

INTEGRATION OF SEXUAL TRAUMA INTO A RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE

FORGIVENESS,

RESOLUTION

AND GROWTH

AMONGST

CONTEMPLATIVE NUNS



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THE PRESENT STUDY

- Ethnographic study exploring the experiences of **5 Catholic contemplative nuns sexually abused by priests**
- Model of the spiritual transformation of the sexual abuse

Why did they tell me about the abuse?

- Long contact, confidence & openness
- Being a practising psychiatrist
- Previously discussed collectively?
- **Spontaneously emerged during the interviews when they were asked to describe a time when they felt intensely sad**

PARTICIPANTS

- **5 Sisters**
- **Anonymity**
 - Names of monastery & Order & location are withheld
- **Ages**
 - 20s to mid-40s
- **Nationalities**
 - 2 Spanish
 - 3 born abroad
- **Belonged to several monasteries in Spain**
- **Diverse educational & socio-economic backgrounds**
- **Different levels of seniority**



BACKGROUND

Trauma & Spirituality

- A traumatic event challenges core beliefs and assumptions, including religious and spiritual ones
- Developing a spirituality which allows a comprehension of the abuse will impact on the resolution of the trauma, their posttraumatic adjustment, and their long-term recovery
- Religious coping

SEXUAL TRAUMA EXPERIENCES

- Various types of sexual trauma: violence, exploitation, coercion and mental and physical stress
- Intense negative emotional response following the abuse - completely outside the usual range of human experience (APA, 2001)
 - sexual advances as 'terrible' and 'unthinkable'

- Preparing to take the habit or postulants/novices
- Perpetrators were priests previously known & trusted by them
- 2 years to > 20 years ago
- Spain / nuns' countries of origin
- Single incidents / enduring
- In the monastery / outside



SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION MODEL FOLLOWING SEXUAL TRAUMA

Their response and recovery patterns were full of similarities



Main difference:

- choice of **disclosing** the abuse or keeping it **secret**

STAGES

1. SHOCK & DISTRESS

2. SELF-DOUBT

3. ANGER & MISTRUST

4. WITHDRAWAL & MEDITATION

5. SECRECY OR DISCLOSURE

6. COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE

**7. SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION AND
FORGIVENESS**

8. POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

1. SCHOCK AND DISTRESS

Existence of evil within the church:
feeling overwhelmed and perplexed

'for such a thing to happen was impossible'

'I could have never imagined it'

'I suddenly descended from heaven to earth'

*'for God's sake! Your first thought is:
how can he [the priest] act in such an evil way!?''*

Psychological & physical distress

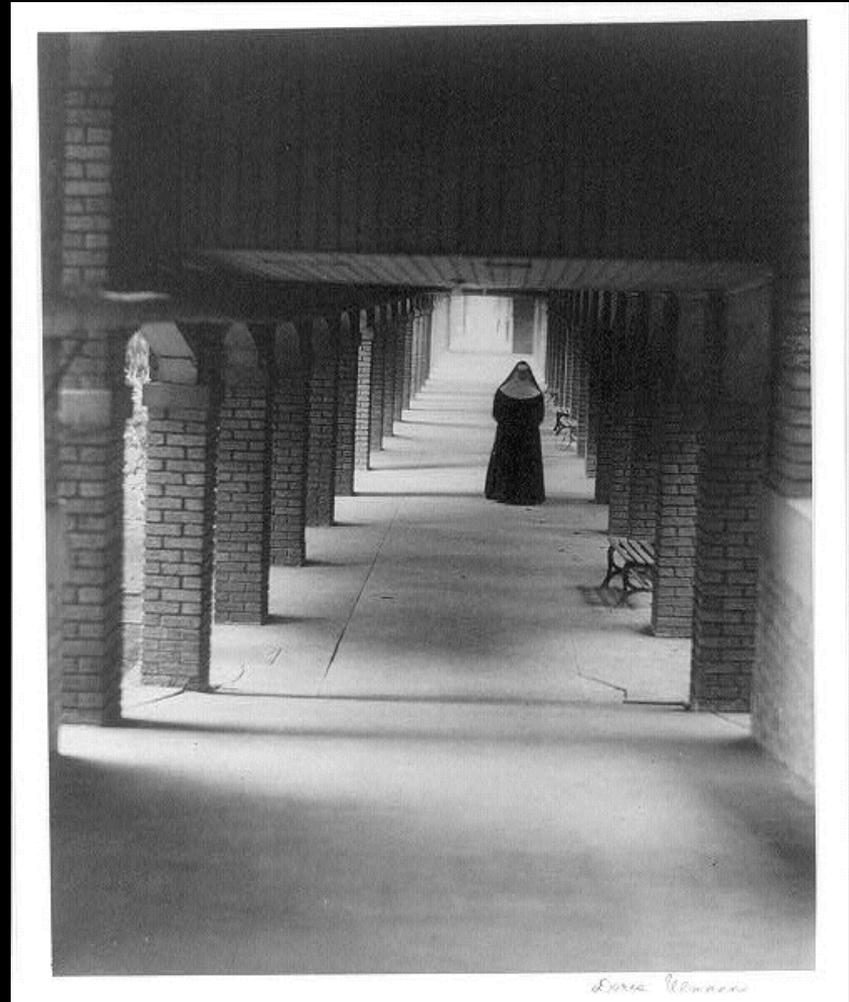
- Symptoms of severe distress
- Concerns: social & spiritual
- No current psychiatric morbidity

PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

- Helplessness
- Shock
- Overwhelmed
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Poor concentration
- Shame
- Self-doubt
- Afraid
- Powerlessness
- Disappointment
- Frustration
- Vulnerability
- Feeling trapped
- Guilt
- Distress

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- Crying
- Poor sleep
- Poor appetite
- Tiredness



CONCERNS

SOCIAL

- Fear of discovery
- Fear of not being believed
- Loss of reputation
- Fear of being expelled
- Need to be honest with the community
- Losing control of their intimacy
- Protecting themselves / others from priests
- 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

2. SELF-DOUBT

- **Doubting their own innocence**
- **Feelings of shame & guilt**

‘When I recovered from the shock [of the abuse], I saw it as clear abuse, that I was a victim. But ... with the Mother [Superior] telling you that it can not be, that he is a good priest, and he denying it...deep down a little doubt remains... and you end up blaming yourself....’

3. ANGER & MISTRUST

Distress at having to receive sacraments from the same priest who abused them

Anger about having their first sexual experience in such a traumatic way

'... before entering [the monastery], I fell 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. So to me that had been in love but never experienced this physical arousal, it was he [the priest] who caused it!'

Mistrust in priests & maintaining boundaries

'It makes you regard priests distrustfully'

'After all, you need to guard yourself from any man, you need to keep a distance'

'I now have my eyes wide open'

Ready to excuse their senior nuns

'The Mother did not believe it [the sexual abuse]: he was a very spiritual man, he was the man of trust of the community'

'The Mother [Superior] ... is so kind hearted that she thinks good of everyone'

4. WITHDRAWAL & MEDITATION

**Crying and praying:
sources of relief,
strength & hope**

'I cried and prayed'

*'God healed me through prayer
... prayer is very healing,
prayer is what frees you,
what really heals you, cleans
you, empties you'*



Holding firmly to their religious vocation

'... when I managed to get him 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... I told myself: No! ...God has not let me down, this man has let me and Jesus down'

'Nobody was going to spoil my plan [of being a nun]! Because it was not really my plan [it was God's plan]'

Not rebelling against God but trusting him

'... deep down there is someone [God] who exceeds me and that keeps things under control, that things are not out of control . . . I can not know everything, I can not tell God: 'How do you allow this?' It would be absurd! There is someone who exceeds me for my own good and that I need to use even the negative to do good'



5. SECRECY OR DISCLOSURE

- **Fear of their contemplative lives being jeopardised by not being believed**
 - E.g. a letter accusing a novice of having had a relationship with a priest back in her own country → expulsion

Defending the truth of their accusations

'This was for me a very hard test, I had to be very strong, I felt very lonely...because the Mother would not believe me!'

'I dug my heels in when talking to the Mother and told her: Mother, please, this man can never set foot in here!'

6. COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE

- Relief at being believed and understood
- Being comforted by the community

'they ended up crying and hugging me'

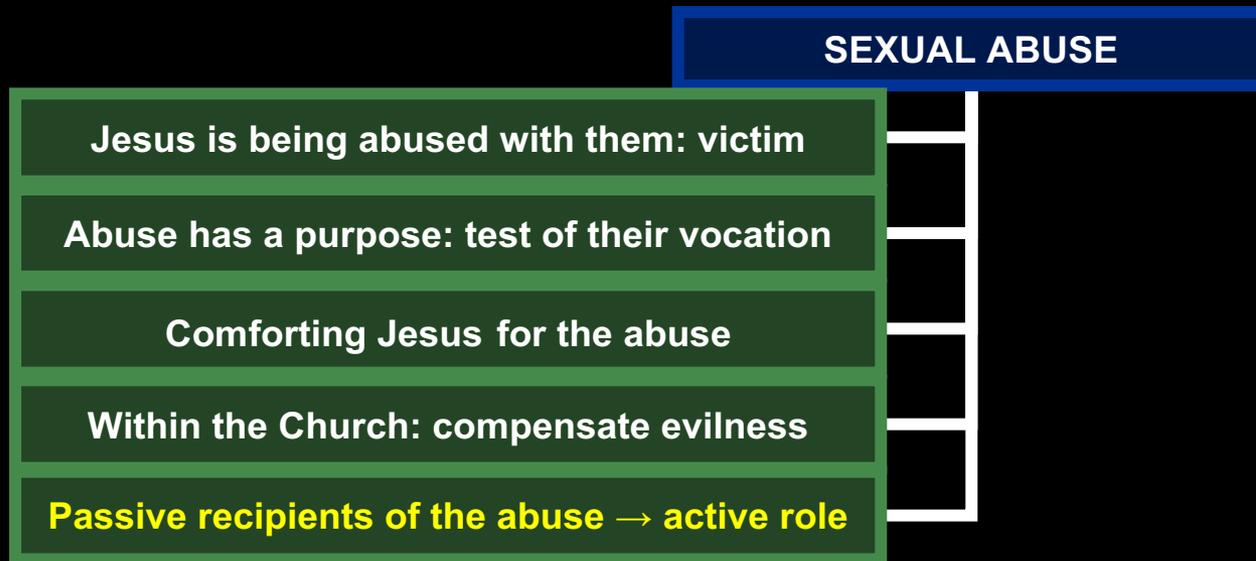
'I have experienced their sympathy because before I was like a stone'

7. SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION

Transformation of the abuse into a SPIRITUAL NARRATIVE

- a) Jesus himself was abused with them
- b) The abuse is seen as a test to prove their vocations & worthiness
- c) They passed the test successfully as they resisted & rejected the abuse

Spiritual transformation of the abuse



'I felt I was very much a victim and I felt God very much a victim too. I felt great solidarity with the Lord: we were both undergoing this horrible moment. He [the priest] was his [God's] representative, God did not want this to happen at all... it was very hard but this was what saved me: we were both going through this awful experience'



***'I was being
abused with God,
to whom I had
given myself . . . he
was my chosen
one, both of us
were victims'***



8. POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

Forgiveness of their abusers & praying for them

Making them more in touch with reality, more aware of human nature & sexuality

'I matured, I realised that we are all human and that you are not a saint because you are a priest... 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'

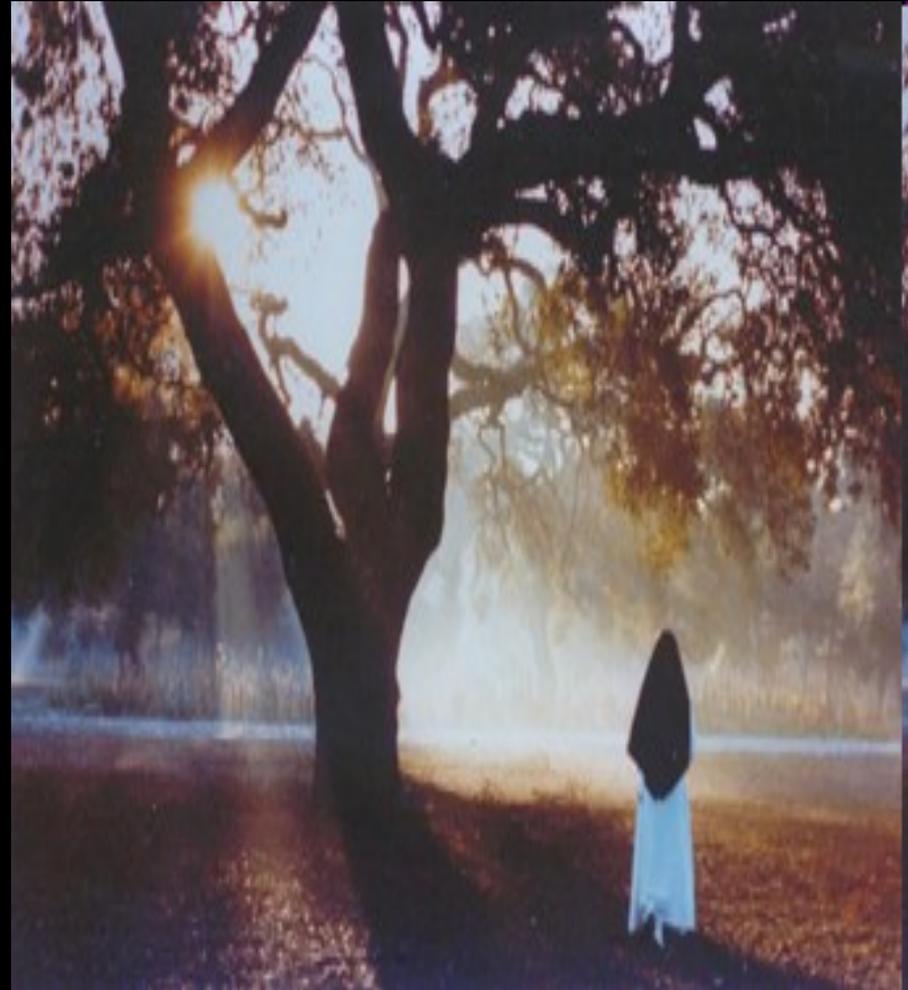
Mimesis

- Identification was **Christ** and his Passion:
'cross', 'mount of olives',
'chalice', 'forgive them for they know not what they do'
- Christ's suffering was a central element - he was a victim who was suffering too - enabling them to **transcend the self, forgetting their own pain, focusing on Christ's pain**



CREATION OF A RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE

The **resolution** of their inner turmoil came gradually through their reframing of the abuse into a symbolic religious narrative → **forgiveness** → re-establishment of their spiritual balance



In times where...

... medicine encourages us to regard emotional difficulties as diseases rather than as spiritual questions (Littlewood, 2004)

We hope that our study has contributed to challenging the medicalisation of human suffering, questioning the dominant models that pathologise trauma as invariably leading to psychopathology (Rousseau & Measham, 2007)

Thanks!



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