

Abuse: the causes and consequences

Carlos Gomes Esteves

On the occasion of an international meeting of priests and deacons, Carlos Gomes Esteves – an Argentine psychologist, psychotherapist and lecturer, as well as being a married permanent deacon – shared some input to better understand the problem of abuse and its consequences. The starting point is the conviction that this is a problem, as Pope Francis has often said, that concerns the whole people of God.

A cry silenced and ignored in the past, which is currently being heard with its full force, concerns the suffering of many victims of various forms of abuse: sexual, power, spiritual, conscience and psychological. To respond to this cry, the Church, communities and societies need witnesses of good practice; of people who know how to generate trust, safeguard it and be reliable; people open to dialogue, capable of indicating possible and not imposed paths; wise healers of others, especially the most vulnerable, and who can help heal wounds and traumas.

I do not intend to provide information here that most of you already have access to. I would like to reflect not simply "from the outside" – which, from the methodological point of view, is undoubtedly good – but also "from within", that is, together with all the people of God to which we belong, in order to be able, with God's grace, to contribute to transforming a culture that lives in us and that is linked to the very roots of abuse. It is not easy and there is a lot of resistance both conscious and unconscious. We can risk pointing to scapegoats and remain detached, like the Pharisee who says: "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other men" (cf. *Lk* 18:11).

Taking on reality all together

Pope Francis, in a letter addressed to the bishops of Chile on May 15, 2018, says that we must have "the determination to collectively assume that reality in which we are all involved – me first – and from which no one can excuse himself by shifting the problem onto the shoulders of others"¹.

Indicating the direction we must take, he quotes John 3:30: "He must increase; I, on the other hand, must diminish" and urges us to ensure "that this is a time of conversion". We will not be a prophetic Church if we do not embark on a path of decentralization, which takes us

beyond our individual and collective self-referencing, with an attitude which gives priority to the other and the Other.

We must "discern how to generate new ecclesial dynamics in keeping with the Gospel and that help us to be better missionary disciples capable of recovering prophecy". In particular, it is essential that ministers do not appropriate to themselves the exclusivity of the voice of God – one of the elements of spiritual abuse – and of the anointing of the Holy Spirit conferred on all the faithful.

The Pope continues: "The problems that are experienced today within the ecclesial community cannot be solved only by facing concrete cases and reducing them to a removal of people; this – and I say this clearly – must be done, but it is not enough, we need to go further. It would be irresponsible on our part not to search deeply at the roots and structures that have allowed these concrete events to take place and to keep continuing."

Spiritual abuse

All abuses have a common factor which is the abuse of power. What changes are the forms in which it is expressed and which determine the type of abuse: spiritual, power, trust, sexual.

"*The abuse of power*" – says Dr. Katharina Anna Fuchs of the Institute of Psychology at the Pontifical Gregorian University – "always comes to light when there is an imbalance of power caused by position/authority/ecclesiastical hierarchy/age/life or work experience or social status". And she continues: "Pastoral or spiritual relationships are often characterized by an asymmetry between those who are accompanied and those who accompany; the same is true for founders of religious movements or superiors of religious communities"².

Linked to the abuse of power is the *abuse of trust*: "It means the violation or transgression of boundaries in trusting spiritual relationships, since hope and trust are placed in the person of the superior, the companion or the founder."

Going deeper into the subject, Dr. Fuchs provides us with elements to broaden the horizon of our conscience and realize our responsibility and the serious damage we can cause "in the name of God", of the instrumentalization of the Gospel itself, with arguments that have nothing to do with it but are used to justify abuse.

Abuse of power and symmetry-asymmetry

Relationships between people are necessarily symmetrical and asymmetrical. It is rightly observed that the abuse of power generally presupposes an asymmetry as a condition of domination over the other. Focusing more on this will help us discern what can be, in the confusion, a reason for abuse.

– Symmetry is *essential*. It has to do with the dignity of the human person. It is based on the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore equal and distinct, and on the unparalleled and unsurpassable dignity of children of God conferred by baptism.

When, in Christian anthropology, we speak of the absolute value of the person and consider its constitutive features, we say that they are manifestly a unique being, the work of God, unrepeatable, endowed with self-awareness (which no one can take away from them) and

have a freedom that allows them to discover and give meaning to their life, a responsible being, destined for communion, self-transcendence, etc.

When we talk about essential symmetry, we are talking about this: about what must not be distorted in any way, about what must always be guarded and respected.

- But there is also the necessary *asymmetry*, which is not essential but *functional*. I say this in the best and positive sense of the term, in the manner of Paul, who teaches us that not all parts of the body have the same function, but all are important and make sense because they belong to the same body. The problem arises when we confuse things and consider functional asymmetry essential - perhaps not from a theoretical point of view but as a fact. In my view, the abuse of power, among other things, is based on this confusion.

Functional asymmetry should never appropriate supremacy over essential symmetry. In practice, we can experience functional asymmetry improperly as essential, when we make it an element of support for an unauthentic self-esteem, based on a false superiority, confusing the role with the totality of the person and thus reducing the essential symmetry to a mere rhetorical expression. An asymmetry experienced in this way not only depersonalizes the other, but often also those who exercise it, causing them to end up captivated by their domination like a Narcissus looking at their image reflected in the water.

When the accidental (role) is confused with the essential, the person clings to the role in such a way that the role replaces the person and imposes itself on the other. When the person is then stripped of his role, he feels empty, insecure, disoriented. His service has become like a personal armor, his role a reassurance to himself. In this way, the role becomes the center that marks abusive differences instead of being at the service of the dignity that makes us brothers and sisters.

I think that being attentively aware of this will help us not to be seduced by the role, which often feeds our ego and our vanity, and will make us live it rather as a service to God and to others and which will then allow us, at the same time, to develop our personhood with love and humility.

A change to be made

Silvano Cola, a priest and psychologist who died in 2007, prophetically urged us to change everything that has to do with the roots of abuse. I would like to refer to what he told us during a stay he made in Argentina, particularly with reference to two passages, based on my notes from that encounter with him.

The superior-subject relationship. Cola observed: one commands and the others must obey. If I don't command, I have to obey. In the Trinity this is not the case, because God the Father is indeed the principle and, when he generates the Son out of love, he affirms himself as Father, but the Son is equal and distinct from the Father. Three equal and distinct persons. Three centuries had to pass before the Fathers of the Church were able to affirm this dogmatic formulation: the Trinity is formed by three equal and distinct persons. Why was there resistance to that idea at the time Don Silvano wondered. Because the emperors did not accept the Trinitarian principle of communion. They were Arians and for Arianism the one who governs is superior to the other and is the one and only power.

Against this background, we can understand why Jesus speaks of the sovereignty of the one who puts himself at the service of everyone: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mk 10:42-43). In fact, there is nothing in the Gospel that speaks of dominion over others: "there is only one Master and you are all brothers". "And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father" (Cfr. Mt 23:8-9).

Baptismal and ministerial priesthood. Don Silvano recounted with a touch of irony: "In the seminary they prepared us to think of ourselves as more than emperors, to the point that the priest came to consider himself more than Mary. Before we became priests, it was said, the guardian angel walked to our right, then to the left because we were more worthy."

In the past, Baptism was not thought to configure the person as a priest, prophet and king in real terms and we reasoned as if not everyone was baptized or possess the Holy Spirit. In reality, even today there are those who think that the Church *is* the hierarchy. Jesus, on the other hand, founded it as the people of God. Within this, the ordained priesthood is a service that the bishop confers for the benefit of the community, just as the apostles created the diaconate to serve the community, not to command it.

That the sacrament of orders is important because of the spiritual powers it confers cannot be doubted from a Catholic perspective. But if these powers are not exercised as a service of love, the ordained priesthood condemns itself.

And Cola concluded: the baptismal priesthood is called royal and also Marian. It is the essential priesthood. If we do not live that, we are not in God, and this applies to everyone: priests, bishops, deacons, laity.

1 Translation taken from the Italian version of the Letter published on the website of "La Civiltà Cattolica".
<https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/news/papa-francesco-ai-vescovi-cileni-15-maggio-2018/>.

2 Notes from the author from a talk given in Castel Gandolfo on 14 September 2022 at a meeting of the Area Delegates of the Focolare Movement.