "to forgive" is *veniam dare*, "to grant a mercy or favor."

8 *The Tablet*, loc. cit.

9 Simon and Shuster, NY, 1993, p 46.