

## **A LETTER ON THE ABUSE OF POWER AND SEXUAL ABUSE**

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*FATHER GENERAL*

My dear Sisters,

My dear Brothers,

With this letter, I would like to offer you some indications regarding the painful phenomenon of abuses in religious life, in particular the abuse of power and sexual abuse. The Church is painfully aware of this reality. The media have brought to light the presence of sexual abuse in the Church, be that with minors as with vulnerable adults. We are all aware of this phenomenon. Until recently, we kept silence and kept secret. We were asked not to speak and not to denunciate. Now fortunately all has changed both in the Church and in civil society.

I have been made aware in these years, as Father General of the Order, that we Discalced Carmelites are by no means exempt from the danger of these various forms of abuse of which the Church puts us on guard and corrects us: of authority, of power, sexual, of conscience, etc.

### **1. The gift of the vocation to Religious Life**

**I**would like to begin by recalling how the Church sees us, male and female religious. In the Church, we are a gift. The Second Vatican Council, in its dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gen-*

tium, affirmed that: “The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls. The counsels are a divine gift, which the Church received from its Lord and which it always safeguards” (LG 43). And in the Decree on Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, we read: “the pursuit of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels draws its origin from the doctrine and example of the Divine Master and reveals itself as a splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom” (PC1).

In the same *Lumen Gentium*, the Council presents the profession of the evangelical counsels as a total gift of the person to God and as a sign and a stimulus for all the members of the Church: “the faithful of Christ bind themselves to the three aforesaid counsels either by vows, or by other sacred bonds, which are like vows in their purpose. By such a bond, a person is totally dedicated to God, loved beyond all things. In this way, that person is ordained to the honor and service of God... The profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation” (LG 44).

## 2. The Abuse of Power

Pope Francis affirmed on the 25<sup>th</sup> August 2018 in Ireland that among the different types of abuse, “sexual abuse is not the first. The first abuse is of power and conscience”<sup>1</sup>. The problem of abuse of power in the Church is larger than harassment or sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is one of the expressions of the abuse of power.

What is the abuse of power? The abuse of power is to overstep one’s proper competence or simply overstep the limits designated by the ecclesial authority. When we speak of abuse, it is necessary to be aware of certain limits to the exercise of authority. In the Church, authority means service, and our model is Jesus, who “did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10.45).

According to the Code of Canon Law, the superiors must fulfil their function and exercise their authority according to the dispositions of universal law and of proper law (cf. Can. 617). This means that the power of superiors

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1 “It is not enough to turn the page. Life must be given anew”, in *Civiltà Cattolica*, 4038 [September 2018].

cannot be exercised arbitrarily or according to their own whims. Besides the Church's universal law, there is the proper law of every religious institute that aims to uphold its spiritual heritage, its charism. Superiors are not managers of a company but are called to preserve the charism of their religious family.

Depending on the object of abuse we can distinguish between the abuse of power, which involves overstepping juridical powers, and spiritual abuse, also known as abuse of conscience, which involves overstepping the established forum or field of action. In the Code of Canon Law, there is a distinction between *external forum*, which corresponds to external objective criteria, and *internal forum*, which corresponds to one's own conscience. By *internal forum* is meant, strictly speaking, what comes to be shared in the confessional or in spiritual direction. In this sense, spiritual abuse is entering a sphere that corresponds to other instances, such as the ambit of the conscience that is reserved to the minister of the sacrament of reconciliation, or the Apostolic Penitentiary.

This clarification is extremely important because religious obedience to one's superiors is binding if they act within the ambit of their competence, as defined by their proper law, i.e., the *Constitutions*, as well as in the area of the correct forum (the *external forum*). If the superior exceeds his competences, his decision becomes inefficacious and consequently does not bind to obedience. At the same time, by exceeding their proper competence, they bring about an abuse of power.

The Code of Canon Law underlines the gravity of abuse, and indicates the penalties applied to whoever "abuses ecclesiastical power, office, or function" (can. 1378 §1). The ecclesial power or jurisdiction corresponds to those who have been ordained (can. 129), while "an ecclesiastical office is any function constituted in a stable manner by divine or ecclesiastical ordinance to be exercised for a spiritual purpose" (can. 145).

On the basis of the document "*New wine, new Wineskins*" (2017), from the then Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, we can distinguish some cases of abuse of power:

- The centralization of everything in the person who exercises authority, bypassing subsidiary governing bodies such as the Council or the Chapter;
- Failure to provide accurate and reliable information;
- Disregard for canonical norms;

- Manipulation of the freedom and dignity of others, “*reducing them to total dependence that mortified their dignity, and sometimes even their fundamental human rights*” (no. 20);
- Limiting or actually eliminating the co-responsibility of the other members of the community;
- Maintenance of the *status quo*, with such arguments as, “we have always done in this way” (no. 19);
- No change, over many years, in the attribution of roles.

In April 2024, at the meeting in Nemi with the Presidents and the Delegates of the Federations and Associations of our Discalced Carmelite Nuns for the revision of the *Constitutions*, we spoke clearly about the necessity of discernment and accompaniment. I encourage you to re-read the conference ‘The Teresian Carmel Today’. I would like to recall some important ideas: “*Suffocating environments and excessive control (I am not speaking of the need for order and discipline) continue to exist in monasteries and convents, thus destroying trust and causing much sadness. Teresa wanted a particular style and a generous self-giving, in an environment of trust and freedom, where you can breathe and where “all must love one another.” Today there exists certain sicknesses: manipulators full of charm, people who seduce, who have a gentle or attractive side but who do not accept opposition or dissent. They like you but the day you do not dance to their tune, they make your life unbearable. There exists an emotional blackmail and abusers become victims when they are contradicted or have a different opinion. We must open our eyes and create communities where there is transparency and truth, with mature men and women, who recognise their limitations and allow others to help them. We must clean up our act and ‘disabuse’ ourselves. We must help those who protect their own complexes by using rigidity and excessive authoritarianism towards others*” (Miguel Marquez Calle, *Teresian Carmel Today* [Nemi, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2024]).

On the other hand, we must also avoid the danger of considering any exercise of authority or correction as an abuse of power. There is in fact a risk of an exaggerated subjectivism: to imagine – without discernment and honest dialogue – that any suggestion or offer given to us by superiors is an abuse. With the vow of obedience, we religious have freely accepted to search always and in all things for the will of God. In this, the mediation of the superiors is a valuable help. It is not acceptable to shirk from the obligation we have to obey legitimate decisions by our superiors, under the pretext of a possible abuse of authority.

### 3. Sexual Abuse in Religious Life

In recent times, we have been made aware by media channels of abuse within the Church, not only of minors but also of female religious. In these cases, the abuser is normally a male religious.

In the Teresian Carmel there have unfortunately been cases where religious priests have abused religious women. These women have put their trust in those priests as authority figures (superiors), confessors, spiritual directors or as brothers sharing the same charism. Some of our confreres have failed in their religious consecration and in their duty as superiors, confessors, spiritual directors and as brothers.

In recent years, the Church has published a number of documents that help us to overcome the sad reality of sexual abuses. The *motu proprio* of Pope Francis *Vos estis lux mundi* (VELM), (published on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2019 and updated 25<sup>th</sup> March 2023), fruit of the meeting in Rome of all the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of the Universal Church with the Pope, a document of an inter-disciplinary nature, must be applied by various Dicasteries: Doctrine of the Faith, Oriental Churches, Bishops, Evangelisation, Clergy and Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (cf. VELM, art. 7).

In this document of the universal Church, sexual abuse is considered a crime that causes grave damage to its victims: “*The crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful*” (VELM, Intro.)

-“*The crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord...*” Sexual abuse in the context of consecrated religious life is a crime for the violation of the vow of chastity, of the religious consecration and also of the sacrament of confession, if this should happen in the context of the same sacrament (cf. Can. 1395 §3).

-“*... cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims...*” The negative consequences of whatever type of sexual abuse on the victims are objective. The majority of the victims are not minors; however, in a context in which you put your trust in someone who is an abuser, be that in the area of the sacrament of Reconciliation, spiritual direction or formation, abuse always causes deep wounds that are difficult to heal. The victim must look for help from psychology or psychiatry to overcome the trauma of the sexual abuse that happened in whatever area mentioned above.

-“... *harm the community of the faithful.*” The entire community is affected by the scandal of abuse by priests or religious, which causes pain and consternation among all the faithful.

Pope Francis has shown us the steps to prevent abuse in the Church: *“In order that these phenomena, in all their forms, never happen again, a continuous and profound conversion of hearts is needed, attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the Church, so that personal sanctity and moral commitment can contribute to promoting the full credibility of the Gospel message and the effectiveness of the Church’s mission”* (VELM, Intr.)

- *“In order that these phenomena, in all their forms, never happen again...”* Faced with this painful reality, the Church has offered various means, documents and formation programmes to combat the fact of sexual abuse and to prevent it.
- *“...a continuous and profound conversion of hearts is needed...”* The first appeal of the Church in confronting and overcoming sexual abuse is that of conversion of heart, for which the conversion of the mind and of thoughts is always necessary and essential. God works in everyone’s heart, depositing the gift of conversion; however, there will not be true conversion if there is no conversion of thought that gives motivation to the conversion of the heart and a new way of behaving of the person. Yet God is free to work and to bring about conversion in whatever the time and place.
- *“...attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the Church...”* Concrete actions will be effective by the measure that we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit of interior and exterior conversion. We need to step forward – that is a conversion – to welcome the victim with all that they have suffered, confront the aggressor with the truth of his acts and apply the consequent penalty: punitive measures or treatment. We are normally more inclined to protect the aggressor, and this is why the consequences for the Church have been painful and sad. The conversion of heart implies calling on God for conversion regarding our thinking, the way we reason, the victim’s complaint, and the responsibility of the aggressor.
- *“...so that personal sanctity and moral commitment can contribute to promoting the full credibility of the Gospel message and the effectiveness of the Church’s mission.”* Religious life, according to the Second Vatican Council, is a sign of future goods, an anticipation of eternal life (cf.

LG 44): the fact of abuse within religious life spoils consecrated life in all its forms, thereby obscuring the same ecclesial mission.

It is therefore very important, and I ask this of you, that in your formation programmes for Discalced Carmelite friars and nuns you address issues of dialogue, honesty, collaboration, authentic friendships, especially with regards to affectivity and sexuality. It should be done in a respectful way and with the help of competent persons. May the formandi be able to trust enough their formators and accompaniers (who must be mature people) to be able to express the traumas, wounds, difficulties, challenges and above all the richness that the gift of chastity brings. This topic is always to be matured and always nurtured, without angelism, without disregarding the body, recognising the beauty of God's creation, lived with gratitude and in family-community. It is a reality that always needs to be looked after and accompanied.

#### 4. The offense of sexual abuse and cover up

**S**exual abuse, linked to the abuse of authority, is a grave attack on the dignity of the children of God, and it is particularly grave when it occurs within the Church and in consecrated life. The Apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth: “*Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received him from God*” (1Cor 6.19). The Church has justly strengthened the measures to prevent abuse and to punish abusers.

In the *motu proprio Vos estis lux mundi*, the subjects and scope of the crime of sexual abuse are discussed. Regarding the people concerned, it says, “*these norms apply to reports regarding clerics or members of Institutes of Consecrated Life or Societies of Apostolic Life and Moderators of international associations of the faithful recognized or erected by the Apostolic See*”. The crimes referred to are those against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue committed “*through violence or threat or through abuse of authority, or by forcing someone to perform or submit to sexual acts*” or committed “*with a minor or with a person who habitually has imperfect use of reason or with a vulnerable adult.*” (VELM 1,1).

In the new canonical penal code reformed by Pope Francis in 2021, there have been added penalties to be applied to whoever “*by force, threats or abuse of his authority commits an offence against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue or forces someone to perform or submit to sexual acts*” (can. 1395 §3), both

for clerics, and for any member of an Institute of consecrated life or a Society of Apostolic life, and for any faithful who enjoys a dignity or performs an office or function in the Church (can. 1398 §2).

After this brief reflection, together with the entire Church and the Order, I ask all consecrated religious in the Teresian Carmel to not continue with a culture of silence and cover up. On the contrary, we must denounce all forms of abuse or sexual harassment. Silence does not lead to positive results for the Church or the Order. There should be no place in the Church or in the Teresian Carmel for abusers who do not repent, who remain in their sin, who do not recognise their illness. Those who have some kind of weakness or illness in this area must seek help without delay before harming someone. We are all sinners, for this reason we all need of conversion, help and humbly to allow ourselves to be corrected and guided.

The appeal of the recent Popes for “zero tolerance” in cases of abuse of minors also applies to cases of abuse of religious women. No one is allowed to harass or abuse a person consecrated to God, and much less under pretext of “theology” of the body, sexuality or freedom, that masquerades abuse and manipulation.

As Father General of the Order, I ask forgiveness to all those who, in the context of Carmel, have suffered or are suffering any type of abuse on the part of one of our brothers or sisters, religious or lay. I exhort those who have some inclination to abuse, to seek help without delay and let themselves be accompanied, in order not to do harm, and to repair the damage done, if they have perpetrated it. I pray that all the victims will overcome their fears, that their wounds will be healed, and that they will recover their freedom, joy and dignity.

Today, to walk in the truth is for the Teresian Carmel to denounce all forms of abuse and to work to find justice and love. We will not let ourselves be contained by fear or by a false kind of respect. What we must fear are lies, not the truth. I ask all of you to be humble, and to let yourselves discern and correct, to pray, to be courageous and sincere...

The desire of St Teresa was to create a Carmel that would walk in the truth and in safe communion with God and with others. To walk in the truth, with sincerity and trust, in true friendship, is the Teresian ideal. Let us take care of this precious treasure that God has given us.