

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE is dedicated to a delicate topic: “Sexual Abuse in Families”. As the title suggests, the focus is on the abuse of vulnerable victims, but with attention to the reality of family. We know from sociological statistics that, indeed, the family, no less than the Church – or the family *within* the Church – can become a *locus* of abuse. Thus, the guiding thread for the contributions in the issue is: what lessons learned from the reflection on sexual abuse in the Church might provide us with analytical tools for addressing the situation of abuse within families?

The point is not so much to carry out something like a *comparative* analysis, equating Church *and* family, though the wider context of the Church might very well englobe and define the context of families in which abuse occurs. The perspective is broader. It ultimately concerns the fact that important insights gained from the psychological, philosophical, and theological reflection on the scandal can, very relevantly, shed light on the sexual abuse that occurs in families. The recent Church discussion, with all its conceptual depth, brutal honesty, and geographical extension, has thrown into relief a number of recurring conditions for understanding the phenomenon of the abuse of vulnerable persons. Could the uncovering of such conditions, together with the proposed suggestions on ways to address them, shed further light on the causes of abuse within families, Christian and otherwise? More importantly, could they offer a way out of the vicious circle exhibited by recognized pathologies?

Certainly, we have become more attentive and keen to the *signs* of abuse, but also to its *structural* conditions. We know well, now, that abuse emerges from the exploitation of power asymmetry in human relations. It thrives in a context of secrecy, lack of accountability, and the engendering of fear. It presupposes an inability, or an unwillingness, on the part of the perpetrators to judge the weight of their actions and their consequences on the victims, to name but a few triggering factors.

This issue of *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* offers an analysis of sexual abuse within the family that builds on the following: first, the contribution of anthropology and human sciences; secondly, the theological articulation of the problem from the perspective of Church doctrine; and thirdly, the shocking, and, perhaps hitherto unheard, account of concrete narratives of abuse.

Stephane Joulain draws on his over twenty-year-long experience of work with victims of sexual abuse and with perpetrators in providing a clinical and psychological perspective. Moving from the recognition that the issue is complex and cannot be reduced to the simplicity of a univocal explanation, the author focuses on the different motivations that lead an adult to sexually molest a child, as well as the pre-existing world visions (the *Weltanschauung* of the perpetrator) that push the offender to action. He then offers a spectrum of therapeutic interventions

and concludes by raising a number of ethical challenges in managing sexual offenders.

Relying upon the insights of psychiatric and sociological research, *Anne Danion-Grilliat* offers a thorough excursus on familial incest, whose frequency – 75% of all cases of sexual abuse are incest, according to the author – is all too often forgotten or undermined. The phenomenology of incest warrants an examination of the existential predicament of *all* the actors involved in the abuse, together with the climate of violence, either disguised as seduction or overtly expressed, within the family that occasions it: father, mother, and siblings, as potential perpetrators; children in their different age and stages of maturation as victims. The author examines both physiological and psychological consequences of incest for the victims, with respect to various manifestations of trauma, describing, in particular, the main traits of “traumatic memory”.

In her contribution, *Karlijn Demasure* takes up the perspective of children survivors of intra-familial abuse from the point of view of their spirituality. Having defined abuse and incest, the author goes on to analyze the spiritual impact of intra-familial abuse, especially with respect to the emotional and experiential understanding of God – in a word, the “image of God”, of the survivors.

A historical perspective is offered by the contribution of *Marie-Jo Thiel*, who looks at the progressive emergence of a *prise de conscience* of the phenomenon of sexual abuse of vulnerable persons. The article unpacks the deficient moral premises that account for the lack of concern for the widespread presence of sexual abuse within family constellations, from the family *stricto sensu*, to other family-like communities, including the school and the Church. Furthermore, it sheds light on changes in ethical awareness, in their turn tied to dimensions of sociological, political, and juridical evolution, which effect a different realization of the nature of the problem. It is only in the wake of a changed ethical consciousness that the voices of the abused begin to be heard, together with a different awareness of the systematic dimensions of abuse. In so doing, the phenomenon of abuse takes on a more complex character and ceases to be understood purely as an expression of personal evil. A particular concern of the article is to track the trajectory of the historical evolution with paradigm shifts in the understanding of Christian ethics. Within the Church, the patriarchal structure is enmeshed in a culture of clerical power (clericalism) that provides the *proximate* context for the explosion, when not the subjective justification by perpetrators, of sexual abuse.

In my contribution, I offer perspectives on the moral theological notion of conscience, relying especially on Pope Francis’s Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. Though not immediately directed at the predicament of sexual abuse within family constellations, Pope Francis’s teaching on conscience can offer relevant insights in unpacking the premises of an ill-formed conscience in the abuser, and to bring to the fore the centrality of personal responsibility for the consequences of one’s action. Furthermore, an emphasis on the education of conscience may help the potential victim to recognize ideological mystifications and justificatory postures in the potential predator. Insofar as the asymmetry of power – of parents over children, priests over underage parishioners, sport coaches

over trainees, etc. – provides the context for the exploitation involved in sexual abuse, it becomes paramount for the victims to recognize the signs of prevarication and to discern them in their deeper intentionality.

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