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Integration of sexual trauma in a religious narrative: Transformation, resolution and growth among contemplative nuns

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Abstract

The psychological consequences of sexual abuse are generally serious and enduring, particularly when the perpetrator is known and trusted by the survivor. This paper explores the experiences of five contemplative nuns who were sexually abused by priests and the spiritual journeys that followed. In the context of an ethnographic study of contemplative practice, participant observation and in-depth interviews were used to examine the ways that the nuns sought to make sense of their experiences through a long process of solitary introspection. The pursuit of meaning was shaped by religious beliefs relating to forgiveness, sacrifice, and salvation. Thus, trauma was transformed into a symbolic religious narrative that shaped their sense of identity. They were able to restructure core beliefs and to manage their current relationships with priests more securely. They described regaining their spiritual well-being in ways that suggest a form of posttraumatic spiritual growth. We conclude by discussing the findings in the light of the existing literature on the interaction of trauma and spirituality.

Keywords

Christian monasticism, coping, ethnography, narrative, priests, psychiatry, religion, sexual trauma, sexual abuse

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For many people, religious and spiritual beliefs comprise a substantial part of their global meaning system, informing how they understand, react to and cope with suffering (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Park, 2005). Traumatic events may challenge core beliefs and assumptions, including those of religion and spirituality (Boehnlein, 2007). Developing a spirituality that allows a comprehension of the abuse can influence the resolution of the trauma, posttraumatic adjustment, and long-term recovery. Reflecting in depth about a traumatic event tends to promote a search for new purpose and meaning in one's life (Decker, 1993). Moreover, those striving to understand the trauma and its meaning seem to be more likely to report posttraumatic growth (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000).

Religious coping is among the most frequent coping strategies in times of adversity (Koenig, 1997; Koenig, McCullough, & Larsen, 2001) and has been associated with positive psychological outcomes following a traumatic life event (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 1990). Religious and spiritual cognitions can help to make sense of threatening and distressing situations, modifying the apparent meaning of a traumatic event by providing more benign interpretations, assisting in finding positive aspects and promoting perceptions of growth (Park, 2005). However, those who hold more negative views of God, whether prior to the trauma or as a result of it, may explain the traumatic event as arising because of divine punishment or past misdeeds. The traumatic experience may then pose a greater test of their religious faith and commitment leading to maladaptive coping. Spiritual discontent—involving anger, doubting, and rebelling against God's will—has been linked with symptoms of depression and anxiety (e.g., Harris et al., 2008). Some treatment guidelines for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) acknowledge that religious beliefs, after trauma, may be associated with maladaptive cognitions about punishment and injustice (Resick & Calhoun, 2001).

Religious and spiritual challenges after sexual trauma

Sexual trauma refers to one or multiple sexual violations that provoke significant distress. Although most research studies examine specific types of sexual violence such as rape and sexual assault, the term *sexual trauma* is used by some clinicians as it combines the acts of violence with the survivors' responses (Yuan, Koss, & Stone, 2006).

Religion and spirituality are commonly regarded as important coping strategies by victims of sexual abuse (Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003; J. E. Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998). Religion may contribute to greater resilience, attribution of meaning and guidance as well as providing a social support network. The reactions of religious people to undergoing sexual trauma are varied: while some may react by leaving the church and abandoning belief in God, others may preserve their faith, even increasing their religious commitment (Crisp, 2004). Suffering sexual abuse has been shown to affect survivors' image of God (Crisp, 2004; Hurley, 2004). Christian support groups aiming to provide help and healing to victims who have undergone sexual trauma have grown (e.g., walking-wounded.net¹) as have

spiritually integrated interventions for sexual abuse (e.g., Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005) and the creation of materials targeted to clergy to help them respond to parishioners who have been sexually abused (e.g., Pellauer, Chester, & Boyajian, 1991).

Sexual abuse within religious institutions

For many, religion and spirituality represent purity, the transcendent, freedom from suffering, and a place of safety. Recent clerical sexual abuse scandals, particularly widespread in the Catholic Church, continue to rock these idealised perspectives and undermine the trust given to priests whom many parishioners regarded as being representatives of Christ. In addition to the profound and enduring effects that sexual abuse can have on the faith of the survivor (Sipe, 1995), congregants commonly report having feelings of disillusionment and alienation (Hadman-Cromwell, 1991), while the general public adopts an accusatory stand against the church (Nason-Clark, 1998). An American Gallup poll undertaken in 2002 found that the majority of Catholics were highly critical of their church for the way it had handled the problem of sexual abuse by priests (Moore, 2002a, 2002b).

Most research on sexual abuse in a religious context has concentrated on child sexual abuse, with studies highlighting its significant negative spiritual consequences (Hall, 1995; Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993; Rossetti, 1995), and on male religious perpetrators who are, most frequently, priests (Chaves & Garland, 2009; Sipe, 1995). A recent nationwide study looking into the prevalence of sexual advances by the clergy toward adults across denominations and religions in the USA found that 3.1% of women who attended religious services at least once a month reported having experienced a sexual advance by a member of the clergy or religious leader in their own congregation since turning 18 (Chaves & Garland, 2009).

A national survey of the sexual trauma experiences of Catholic nuns belonging to active-life religious institutions in the USA revealed a prevalence of all types of sexual trauma of nearly 30% (with 21.2% of such abuse perpetrated by clergymen; Chibnall, Wolf, & Duckro, 1998). During their religious lives, sexual exploitation or coercion (type of sexual trauma) was found to affect more than one in 10 nuns, most commonly at the hands of a priest (accounting for half of the cases); the abusers were commonly spiritual directors to the abused. The study also highlighted the nuns' past and current sequelae, which included psychological dysfunction (such as self-blame for the experience, anger, anxiety, shame, depression, difficulties in sleeping and concentrating) as well as spiritual consequences (such as disruption in their relationship with God and in their image of God as a father, difficulties in praying and considering leaving their religious order). A number of factors are relevant here. Catholic clergy, ordained nuns and priests, must vow to remain celibate; however, the power imbalance between them, a culture of deference, trust and emotional and spiritual intimacy is likely to create a context where sexual abuse may more easily appear. Rutter (1991) pointed out that, in the context

of pastoral counselling, even a woman with firm sexual boundaries may loosen them in order to reveal her inner problems to her minister, thus increasing her vulnerability.

The increase in media attention and academic interest in this area has been accompanied by community initiatives creating advocacy groups to assist victims of clerical sexual abuse (Pullen, 1998), for example, the support group Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors (M. Kennedy, 2003)

The current study

The present article explores the experiences of five Catholic contemplative nuns sexually abused by priests, using ethnographic methodology.² In this paper we propose a detailed model of the nun's experience of sexual abuse, describing and illustrating how the nuns coped with the pain of their experiences through the use of spiritual concepts, narratives, and imagery leading to transformation and resolution. These processes are discussed from the perspective of the literature on the interaction of trauma and spirituality.

Method

Participants. The participants of the study were five Catholic contemplative nuns of the same order belonging to several monasteries in Spain. Their ages ranged from early 20s to mid-40s, and they came from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Regarding their nationalities, they were a mixture of Spanish nationals and those born abroad who came to Spain to enter a monastery. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the study, we have omitted any information that might permit identification of the participants. Hence, the names of the religious order, monasteries and locations are withheld, as are specific nationalities of those born abroad.

Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. GDV spent a week with a group of novices accompanied by their Mother Teachers (it is common for the latter to attend too as they are senior nuns in charge of the novices' overall training). Over the course of the week, she interviewed all the nuns individually. The nuns had gathered together for a formative course in a monastery in Spain. During the novitiate (training stage), all the novices of the order meet once a year to attend a course that is given by someone with experience in spiritual direction. The purpose of these courses seemed to be both educational as well as social. In addition to deepening their knowledge of their contemplative life, the participants also have the chance to share experiences and strengthen bonds with nuns from other monasteries. In addition to individual in-depth interviews, GDV also attended lessons and prayers and joined the sisters for meals and during their recreational periods such as coffee breaks, walking in the garden of the monastery in the evenings, and the farewell celebration on the last night of the course.

GDV conducted all the interviews which lasted an average of 90 minutes. During the interview, the nuns were not specifically asked about traumatic experiences of sexual abuse; rather, the details emerged spontaneously during the interviews, which were part of a larger study.³ In order to preserve the nuns' anonymity, any further details on the aims of the study and the questions of the interview are omitted as a precaution, given the delicate information that this paper contains and the increasingly small number of contemplative monasteries in Spain.

The semistructured interviews were conducted in a private room of the monastery. Although Spanish was not the first language for the nuns who were born abroad, they spoke it fluently. Thus the interviews were conducted in Spanish without an interpreter, and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Ethical approval to undertake the study was granted by University College London, Research Ethics Committee. GDV met personally with the Mother President of the order to explain the project and answer her questions, and also sent written information to the Mother Superiors of each nun. Once their approval was obtained, GDV explained the project to the nuns in a joint meeting, giving them the chance to ask questions both collectively and individually. Informed consent was obtained from each nun who was fully aware of the purpose of the project and the authors' willingness to submit the findings for publication in a scientific journal.

Analysis. The transcripts were subject to thematic content analysis by the first author (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Statements or phrases signifying relevant concepts, ideas, behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes from the transcripts were highlighted; statements were compared across transcripts to identify recurring themes that were subsequently categorised. The themes extracted from the data represent the key findings of the study. Regular meetings were held by the authors prior to and after the interviews, as well as during the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Findings

The main findings are presented in this section and they are illustrated with quotations extracted from the transcripts. After briefly describing the traumatic experiences, we propose a detailed model of how the nuns responded to, adjusted to, and resolved the trauma.

Sexual trauma experiences

The nuns described various types of sexual trauma, involving violence, exploitation, coercion, and mental and physical stress. The sexual abuse often took place during their early stages of training, when they were postulants and novices, or when they were preparing to take the habit prior to entering their current monasteries. In all cases the perpetrators were priests the nuns had hitherto known and trusted. The abuse happened between two and over twenty years

prior to the interviews. Some traumatic events occurred in Spain while others occurred in the nuns' countries of origin; some involved single incidents while others lasted several years. One particular nun was preparing to take the habit, and had yet to move permanently into the monastery. Another nun, who suffered abuse from a priest in her country of birth, left to enter a Spanish monastery. In the latter case, the priest had colluded with the Mother Superior who, it was alleged, also took a role in coercing nuns into having sexual encounters with him. All the nuns described an intense negative emotional response following the abuse, experiencing the sexual advances as something "terrible" and "unthinkable," completely outside the usual range of human experience.

Spiritual transformation model following sexual trauma

The patterns of response and recovery that the nuns underwent, taking them from a state of severe psychological, physical, and spiritual distress following the traumatic exposure, to a current state of spiritual balance and mental well-being, had many similarities. Therefore, we have proposed a model of dealing with the trauma elaborated in eight stages (see Figure 1). Following the initial stages, dominated by shock, distress, self-doubt, and anger at the abuse and at the perpetrator, the nuns described how they embarked in a long process of searching for meaning in their traumatic experiences. They spent many hours alone reflecting on the painful events, mostly during their prayers when they shared their sufferings with God. Their efforts to construct meaning allowed for a spiritual transformation of the abuse to take place, culminating in an elaborate religious narrative, which reinforced their vocations and self-worth, contributing to their renewed spiritual and psychological equilibrium, and even to their posttraumatic growth.

The main difference encountered amongst the nuns' descriptions was their choice of whether or not to disclose the abuse, options that highlight the importance of being accepted by their community. We will illustrate these stages through quotations extracted from the interviews.

Shock and distress

The nuns described their sense of shock and disbelief, a total breakdown of their established worldview in the aftermath of the abuse, exacerbated by the shattering of implicit beliefs about the goodness of the church and the integrity of her priests. Previously, the nuns had felt protected, immune, and safe from the evils of the outside world. The possibility or likelihood of suffering abuse by fellow clergy was unimaginable: "for such a thing to happen was impossible," "it was unthinkable," "I could have never imagined it," "I suddenly descended from heaven to earth."

One nun had much to say about not just the suffering of the incident, but also the shock and consternation that the subsequent behaviour of the priest—whose sexual advances she rejected—caused her when he criticised her in front of the parish congregation. It was incomprehensible to her that, instead of experiencing

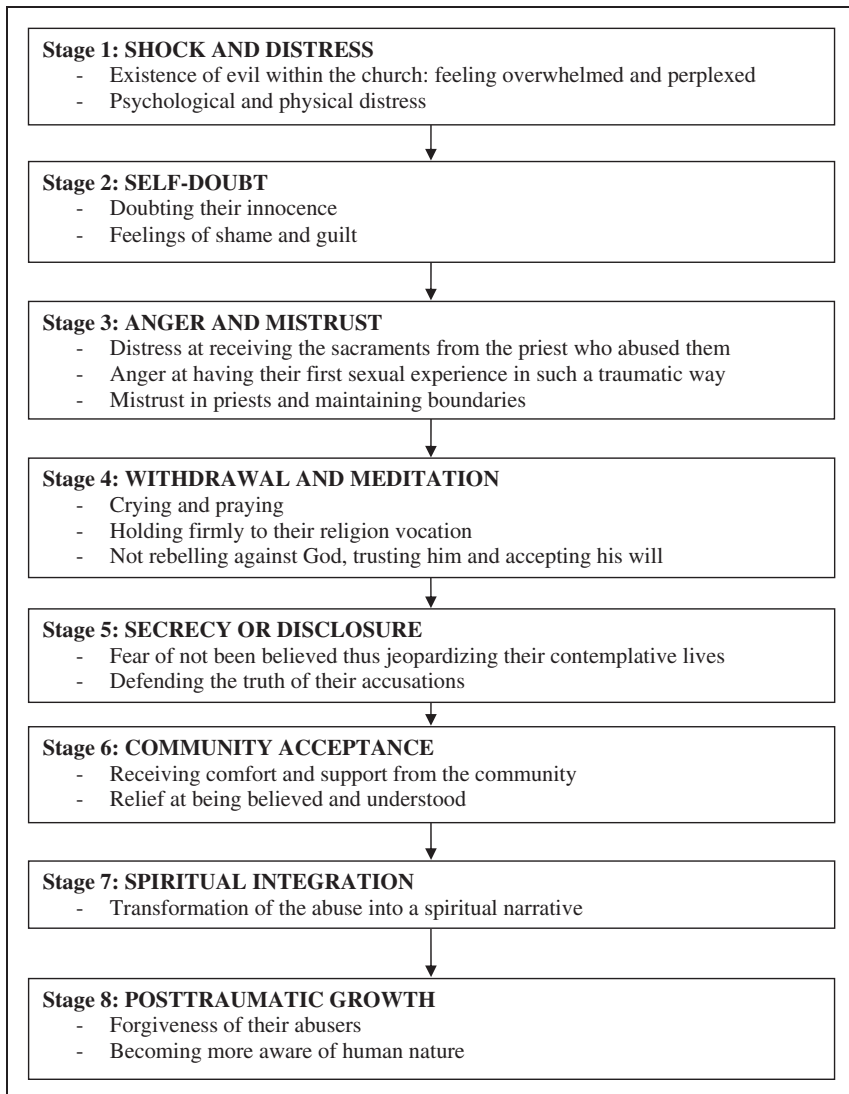


Figure 1. Flow diagram showing the stages that the nuns went through in order to achieve recovery.

remorse, he took revenge by slandering her. Another nun was totally overwhelmed by discovering that the priest had similarly abused other nuns:

He [the priest] never wanted to recognise it [the assault]. After a time, I had to learn that he had slept with nuns and he justified everything... For God's sake! Your first thought is: how can he act in such an evil way!?

The nuns described how, immediately after the abuse, they cried for long periods of time, feeling helpless and lonely, with their worries impairing their ability to concentrate and fall asleep at night. Table 1 summarises the psychological and physical symptoms and the concerns that they recalled having at the time. The nuns did not currently suffer from psychiatric morbidity.

Self-doubt

All the nuns insisted that they were the “victims” and that the priests were the ones to blame. Nevertheless, at the same time, they also described painful times of doubting their own innocence when they were tormented by feelings of shame and guilt. They wondered if they had done something wrong to provoke the abuse or even whether the abuse was something normal that they had somehow misunderstood. The latter was particularly relevant for a nun who was not believed by her Mother Superior and who, herself, doubted having been abused as the priest had attempted sexual intercourse, as this eloquent excerpt illustrates:

At the end, you start doubting: maybe such a thing might be normal . . . and then I told myself: no!, although he did not, he did not get to [full intercourse] . . . but for God’s sake! It was a subjugation . . . this is not being loving, this is too much! . . . When I recovered from the shock [of the abuse], I saw it as a clear abuse, that I was a victim, in those moments I did not doubt that I was a victim, but after all, everything gets messed up and you don’t know anymore, with the Mother [Superior] telling you that it cannot be, that he is a good priest and he denying it, all of this deeply disturbed me and deep down a little doubt remains . . . and you end up blaming yourself . . . You wonder if this is an obsession, if he did not complete the abuse totally, maybe it was not abuse.

Anger and mistrust

Another source of suffering, frustration, and anxiety for some of the nuns was that they had to continue seeing the priest who abused them. In some cases, they had to receive the sacraments—taking communion and confession—from their abuser, as they had kept the abuse secret, or had not been believed. In two cases, the priests were the monastery’s chaplain and were in charge of the daily celebration of the mass and providing the nuns with spiritual direction. Another nun’s abuse occurred outside the convent but the perpetrator was the parish priest of the only church in her village. She also continued seeing him as she did not have the means to travel to another church and she had ongoing commitments as a catechist that she wanted to honour. In these instances, the nuns reported they felt trapped and powerless by the perceived impossibility of changing their circumstances. One nun even tried to be spiritually guided by her abuser, owing to the insistence of her

Table 1. Symptoms of the trauma and, social and spiritual concerns.

Symptoms	Concerns		
	Psychological	Physical	Social
Helplessness	Afraid	Crying	Fear of discovery
Shock	Powerlessness	Poor sleep	Fear of not being believed
Overwhelmed	Disappointment	Poor appetite	Loss of reputation
Confusion	Frustration	Tiredness	Fear of being expelled
Anxiety	Vulnerability		Need to be honest with the community
Poor concentration	Feeling trapped		Losing control of their intimacy
Shame	Guilt		Protecting themselves/others from priests
Self-doubt	Distress		Critical views on priests and men in general
			More aware of human nature and sexuality
			Spiritual
			Existence of evil within the church
			Giving up their religious vocations
			Proving the strength of their vocation
			Doubting their own innocence
			Threat to their vow of chastity
			Misunderstanding of the abuse
			Growth comes through suffering
			Receiving sacraments from abusers
			Learning to forgive their abusers

Mother Superior—who firmly believed in his innocence—and the lack of any alternative priest available in the monastery:

I had to force myself [to meet with him] and told myself: “Well, there is a grille⁴ in between us . . .” but it was no use, I could not! No . . . So then I told her [her Mother Superior] clearly—I had to be very strong—that I refused to [have him as her spiritual director], this filled me with a terrible sense of unease, it was very tough, very tough.

Two of the nuns had given up relationships with boyfriends to follow their vocation. They candidly explained that they had avoided having any sexual intimacy while they were deciding whether they wanted to be nuns: “We lived in a holy way as friends . . . he [her boyfriend] wanted to marry me but I felt a stronger call inside me which was to marry another husband [God].” Therefore, they expressed anger about having given up the possibility of sexual relationships with men they loved, only to have had a traumatic sexual experience at the hands of someone bound by the same vow of chastity. As another nun explained:

I have never been aroused like this . . . this was a sensation I have never had . . . I was coming from quite a hard experience. Look, let me explain that before entering [the monastery], 9 months before, I fell in love when I thought I was totally immune to falling in love and it made me doubt my vocation, it cost me a lot to make up my mind because I was very much in love and the boy was also very much in love with me but he was very respectful with me, very much, very much. So to me that had been in love but *never* experienced this physical arousal, it was *he* [the priest] who caused it!

The abuse made them doubt priests’ intentions: “It makes you regard priests distrustfully . . . at first, you do refuse to listen to them, you refuse to listen.” They employed several practical strategies to protect themselves both from the particular priests who undertook the abuse—and priests more generally—and to rethink their future relationships with them: “After all, you need to guard yourself from any man, you need to keep a distance,” “I now have my eyes wide open,” “if they are priests, they are priests for the church, one can *not* be friendly with a priest.” One nun was even adamant that she would never take a priest as a spiritual director: “I will take a nun, *not* a priest as my director!”

Though they blamed and criticised the priests severely, they were ready to excuse their senior nuns: “The Mother [Superior] did not believe it [the sexual abuse], she could not believe it as he was a very spiritual man, he was the man of trust of the community,” “the Mother [Superior] did not believe it, poor thing! She is so kind-hearted that she thinks good of everyone.”

Withdrawal and meditation

After the traumatic event, the nuns described frequent episodes of crying and praying. They often did both simultaneously: “I cried and prayed.” Crying was

a physical outlet for venting their pain, offering physical relief, while praying gave them a sense of being sustained by God's presence. They described praying as having a conversation with God. Thus, even the nuns who did not tell anyone about the abuse, never stopped talking about it to God in their prayers: "A week went by, then another week [since the abuse], I prayed, I was quiet but praying." They found in prayer a restorative power: "God healed me through prayer . . . For me, prayer is very healing, prayer is what frees you, what really heals you, cleans you, empties you."

They turned to prayer when they needed strength: "What you need more is prayer because without prayer you cannot have the courage [needed to cope with the abuse]." It also gave them the space and the time to reflect and decide on their actions: "I prayed to see how to overcome it, what to do"; as well as being a source of maintaining hope:

[Did you ever lose hope?] No, I prayed! I told myself: "you are not going to cry in front of the nuns" and, in the break time, I went to the chapel and I prayed and prayed. There was a Christ there and I kissed his feet saying: "Lord *you* know."

Most of the nuns recognised that, at some point the idea of giving up the religious life had crossed their minds, especially in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event or when they were not believed. One nun mentioned that a fellow nun who, was abused by the same priest, indeed left the monastery. However, the nuns in the study explained how they counterattacked these thoughts by reminding themselves of the truth of their religious vocation and the need to be faithful to their call in spite of this painful setback:

If I am honest, the shock I got, when I managed to get him [the priest abusing her] off the top of me and I was left alone, it did cross my mind to throw away the vocation and everything but in a second, in a second, instantaneously I told myself: No! No! God has *not* let me down, *this man* has let me and Jesus down.

They firmly believed that their wish to become nuns came from God and therefore no man could destroy their vocation:

Nobody was going to spoil my plan! Because it was not really *my* plan [it was God's plan].

I cried and then I washed my face. I felt sad . . . but in the chapel I said: "Lord I am here because *you* want me to be here." If I hadn't had a vocation, I wouldn't have borne more than 2 months.

One nun used the allegory of the Parable of the Wise and the Foolish Builders or the House on the Rock to argue that, when a vocation has strong foundations, no "storm" can destroy it.⁵ Another nun described the religious life as a "difficult path" where "obstacles" need to be expected.

They also firmly believed that if God had allowed the abuse to happen, there was a reason for it beyond their limited human understanding and that, ultimately, it was for the best. This was linked to their conviction that spiritual maturation and transformation comes about through the lessons learned during times of darkness and suffering. Therefore, they accept life's adversities with their attached suffering, as this meant accepting God's will:

I didn't rebel [against God] because I think that deep down there is someone who surpasses me and that keeps things under control, that things are *not* out of control... This is what faith means to me: even if I see everything bad, beyond my judgement, there is somebody else whose judgement is superior... I can not know everything, I can *not* tell God: "How do you allow this?" It would be absurd!

Throughout the interviews, the nuns constantly referred to the need to have had an unconditional faith in God to persevere with their religious path after the abuse: "Impossible, without faith, it would have been impossible to overcome it," "if I had not had faith, I would have given everything the boot, everything!"

Secrecy or disclosure

The nuns who had come from abroad and were adapting to the life in a Spanish monastery talked about feeling powerless and afraid of not being believed, especially as the one they had to accuse was a priest, thus jeopardising their chances of leading the contemplative life they longed for and that had involved making considerable sacrifices including, for some, leaving their home countries. They bound themselves to keep the abuse secret; one of them did so for over a year after her arrival. Moreover, in cases where the abuse occurred in their home countries, the potential of discovery by their new community in Spain caused them anguish as they feared it would give them a bad reputation, and might even cause them to be returned to their countries of origin. For one nun especially this threat was very real: a fellow novice in her country of origin was expelled after a letter surfaced accusing her of having had a relationship with a priest, even though she denied it.

Voluntarily disclosing the abuse to their superiors also carried a great deal of anxiety and distress. A nun who was sexually assaulted by a priest talked extensively about the distress of not being believed. Her Mother Superior had believed the priest's denials over the nun's testimony: "This was for me a very hard test, I had to be very strong, I felt very lonely, very lonely, that my Mother [Superior] would not believe me!" However, being believed also caused anxiety, grief, and a sense of losing control over their intimacy. This was the case of another nun who entrusted a priest with her traumatic experience. She found out that he reported it, without her consent, to other priests and to the bishop—and that they used it to resolve rivalries and antipathies within the clergy by getting back at this priest: "I felt they were playing with this issue." Yet no one in the community contemplated taking legal action.

One of the nuns persisted in her accusations against the priest, managing successfully—when more evidence emerged—to have him permanently removed from the monastery. She remembered how she talked to her Mother Superior: “I dug my heels in with the Mother and told her: Mother, please, this man can *never* set foot in here!” Another nun confronted her Mother Superior who was appealing to her vow of obedience to agree to have an intimate meeting with a priest, by reminding her that she also had a vow of celibacy. Another nun even recreated a conversation she had with the priest who sexually harassed her when she was getting ready to enter a monastery; she told him that she wanted to be a nun, but that if she changed her mind, she wanted to get married and not to have a relationship with him adding that “there are many boys out there that are *not* priests and who *can* have relationships with girls,” to remind him of the vow of celibacy that he was breaking.

Community acceptance

The nuns also described the relief and peace they felt when their abuse was believed, and they were offered the support and love of their community. Being understood and believed was a healing and legitimising experience for them. Especially moving was the disclosure of one nun who withheld her long history of abuse at a monastery in her country of origin, from her Spanish community for over a year due to her dreading the consequences of not being believed. She felt uneasy and wrong about not being completely honest with her community; she did not even tell them that she had been a nun before joining them, as she would have had to disclose the abuse as a reason for leaving her previous monastery. She simultaneously told her Mother Superior and Mother Teacher: “They ended up crying and hugging me.” She also revealed it to the rest of her community who also offered support: “I have experienced their sympathy because before I was like a stone.”

Spiritual integration

The traumatic event that provoked pain and anger, and threatened their core beliefs was transformed into a meaningful spiritual narrative that could be incorporated into their religious life, allowing them to recover a sense of safety and balance. There were three main components in their narratives: (a) they felt Jesus was with them while they were being abused, and was himself undergoing the abuse as well; (b) the abuse was seen as a test of the strength of their vocation and their worthiness to become nuns; and (c) they passed this test successfully as they resisted and rejected the abuse with all their might.

Several nuns explained how they felt that Jesus was with them during the abuse: they believed that Jesus was a “victim” too that needed to be comforted by them. They saw the injury committed by the priest as one particularly towards Jesus:

I felt I was very much a victim and I felt Jesus very much a victim too. I felt great solidarity with the Lord: we were both undergoing this horrible moment. He [the

priest] was his [Jesus's] representative . . . it was very hard, but this was what saved me: it was not just me being a victim, I felt that somebody else [Jesus] was a victim too, we were both going through this awful experience.

Jesus's presence was felt not only during the abuse but also afterwards. The nuns described how they did not suffer alone and that Jesus was with them sharing the pain: "Both of us were crying [after the abuse took place]." Seeing Jesus suffering made them grow stronger, temporarily forget their own distress, and feel compelled to soothe his pain: "I felt very close to his suffering," "I felt great sympathy for him." This narrative provided them with a sense of purpose, enabling them to adopt an active role—that of someone in a position to offer comfort—rather than being passive recipients of abuse.

On the other hand, the nuns viewed the abuse of the priests—whom they had approached for help—as another obstacle in their path to the contemplative life they desired, and as a test to prove the strength and worthiness of their vocations. Leaving aside the abuse, for nuns who came from abroad the path, until they entered the monastery, was arduous and costly. Other nuns had to face incredulity and lack of support from friends and relations when they told them about their religious vocations. Understanding the abuse as the ultimate test—that they had successfully passed—reassured them of their worthiness to be God's brides.⁶

Firmly resisting and rejecting the abuse came up repeatedly in the narratives. The nuns saw this rejection as a crucial aspect of "passing the test" that the abuse posed; they all insisted that they had fought and rejected the advances of the priest as much as they could. There was an element of freedom even within the abuse: "You can say yes or no, but if one takes one's life very seriously, you can't." They repeatedly stated, in spite of the moments of self-doubt described before, that the abuse was neither consensual nor provoked by them in any way. Had they not resisted the abuse as they did, they would have felt worse:

If I would have given in [to the sexual assault], or even without ever thinking that this was going to happen, I would have fooled around—because we women are always women and you like to be paid attention to—so if I had fooled around, without wanting anything like that to happen and then it happened, then I would have felt guilty.

I remained with a very clean heart, very clean, as nothing happened between us.

For these nuns, the abuse itself was the only sexual physical experiences they had had. Even if they had boyfriends before coming to the convent, they had decided to preserve their physical purity for becoming God's brides. Interestingly, they not only denied any feelings of physical impurity after the abuse, but described an

increase in their sense of spiritual purity and intimacy with God. Again, their narrative of having God with them during the assault, experiencing the abuse, may have allowed this preservation of their sense of purity. In response to a question about whether she felt unworthy of being God's bride due to the physical consequences of the assault one nun stated:

I think that what really saved me from feeling this way was this precise feeling of being abused with God, to whom I had given myself . . . He was my chosen one, both of us were victims, both of us; therefore, in that sense, I have never had that sensation of being impure.

Posttraumatic growth

The abuse was the most painful experience most of the nuns had experienced. Therefore, forgiving the men who caused them so much pain and who had betrayed all that they held dear posed a great challenge. They wanted to take their faith seriously, and felt that keeping hatred against their abusers was against Jesus's message of forgiveness and love. Truly forgiving the priests was the final stage that allowed them to leave the trauma behind, giving them a sense of freedom and relief. One of the nuns even told the priest directly, who finally repented:

He asked me if I did truly forgive him . . . I told him: I have nothing against you, I am telling you, really, you need to know that I truly forgive you, since then [when she forgave him] I am well.

The nuns also prayed for the priests: praying for God's forgiveness, for the offenders to redeem themselves and for other nuns to be spared such abuse. One of the nuns, who found out that the priest who abused her had suddenly died, prayed for the salvation of his soul: "I asked God to have mercy on him, because I don't know how he died, who knows . . ."

After the abuse they saw priests in a different light, not just spiritually, but in a more physical and gender-specific way. Several times they insisted that priests were men—who consequently could have sexual feelings—as if this fact had not occurred to them prior to the abuse. Previously, they felt that, unlike secular men, priests were safe to be around as they were committed to a life of celibacy. However, after the abuse priests were equated to men and, as such, capable of having sexual feelings: "men are men."

I could have never believed that such a thing could happen to me but it happened and I told myself: "they are human, they are human and they can love, they can have all the feelings that humans have, it is not strange as they are men."

The abuse made them more aware not only of human sexuality but also of people's limitations, and they were wary of future tendencies to idealise other fellow beings:

I realised that we are all human and that you are not a saint because you are a priest; you are not a saint because you are a nun . . . it made me be more realistic. I think I didn't have my feet on the ground then as I do now . . . what happened kept my feet on the ground regarding human reality, their sexuality and that you cannot idealise a person . . . so it's hardly surprising that the most sublime person also has defects.

As explained previously, they became more adept at protecting themselves, thus decreasing the risk of further repetitions. Moreover, they felt more empowered to manage the situation should they ever face a similar event:

Having had an experience like this has helped me to be ready, yes, because something like it could happen another day. In our religious life the people who have access to us are priests . . . So I know what distance to maintain.

Discussion

The present study aims to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between trauma and spirituality, addressing the scarcity of qualitative research on the sexual abuse experiences of religious women. Without underestimating the depth of the nuns' suffering the abuse had triggered, this study used qualitative and ethnographic methods to explore their ways of coping and their attribution of meaning shaped by their contemplative vocations.

Reactions to the trauma

A common theme that emerged strongly throughout the interviews was the fact that the nuns rejected and fought the abuse with all their might. This was a key aspect of the nuns' perception of triumphing over the test that the abuse posed. The nuns showed a remarkable level of determination and strength in resisting the abuse and defending the truth once they disclosed it. This is particularly remarkable when we take into account their weak position at many levels.⁷ First, the relatively subordinate state of women in the Catholic Church (Casas i Tubau, 1994; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1996), compared with the more powerful position held by the perpetrators; the nuns saw the priests as their seniors to whom they owed respect, and a degree of implicit obedience. Secondly, the specific characteristics of these nuns also rendered them more vulnerable to giving in to the abuse: they were in the initial stages of their religious life, or about to enter the monastery; they were sexually inexperienced as well as relatively uninformed about sexuality; and, additionally, some were adapting to a new country. Thirdly, the nuns were completely unprepared for, and taken aback, by the abuse as they felt that their seclusion in a

monastery afforded them safety from both the mundane dangers and evil outside its walls. Finally, the impact of the sexual trauma may have been exacerbated by their vows of celibacy (Sipe, 1995). Indeed, they had given up the prospect of sexual relationships in order to become “God’s brides.” Coupled with the importance placed on sexual renunciation since the early days of Christianity (Brown, 2008), the abuse might have reinforced their vows of consecrated chastity, thereby strengthening their renunciation of sexuality and of men in general.

In a national survey of Catholic nuns in the USA, Chibnall et al. (1998) found that sexually traumatic experiences by religious figures were perceived at the time they occurred as less negative than when the perpetrator was a layperson. The authors suggest that when they were sexually exploited by a priest or another nun, nuns could perceive the abuse as the development of an intimate bond or “special” relationship (Rutter, 1991). On these lines, a qualitative study in the USA looking at the sexual misconduct of clergy with adults from Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and nondenominational congregations recently carried out found that, although several of them experienced verbal and physical violence, the majority identified their experiences as romantic affairs (Garland & Argueta, 2010). It is interesting that none of the nuns in our study saw their experience in the slightest positive light. On the contrary, the fact that the perpetrators were priests was not only infuriating, but made their experiences even more painful. The disappointment of having trusted and valued these priests was compounded by the fact that the priests were not only breaking their own vows but they were also betraying both their religious callings by asking others to do the same.

The main differences between the nuns’ models of responding to and dealing with the trauma posited above was the fact that some of them chose to keep the abuse secret while others disclosed it to senior nuns, their community, or to a priest. Secrecy was also found as a frequent reaction in the national survey of Catholic nuns—almost a quarter of the nuns who were sexually exploited never discussed the experience (Chibnall et al., 1998). Not disclosing the abuse to others could have played an important protective role (Rousseau & Measham, 2007), especially considering the power imbalance existing between the nuns and the perpetrators, the foreign status of some of the nuns and their lack of seniority. On the other hand, not being believed by their Mother Superior after revealing the abuse was one of the most painful and distressing aspects of the nuns’ experience. From a historical viewpoint, religious superiors’ dismissal of reports of sexual abuse, compelling the victims to remain silent, tended to be the norm in order to avoid staining the “honour of the Holy House” (Farrell, 2004, p. 49). It is likely that the nuns’ abuse would have been more readily believed by their superiors had the perpetrators been laymen. Although the Mother Superiors might have genuinely believed in the priests’ innocence, they might have also had an unconscious motivation to prevent damaging the reputation of “God’s representatives on earth” and the image of the church as a whole.

Trauma-related shame is a common experience for women who have been sexually abused; indeed, the response to shame was an important theme in the nuns’

narratives. Rothschild (2000, 2010) emphasised the importance of “sharing your shame” with the person’s support system and of being accepted for the shame to resolve, arguing that friends, family, and spiritual directors can be as valuable as professional help. A significant distinction was noted between the experience of the nuns who were believed and embraced by their community when they disclosed the abuse and those who were not believed or who kept it secret. The former experienced great feelings of relief, acceptance and healing, while the latter suffered higher levels of distress, guilt, and fear of rejection, as well as alienation from the community.

Freyd’s (1996, 1999) theory of betrayal trauma sheds light on the nuns’ reactions to the abuse. *Betrayal trauma* refers to those situations in which the individual has suffered harm or any kind of violation from a person or an institution they depend on. The dependent nature of the relationship with the perpetrator may lead the victim to accept or ignore the abuse so they can preserve the relationship that they perceive as being necessary (Freyd, 1996, 1999; Freyd, DePrince, & Zurbriggen, 2001). The nuns’ abuse can certainly be understood within this framework; their spiritual directors had, despite their own vows of celibacy, violated the nuns’ trust through their abuse. Moreover, in some cases, the nuns had to continue to depend on the priest who committed the abuse in order to receive the sacraments.

In some cases, being fully conscious of the betrayal may be counterproductive to survival, while dissociating oneself from it—isolating awareness of the betrayal—may be more adaptive (DePrince & Freyd, 2002). It was striking how the nuns focused all their anger on the priests, making them solely responsible for the abuse, but how readily they excused and justified their Mother Superiors for not protecting and even for not believing them. Betrayal trauma can have severe consequences in the way the victims subsequently conceptualise themselves, others, and the world (DePrince & Freyd, 2002). The nuns strove to maintain their faith in the goodness of their senior nuns, their communities, their order, and the church, as this was essential to maintaining their status quo. Nevertheless, the abuse greatly damaged their opinions of priests, and men in general, which conversely served to affirm their religious vocations.

Spiritual transformation model following sexual trauma

There were striking similarities in the nuns’ processes of attribution of meaning to the abuse and their resulting religious narratives. The complex framework of social interactions that tend to confirm or weaken a particular worldview, which has been termed its “plausibility structure” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), may be relevant to the observed commonalities. Belief systems need confirming social interactions to have viability. Beliefs such as those held by the nuns about the presence of Jesus with them in times of suffering, or about seeing adversity as a test of their faith and vocation have high plausibility in religious settings like a monastery with their reality being reinforced and confirmed through their incorporation into the everyday discourses and practices (in contrast with this, in a secular setting, these beliefs would be regarded as highly implausible and might even be considered pathological).

Goffman's concept "total institutions" (1961/1990) also can be a useful concept in explaining the similarities among these narratives. Individuals, such as cloistered monks and nuns, who live in enclosed settings and are subjected to the same authority tend to reshape their conceptions of the self and their subjectivities, gradually identifying themselves with the other inmates and with the institution's way of life. Our previous study on contemplative cloistered nuns also made it clear that they viewed any type of adversity or suffering, both psychological and physical, as having a spiritual dimension with an embedded invitation for spiritual growth (Durà-Vilà, Dein, Littlewood, & Leavey, 2010). Thus it is not surprising that they deployed the same religious framework when they faced traumatic experiences; of course, the religious dimensions the nuns applied to their interpretation of the abuse might have also been intensified by the fact that the perpetrators were their priests and spiritual directors.

Victims of sexual assault may differ in the ways they respond and adjust to the traumatic experience (e.g., Bonano et al., 2008; Littleton & Grills-Taquechel, 2011). Resick and Schnicke (1992) developed an information-processing model of trauma response patterns distinguishing assimilation, accommodation, and overaccommodation, which was supported by the findings of studies undertaken amongst women who were survivors of rape (Littleton, 2007; Littleton & Grills-Taquechel, 2011). According to this typology, the nuns seemed to have engaged mostly in the accommodation model. They used a variety of adaptive coping strategies (e.g., seeking support from their community, expressing their emotions to God and/or senior nuns) as they attempted to modify their extant schemas to accommodate the traumatic experience (e.g., that there is goodness in the church, and the religious life, in spite of the corruption of the priest who abused them). The nuns also used strategies that were consistent with those found in previous studies on religious coping, to relieve their distress, particularly their willingness to "turn a situation over" to God (Koenig, 1997; Koenig et al., 2001).

There is growing evidence that PTSD symptoms may be caused and perpetuated by the individual's cognitive efforts to cope with the traumatic experience (e.g., Resick & Calhoun, 2001). Spiritual struggle, as indexed by a set of negative religious cognitions that arise as individuals attempt to cope with stressful experiences, may be an important cognitive mechanism that can predict the development of PTSD symptoms in trauma victims (Wortmann, Park, & Edmondson, 2011). Interestingly, the nuns did not present with any of the subscales of spiritual struggle found in Wortman et al.'s study (2011) to be linked with PTSD symptoms ("punishing God reappraisal," "reappraisal of God's powers," "spiritual discontent"). But the nuns did present with "demonic reappraisal" which was the only subscale of spiritual struggle that did not serve as a mediator of PTSD symptoms (they clearly blamed the abuse to the existence of evil forces maintaining their belief in a benevolent God).

The construction of multiple meanings is associated with resilience: reframing the perception of the traumatic experience helps the restoration of a meaningful universe (Rousseau & Measham, 2007). The resolution of the inner turmoil on an

emotional, spiritual, and cognitive level that the nuns were immersed in came gradually through their reframing of the abuse into a religious narrative. The elaborate narrative that the nuns constructed in the weeks following the abuse allowed them some catharsis, reshaped their sense of identity and reestablished their spiritual balance and self-worth. This narrative took them from being passive recipients of abuse to embracing an active role within the church, compensating for the witnessed evil, as “wives” comforting Jesus. The abuse was perceived not as meaningless but as having a purpose (see Figure 2).

Moreover the nuns engaged in a process of mimesis in which they made an effort to imitate or identify with spiritual people from the past (Young, 2007). In the history of the church, several women who were psychologically and physically abused by their husbands, including Saint Augustine’s mother, Monica, and Catherine of Genoa, were later canonised by the church (Mayne & Nienhuis, 2001). The nuns would likely have heard about their suffering and identified with them. Nevertheless, the figure they explicitly engaged and identified with was Christ, through the pain and desolation experienced in his Passion. They spoke of the abuse becoming their own “cross,” increasing the meaning and purpose of the traumatic experiences and providing them with a sense of hope, like Christ’s resurrection following his suffering on the cross. Their awareness of the researcher’s familiarity with their religious texts and beliefs may have facilitated the wording of their traumatic memories in these biblical terms (e.g. “cross,” “mount of olives,” “chalice”).

Morgenson (1989) suggests that trauma may impact individual’s spirituality in such a way that the traumatic event is perceived as a manifestation of the divine. Once the trauma is transformed into a spiritual experience, it can trigger the positive effects associated with spiritual experiences, with the potential to become life changing and to resolve existential problems (Batson & Ventis, 1982; Boehnlein, 2007). It is unclear to what extent the trauma was reframed by the nuns into such a

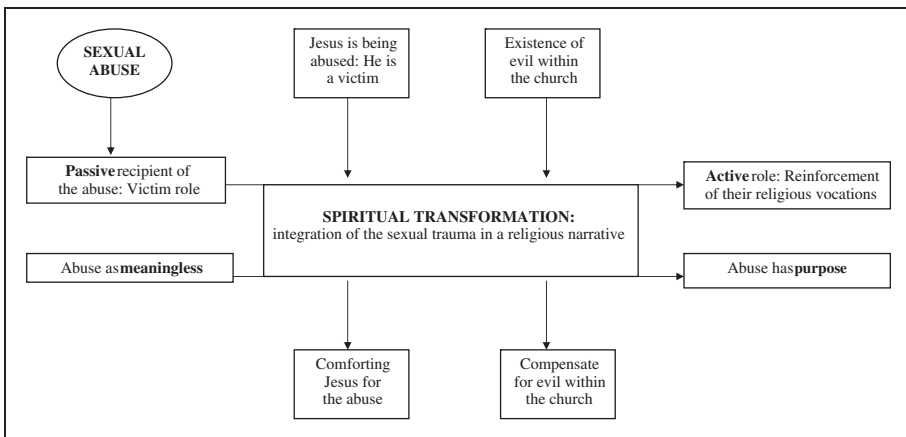


Figure 2. Spiritual transformation of the sexual trauma.

powerful narrative that it became a spiritual experience which allowed them to feel the presence of God. Certainly, viewing the abuse as a spiritual experience that reinforced their religious lives and their own worth was not only more acceptable and less painful for them, but also made it something of great value and meaning.

Formal psychiatric diagnostic interviews were not conducted, hence the presence or absence of an active psychiatric disorder as well as the balance of risk and resilience factors in the nuns were not specifically addressed by the methodology of the study. These are limitations of the study since the presence of a psychiatric disorder could have influenced the degree to which the transformation of the traumatic experience into a religious narrative was able to influence recovery. However, as stated earlier on in the paper, the nuns did not seem to fulfil diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder, given that no pathological symptoms emerged during the course of the interviews.

Dealing with trauma in ways that preserved their vocations

Although the idea of giving up their religious lives crossed their minds in the immediate aftermath of the abuse, there was not a sense—in spite of all the difficulties that they had to face (e.g., not being believed, having to keep seeing the priest)—that they seriously considered abandoning their religious lives: they felt compelled to stay in order to purify and compensate for the evilness that they had witnessed within the church; they had a desire to comfort Jesus against whom, in their view, the outrage was principally directed; and they had a firm belief that their vocations came from God, and thus a man's actions could not spoil God's plan. Of course, there were other motivational factors that might have played a role, including: loyalty towards the church; the great investment in pursuing their religious lives (leaving boyfriends, families, even their own countries); the consequences of leaving (having to face the job market, finding accommodation, letting their families down); or the lack of more attractive alternatives outside the monastery's walls. The sense of loyalty, not just towards the church, but also, and more particularly, towards the order and the individual monasteries might have been intensified by the fact that contemplative orders are under considerable pressure for survival in Spain—there is a severe decline in vocations that is seriously threatening the continuity of their way of life, with increasing closures of monasteries.

Conclusion

The testimonies of these women remind us of the importance of contextualising trauma. Taking into account spiritual aspects when helping religious people coming to terms with trauma may allow religious narratives that incorporate the trauma to unfold. The nuns' understanding of their abuse in the light of their religious beliefs enabled the trauma to be transformed into a potential catalyst for growth. While the nuns battled with the pain and confusion of the event, the attribution of spiritual meaning to the trauma tipped the balance away from

despair and isolation, and toward further understanding and healing. Although their situation as contemplative nuns, with its long periods of daily prayer and silence fostered this process, it seems likely that a monastic life is not a prerequisite for this process and other deeply religious people may have similar experiences. Thus, clinicians working with religious trauma victims should be mindful of the importance of taking into account their spiritual beliefs.

Although in the cases presented here, the nuns' religious beliefs seemed to have had a positive impact in their well-being, it would be naïve to think that this is always the case. Religious beliefs can be a source of meaning and resilience but also have the potential to be damaging (Griffith, 2010). Clinicians need to be alert to maladaptive cognitions and coping reactions in traumatised religious patients. Recovery may be promoted by challenging negative religious narratives such as those that place moral blame on the self, or that intensify feelings of abandonment. A dysfunctional image of God may impair therapeutic progress by provoking a negative religious interpretation of trauma. In these cases, referral to a culturally appropriate spiritual director may be beneficial (Cook & Guertin, 2010; Stone, 2004).

Evidence from meta-analyses of epidemiological studies, showing that only an average of 20% of victims of traumatic events will develop posttraumatic stress disorder (Yehuda & McFarlane, 1995), has had little effect on the general belief that the effects of trauma are irremediably pathological (Rousseau & Measham, 2007). We hope that our study contributes to challenging the medicalisation of human suffering, and questioning the dominant models that pathologise trauma as invariably leading to psychopathology.

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Notes

1. http://www.walking-wounded.net/html/christians_rape__sexual_abuse__abortion.html
2. The nuns of the study are contemplative: cloistered, leading a community life devoted to prayer and work, secluded within the walls of the monastery. Conversely, nuns who belong to active-life orders work outside their monastery in the service of others (e.g., schools, hospitals).
3. The study was self-financed as part of a doctoral project.
4. The grille separates their entrance hall from the cloister to which only the nuns had access.
5. The Parable of the Wise and the Foolish Builders or the House on the Rock appears in the New Testament: Matthew 7:24–27 and Luke 6:46–49. It narrates how the wise man

- builds his house on rock so when the storm and the flood come it does not fall unlike the foolish man who builds it on the sand.
6. The nuns undertook the Vow of Virginity or Consecrated Chastity: they gave up human love to become the wives of Christ, keeping their “hearts undivided”, making their service to God “unconditional”, “loving Him with an exclusive love” (Second Vatican Council, 1967, p. 410).
 7. A recent article appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter* revealing that sexual abuse of nuns by priests is a serious problem particularly in Africa and other parts of the developing world. The published information was based on five reports presented to the Vatican – some recently, some known for at least seven years – written by senior members of women’s religious orders and by an American priest alleging that some Catholic clergy exploited their position of authority to obtain sexual favours from nuns in exchange for things such as permission or certification to work in a given diocese. The article also indicated that especially in Africa, a continent with high prevalence of HIV and AIDS, young nuns may sometimes be seen as “safe targets” of sexual activity by the priests (Allen & Schaeffer, 2011).

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