

Spiritual Direction after Sexual Abuse by Clergy: Observations on the Spiritual Journeys of Some NZ Women Survivors. By Trish McBride

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In producing this article I've worn several hats: as a spiritual director, a counsellor, as a member for some years of Susanna network of NZ women survivors of sexual abuse by clergy, and as a former member (for four years) of the Wellington, New Zealand, Catholic committee which handles complaints about sexual abuse by priests and religious. My analysis is based on the experiences of 16 contributors to the book *Garlands from Ashes: Healing from Clergy Abuse* by Sonja Grace¹, and of 6 members of a survivor support network (all used with permission).

Many spiritual directors are skilled and compassionate listeners to those who have been sexually abused. When the situation has been compounded because the abuser is a clergy person or religious, there are more layers of healing to be done, as this type of abuse strikes at the very spirit of a victim. Any spiritual or religious understandings will have been badly damaged if not destroyed. The undemanding, non-judgemental, accepting companionship provided by a spiritual director on the healing journey for survivors of sexual abuse by clergy can be a vital, even life-saving, ingredient of recovery. Finding a sensitive spiritual director or prayer companion² who is aware of and informed about the results of sexual abuse by clergy can be an invaluable step towards a gentle exploration of the changing perception of the Divine Reality.

Spirituality encompasses the whole of life. Spirituality is - to quote perceptive Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson - "The loves which give meaning to our lives"³ And after sexual abuse whether in childhood or adulthood, most meanings are generally in need of re-framing. Specifically, I'll focus on the effects of sexual abuse on some women's spiritual understandings and practices, and the changing nature of their relationship with the Divine and with the organisations/Christian churches in the context of which the abuse took place. I have chosen the word 'effects' rather than 'damage', because although many crucial things are damaged or killed by sexual abuse by a member of the clergy, it seems to be the long-term experience of most survivors that something new is eventually born phoenix-like from the ashes, a new way of sustaining the spiritual core of life.

There is already a good body of literature on the impact of sexual abuse by members of the clergy (see Resource List), but no-one, as far as I know, has focussed specifically on what happens to the individual spiritualities of victims/survivors. To fill this gap, I want to share what I know of the spiritual journeys of some New Zealand women survivors of sexual abuse by clergy to give spiritual directors a clearer sense of the issues and what can help.

Prevalence: US statistics suggest that 10-15% of clergy are involved in sexual abuse of minors or women. And that is across all denominations. Celibacy does not seem to be a determining factor. Nothing I've seen (media reports plus anecdotal evidence) gives me reason to believe New Zealand statistics are any different. Susanna Group over several years called for full and detailed statistics of known clergy offending to be compiled and published by the Catholic Church⁴. Despite an earlier apparent commitment to do so⁵, this has now been deemed undesirable because: 'In a country as small as New Zealand it would be very easy for people to try to match up individuals with statistical data and they may mistake people's identities'.⁶

US research⁷ has 39.9% of US women religious having suffered sexual assault, with the majority of perpetrators being male clergy, often, sadly, their spiritual directors. My sense is that it has been an occupational hazard which exists not just in Africa.

Setting: For there to be an opportunity to be abused by clergy in the first place, there will almost invariably have been a personal or family involvement with a church. This implies some assent to (a) the traditional Christian teaching, eg God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, (b) the concept of Christian community, and (c) the understanding of the clergyman as a good, trustworthy person, well versed in the role of ‘caring for the flock’, a spokesman for God, the giver of safe and godly advice, and the possessor of special knowledge and powers. When this whole set of relationships and meanings is destroyed by betrayal of trust, there is great distress and confusion: the core of the world view must be re-constructed. Bishop Robinson speaking at the 1998 Melbourne Breaking the Boundaries Conference said ‘Sexual abuse is a bulldozer gouging a road through this fragile ecosystem of sexuality, love and meaning’⁸

Culture: Women in the churches have been taught for centuries both to accept the male view of spiritual matters, and to tend men’s sexual needs. Most Christian churches have been based on the spiritual primacy of men over women. The more literally Scripture is taken, the likelier it is that the concept of male headship is important - within families and within churches. Even where women have been ‘allowed’ a pastoral role, this embedded culture does not disappear. Men through the whole language of the church (Father God, King of Heaven, etc) know at a deep and possibly unrecognised level that they as males are identified by the Church with this God’s authority in a way that women are not. And women know this too.

These factors are likely to have influenced women who have been drawn into a sexual encounter or relationship with a clergyman. They may have allowed advances, perhaps against their own better judgement, or even welcomed them, often because of some sense that closeness to God’s representative might enable them to be closer to God (which is why they go to church in the first place), and to experience some deep healing of earlier hurts. Clergymen are people whose very role says ‘you can trust me’ and ‘I will show you the way to God’. They have been trusted to ‘know best.’

Outcomes: Summarised research on results of sexual abuse by professionals (including clergy) by Ellen Luepker in 1996⁹ indicated that between 1/3 and 1/2 of respondents ‘changed their denomination’. For the church, if it really wishes to know what happens to the faith of victims, it is necessary to explore this in more depth. That brief phrase gives little inkling of the tortured path to be negotiated by survivors as they re-construct a set of meanings and metaphors that are life-giving, while discarding those which, however precious, have been polluted beyond repair.

Damage inflicted by a clergyman who stands at the intersection of the worlds of God, church and men causes not just ripples but tidal waves in all directions, destroying the victim’s perceptions of previously safe realities of God, Church and community. The long journey of healing for a sexual abuse survivor can lead through many stages of discovering a new spiritual path. The effects of clergy sexual abuse on women’s religious beliefs and practices are influenced by the extent of their faith in, and commitment to God, Jesus, the church, its teaching, and the clergy.

Fowler’s Stages of Faith¹⁰ may be a useful lens for a spiritual director through which to view the results of this abuse. The degree of already internalised relationship with the spiritual dimension, and the stage of development of trust in one’s own inner process will have a bearing on what faith and practices can survive separation from faith in ministers and faith in churches. For some women, these are so closely intertwined that when one goes they all go. It seems this is a likely outcome when the abuse is experienced in childhood, though a much later adult re-approach to a Christian community is sometimes initiated.

The women in the sample who were abused as adults have a range of responses which evolved over

a period of years. They are likelier originally to be in a church 'under their own steam', some with perhaps unexamined beliefs, others deeply committed. After the abuse some rejected the whole spiritual package; some held onto a faith in the Divine but now express that outside a church context and often outside a Christian framework; some adapted their faith and God-image privately and maintained contact with their Christian community and its worship; others retained a traditional Christian faith and expression but changed or left their denomination.

Some women could reconcile the belief in Jesus or a Christ figure with a female Deity/Goddess in a way that felt personally healing. They acknowledged the Gospel Jesus was affirming of women and had and has empathy for broken people, a loving will to heal wounds. They looked to him for this healing for themselves. But for almost all a male God-the-Father no longer felt safe. Many found that their increased sensitisation to power issues, patriarchy and male God-language made the churches impossible places to feel basic safety. They then discovered an adverse reaction to those strands in the Bible and Sunday liturgies, thus losing some hitherto cherished sources of comfort.

It is crucial that a spiritual director of a victim-survivor be able to take care with language about God, and not revert to the traditional 'He' if this is no longer the directee's language. And avoid such phrases as 'God is penetrating your life' – this really happened to one directee, re-traumatising her, and making that particular spiritual direction relationship unsustainable!

Others again could no longer tolerate the idea of a male Saviour or mediator, so Jesus, along with the rest of the male power structure, was abandoned altogether. Many women found it necessary to avoid the specific ministers, church buildings, denominations, or images (eg crosses, stained glass windows) which are likely to trigger trauma responses. For all survivors, most other male clergy are deemed risky - who knows who else 'does it'?

Here is a statement from a woman who wrote an unsent letter to the perpetrator. She wanted to share this experience to let the wider community understand the depths of distress and confusion that can be caused:

"I have to a large extent left the church. There is no doubt that my decision has been made inevitable, because of my own personal experience of you, the representative of Christ. The pain of having to leave is deep. I feel I have been robbed by you of my baptismal birth-right. The dreams I had of growing and ministering in the church have been shattered. It became increasingly difficult for me to contribute at parish level because my trust in priests has been destroyed. I feel unable to receive the Eucharist because I do not feel in union with the church. Naturally there is no possibility of my participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation because of the abusive experience of this sacrament at your hands. It is incomprehensible that I should now share anything of consequence from my spiritual journey with a priest. Perhaps my basic faith has been strengthened rather than weakened by the abuse, however the practice of that faith has changed markedly. So too has my relationship with my Godde. The very close relationship I used to have with Jesus is now untenable because he is a male. I have lost my place and role in the church, the sacraments, my relationship with Jesus, any ability to form close trusting relationships with men. That is a very high price to have paid. How can a priest kiss a woman with the blood of Christ still on his lips? How can a priest hold a woman close to his body knowing he was more ashamed of his erection than of his behaviour towards her? Do you see the echoes of Jesus' Last Supper perverted by your selfish abusive behaviour? Can you see the betrayal? Can you see my body crucified?"

The week after this experience, realising its full horror she attempted to take her own life. Ten years on, I'm glad to say healing is at last evident.

What Helps Healing:

Ultimately most survivors learned to look to themselves for healing, to listen to their inner promptings, to ask themselves 'What do I need to do?' 'How safe does this feel?' This is an area where coaching and support from a spiritual director can be invaluable. Women often discovered the answers to these questions were best answered with the replacement of religious/ Christian symbols and rituals by another set, or by the unmediated experiences of nature, a sunset, beach or bush. Some found comfort in the un-demanding offerings of New Age spirituality.

Rituals: Personal and group rituals, usually for women only, were found helpful by some. These may have been Christian in flavour, non-specific, or actively pagan or wiccan. There they were likely to encounter equality among participants, symbols, rituals and metaphors that feel real and relevant, womanly language, an atmosphere of safety and respect. This focus could provide a new safer community to replace the one that was lost, as other participants are likely to have similar views for their own varied reasons, and provide safe appropriate personal support.

Creativity: Dance, writing, art-work and music helped re-establish connection with the Self and the deepest feelings. These may have been undertaken privately, in a spiritual direction or therapeutic setting, or at community-based courses. A new symbol system and spiritual understanding could be the gift of these activities. Again encouragement from a spiritual director could support this process.

Therapy: A skilled therapist was likely to be also necessary to help deal with depression (possibly to the extent of suicidality), post-traumatic stress, confusion about sexuality and other significant psychological problems resulting from the abuse. Either a spiritual director or a therapist could make an appropriate referral if a client was not already having therapy or spiritual direction. Some team-work between the spiritual director and the therapist was sometimes useful.

Literature on the topic of sexual abuse by clergy (see Resource List) was helpful to put the experience into context and show the bigger picture of abusive church cultures. And finding the range of writings and languages of feminist theologies could provide some understanding of the 'why' of it all. Elizabeth Johnson¹¹, Mary Daly¹² and others have articulated the issues of women's relationship with God and church in ways that demonstrate that 'the personal' does indeed both become and flow back from 'the political'.

Laying a Complaint: A respectful, compassionate and **effective** complaint process may perhaps have enabled a complainant to remain within the church community; or to know that even if she needed to leave, that there were at least a few people in the institution who actually understood - which may have kept an avenue of communication open. If the process was ineffective or badly handled it almost inevitably compounded the damage both to the complainant and her relationship with the church. 'Effective' included visible on-going discipline and monitoring of the perpetrator, because most complainants took this step with the aim of preventing similar damage to other women. Some churches have better track records at this than others, and there have been many improvements in the last decade.

Leaving the Church: For many women healing simply was not possible in a church context. Bishop Robinson said he has found the way he is very often able to be useful to survivors is to help them leave as comfortably as possible if that is their choice¹³. He has listened well, and reflected humbly and honestly. This recognition re-empowers survivors as they find their unique way to heal. It defends and safeguards their inner wisdom, as a spiritual director would normally do. What I see in *Garlands from Ashes*, and know from my own experience and networking is that survivors usually end up out of the church, while the perpetrators remain enshrined within it, and probably still in ministry

of some sort within their institutions. This is a problem!

Support Groups: There is nothing like being heard and understood by people who have had a similar experience. Research has also established the benefits of peer support¹⁴. Sharing experiences held in common both validates responses, and helps others articulate theirs. Working for change becomes more feasible with others. A group of Auckland survivors presented a moving workshop called *Survivors – the Prophetic Voice* at the first Australasian Conference on Sexual abuse by Clergy and Health Professionals (Sydney, 1996). The Wellington-based Susanna Group¹⁵ over a ten year period accessed international expertise, critiqued draft church procedures for several churches, provided survivor representatives on two church complaints committees, did education work, issued several press releases, supported a number of women locally and across New Zealand, as well as doing the primary work of supporting each other in their own healing journeys. The group took its name from the biblical Susanna¹⁶. She was propositioned by two judges who, when she wouldn't comply, falsely accused her of adultery. Such was their status in the community that they were believed, she was condemned to death, and was only reprieved and vindicated at the last moment by a Divine intervention.

Problems: The standard Christian community expectation that the victim should 'forgive' the perpetrator and that the perpetrator will 'repent' is far too simplistic, and unlikely to be attainable. The pressure from the Christian culture on the victim to forgive is often internalised, and causes yet more damage and alienation. Steven Tracy in his article *Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness*¹⁷ gives a useful biblical exegesis on this. And from Ellen Bass and Laura Davis in *Courage to Heal*¹⁸: "Trying to forgive is a futile short-circuit of the healing process. Trying to speed things along so you can 'get to the forgiveness' is one of the fastest ways to undercut yourself." Spiritual directors can help by encouraging women to leave forgiveness aside to be re-considered only when their healing is well established.

Nor does the average parishioner-in-the pews have sufficient understanding or analysis of the problem of sexual abuse by clergy to make the church community a safe place for a survivor. Research by Walter Bera in *Professional Sexual Abuse*¹⁹ lists six typical responses in congregations if they hear of sexual abuse by their minister: disbelief, confusion, wanting to give easy grace ("just forgive him"), belief but lacking understanding, anger, and rage. This analysis remains valid even though major publicity over the last decade about the abuse of children has shifted the generic attitude in churches and communities internationally. Very little has been said about the damage to adult women.

There can still be hostility towards complainants when the minister has a following of admirers (see Appendix). It is this mix of attitudes which contributes to the lack of safety for survivors in their church communities. Dealing with the inner turmoil is hard enough without exposing themselves to extra conflict. In *Professional Sexual Abuse* there is also the naming by William White of this sort of abuse of adults as organisational incest²⁰ - a powerfully accurate and evocative description of both dynamics and damage.

Conclusion:

The traditional self-image of the Christian Church is that it holds the key to salvation and to human healing. It will require a radical and humble change in self-understanding by the church for it to recognise that for many people whom it has harmed through its abusive ministers, healing is only going to happen outside the church. If the church can, with Bishop Robinson, actively foster self-determination in survivors, this will help them as they heal on a spiritual path that they alone can discern. Spiritual directors are in a key position to foster that healing. It may call for an extra dimension of faith on their part, that the Divine will find creative and compassionate new ways to be present to women whose spiritual journeys have been profoundly disrupted by sexually abusive

clergy.

Appendix:

Letter (awarded Letter of the Week), The Press, Christchurch, 1.11.02

ACCUSED PRIEST

Sir-

It seems to me that the accusers of Father D's 'inappropriate behaviour' 17 years ago do not appear to have gained integrity, wisdom, and compassion that usually accompanies maturity. If they are, or claim to be, Christian, surely the advice 'who is without sin, cast the first stone' must ring in their ears, and the burden of their sins must weigh heavily on them, as they are forgiven as they forgive others.

And I doubt if the phrase 'you fed me when I was hungry, gave me drink when I was thirsty, clothed me when I was naked, in prison and you visited me' ever echoes in their ears as it must have done in Father D's, as he accomplished these services so generously. We love our priests, and sorrow when one may be reported, truthfully or untruthfully, guilty of misconduct.

MS

Letter to the Editor in response from Susanna Group, written at the request of distressed Christchurch survivors. This was not published.

Disclosures of organisational incest, like those in a family, always cause pain and conflict for others involved, as is evidenced by MS's letter, published 1.11.02. It is little consolation to observe that they too are victims of the original perpetrator - not, as they initially perceive, victims of the discloser/s. The good done by Father (note the title) D is indisputable. Other powerful and charismatic men, eg Bill Clinton, who have also been abusers, have relied on their reputations to protect them from accountability. The issue of forgiveness is far more complex than Ms Short would have us believe. Where a powerful person has injured someone less powerful (compare the roles of priest and layperson), healing is impossible without accountability and justice. Not until these aspects have been attended to is it morally appropriate even to consider forgiveness.

Complainants to the Catholic Church about sexual assault/abuse by clergy and religious have only recently been enabled to speak up with any sense that their pain would be taken seriously; 17 years ago it was totally impossible. They usually act from a passion to stop the same thing happening to anyone else, and, if they still care, from a desire to see the church community healed of its hidden wound. It has nothing whatsoever to do with 'throwing the first stone'! Far from being judged and condemned, these recent complainants deserve to be honoured by the Christian community for their prophetic and costly courage. By breaking the silence they can now heal further themselves, and they have facilitated healing not just for the Church family but for Father D. as well.

(T McB) for Susanna Group

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- ¹ Sonja Grace. *Garlands from Ashes*. Wanganui, NZ, The Grace-Watson Press, 1996.
- ² Internationally, see www.sdiworld.org. In New Zealand The Association of Christian Spiritual Directors has trained professionals, lay and clergy, women and men who undertake this ministry. For a national list, contact The Secretary, ACSD, ferg@wave.co.nz
- ³ Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Paper at *Breaking the Boundaries* Conference on Professional Sexual Abuse, Melbourne, 1998, published in *Tui Motu InterIslands*, Dunedin, NZ, September 1998: 22-25.
- ⁴ *Plea to compile abuse figures*, Wellington NZ, *Evening Post*, 24 April 2002, p7.
- ⁵ *Bishops reveal statistics on sexual abuse cases*, Auckland NZ, *NZ Catholic*, 30 June 2002, p1.
- ⁶ Private communication, John Jamieson, National Office for Professional Standards (Catholic), 20 September 2005.
- ⁷ Paul N. Duckro. St Louis University, Missouri cited in Shorto, Russell *Saints and Madmen, Psychiatry Opens its Doors to Religion*. NY, Henry Holt, 1999:107-8.
- ⁸ Bishop Robinson, *ibid*.
- ⁹ Ellen Luepker. Paper given at 1996 Sydney Conference on Professional Sexual Abuse
- ¹⁰ Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith - The Psychology of Human Development and Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981.
- ¹¹ eg Johnson, Elizabeth. *She Who Is*. NY, Crossroad, 1992.
- ¹² eg Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father - Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1973.
- ¹³ Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Sydney, 1996
- ¹⁴ Grace, Sonja. *ibid*:169
. Luepker, Ellen T. *Time Limited Treatments/ Support Groups for Clients who have been Sexually Exploited by Therapists: A Nine Year Perspective*, in Gary Schoener et al, *Psychotherapists' Sexual Involvement with Clients: Intervention and Prevention*. Minneapolis, Walk-In Counseling Centre, 1989. Ch.14, 181-194.
- ¹⁵ McBride, Trish, *Celebrating Susanna*, in *Faith Evolving: A Patchwork Journey*. Wellington, NZ, P.McBride, 2005: 145-147.
- ¹⁶ Daniel, Chapter 13 in the Catholic Bible.
- ¹⁷ Tracy, Steven. "Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness". *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, No 3, vol 27(1999): 219-229
- ¹⁸ Bass, Ellen and Davis, Laura. *The Courage to Heal, A Guide for Women Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse*. London UK, Cedar, 1992 (reprint).
- ¹⁹ Bera, Walter. "Betrayal: Clergy Sexual Abuse & Male Survivors", *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, no's 3 & 4 (1993): 67-68.
- ²⁰ White, William. *Incest in the Organisational Family: The ecology of burn-out in closed systems*. Bloomington, Ill, Lighthouse Training Institute, 1986

SEXUAL ABUSE BY TRUSTED PROFESSIONALS

Resource List for Spiritual Directors, Counsellors, Supervisors and victims/survivors

Beed, Cara. *Cultures of Secrecy and Abuse - A Paradox for Churches*, Hawthorn, Australia, Cara Beed, 1998

Deans, Louise. *Whistle Blower*, Auckland, Tandem Press, 2001.

Fortune, Marie. *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship*. San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1989.

Not In My Church! Once You Cross the Line, videos with training package *Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship*. Center for the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence, Seattle, 1992.

Grace, Sonja. *Garlands from Ashes - Healing from clergy abuse*. Wanganui, Grace-Watson Press, 1996.
(New Zealand stories. Excellent comprehensive bibliography/resource list)

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. NY, Basic Books, Harper Collins, 1992.

Jamieson, Bishop Penny. *Living on the Edge*. Dunedin, Otago University Press, 1997.

The Kairos Theologians, *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, London, UK, Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1985

McBride, Trish. *Faith Evolving: A Patchwork Journey*, Wellington, NZ, P. McBride, 2005.

McGregor, Kim. *Warriors of Truth*. Otago Dunedin, University Press, 1994.
(Healing from childhood sexual abuse)

Ormerod, N & T. *When Ministers Sin - Sexual Abuse in the Churches*. Alexandria, NSW, Millenium Books, 1995.

Robinson, Bishop Geoffrey. *Spiritual Harm and Spiritual Healing in Cases of Sexual Abuse* (paper), 1998.
Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus. Sydney, John Garrat, 2007.

Rutter, Peter. *Sex in the Forbidden Zone - when men in power - therapists, doctors, clergy, teachers and others - abuse women's trust*. London UK, Mandala/HarperCollins, 1991 (Highly recommended)

Schoener, Gary, Milgrom, Jeanette et al. *Psychotherapists' Sexual Involvement with Clients: Intervention and Prevention*. Minneapolis, Walk-in Counseling Center, 1989.
(838 pages, excellent on many aspects, especially supervision and monitoring of perpetrators)

Stevens, L & Meharry, T. *Broken Boundaries*. Auckland North Shore Women's Centre, 1994
(training video and book)

www.advocateweb.org for information and support.

Biography:

Trish McBride was born in England, and has lived in Aotearoa New Zealand since 1952. After a long and deep involvement in the Catholic Church, she spent some years with the Religious Society of Friends and a women's spirituality group. Trish is a spiritual director, and chaplain to a workshop for people with mental health issues. She is also a counsellor and supervisor. She was a prize-winner in the 1994 international Harriott Memorial Prize for religious journalism, awarded by *The Tablet* (London). Her book *Faith Evolving: A Patchwork Journey* was reviewed in *Presence* June 2008. Many articles and poems have appeared in New Zealand Catholic and other publications. She has an MA(Hons) in Classics, a Diploma in Pastoral Ministry, and recognition as an Associate in Christian Ministry (Inter-denominational).

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