

## Talk by Isabelle Chartier-Siben

originally given during the « Walking with our History » programme  
in La Ferme 2020 and revised in 2021

***Below is the content of a talk given by Dr. Isabelle Chartier-Siben, president of "C'est à dire", an association which supports victims of physical, psychological and spiritual abuse. The talk was given as part of the "Walking with our History" programme organised by L'Arche's international spirituality centre La Ferme in 2020***

I have been working for 20 years on abuse within the Church. In my dismay over each new revelation, I told myself that at least one place was untouched -L'Arche.

Revelations had come concerning Marie-Dominique Philippe. I accompanied many victims, men and women, but also priests who themselves were victims of one or another brother or sister of Saint John and who unfortunately reproduced on others what had been done and taught to them.

I knew before many about the actions of Jean Vanier, because people had come to the association that I preside over to deposit, "this too-heavy-a secret", as they themselves said. They knew and I knew that these revelations were going to lead to a "before" and an "after", and above all that they were going to devastate many people.

When I people come to me, they start telling me their story to see how I react – to see if I believe them, if it is possible, if they are crazy, if it is normal.

It is up to me to diagnose the truthfulness of what is said, and not to let myself be carried away by lies, induced memories, or fabrications. This requires wisdom, know-how and competence.

When, during the course of the story, I hear that the perpetrator is one or the other of these people in whom hundreds, thousands, of people have put their trust, I freeze with horror inside. The worst for me was when, after a very gloomy story, the person in front of me gave the name of one of my best friends. I was forced to tell that person that I knew him because I couldn't cope ... unfortunately it was revealed that there were already several complaints against him, that he had been isolated for a while and had come back with an aura even greater than before. Unfortunately, the stories are all very similar.

How is it possible that such wonderful men and women have this other side to them?

Before answering this question, I will approach the problem from another angle, that of my primary profession. I am a doctor and "victimologist." If the people who were abused were doing well, I don't think we would be talking about this subject. Unfortunately, this is only very, very rarely the case. Not that they are fragile, vulnerable people at the beginning. No. One of the things that makes it possible to establish a diagnosis is the study of their journey, their initial desire and then their evolution.

Being a victim of sexual abuse in a religious setting has a two-fold consequence, that of the sexual abuse itself but also that of the spiritual abuse that allowed for, or that opened the door to sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse has nothing to do with consensual sexual relations. I have had the opportunity to counsel and support nuns who were leaving their way of life to live with someone with a consecrated vocation, priest or other. I have counseled priests who had been “led back” from a religious to a lay way of life and who wanted to rebuild their lives. It is then a question of discernment in the freedom of two people who respect each other’s dignity. Conversely, in the case of sexual abuse, the other, man or woman, is reified, treated unwittingly as an object. I say “unwittingly” because more often than not (but not always), the victim, at least at the beginning, believes himself or herself to be privileged, chosen by God through this relationship. It is only later, when they are left to the side or their life is very damaged, that they become aware of what they have lived through.

## 1. The consequences of this kind of abuse

The consequences under the general heading of what we call psychic trauma (identical to the aftermath of war, attacks, earthquakes ...) with its sequence of symptoms of flashbacks, hallucinations, illusions, memories, ruminations, nightmares: these events are relived years later with the same intensity, the same suffering, the same disorganization.

They fall within the confusion and dissociation linked to a psychological hold,

and are accompanied by sexual and somatic disorders as a result of the breakdown of body image.

## 2. Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse in religious settings is often acknowledged by its victims, male or female, with great difficulty and far too late. Very often the sexual abuse will be very progressive, does away with any mistrust. A hand in a hand, a knee against a knee (people say to themselves, “I must be mistaken, this couldn't have been done on purpose.” From that moment on they start to doubt themselves), head against head, then one hand under the blouse, then on the breasts, then between the legs, then... I stop.

I am obliged, though, to linger a few moments on definitions, which I have chosen to do based on legal terminology:

*Sexual harassment* is the act of repeatedly imposing on a person sexual or sexist comments or behaviours that either violate his or her dignity because of their degrading or humiliating nature, or create an intimidating, hostile or offensive situation.

*Exhibitionism* is the fact of exposing what should remain hidden, (example of the spiritual accompanier who goes naked in order to exemplify the status of Adam, and the following time the accompanied person is the one who goes naked to be Eve).

*Sexual harm* is as soon as a part of the body considered sexual is touched: lips, breasts, thighs, stomach, buttocks and obviously sex. It is a crime if it is with a minor.

*Sexual assault* is with violence, coercion, threat or surprise, i.e., when there is no clearly expressed consent. Sexual assault is a crime.

*Rape* is a crime and is any act of penetration by sex, finger, tongue, or object, whether in the mouth, sex or anus, and done with coercion, threat, violence or surprise. I am sorry to be so crude, but, when I hear an abuser nun say, "I did nothing", on the pretext that she only put a pen in, she is defining rape. Or when I hear a man who says, "I didn't have an orgasm" or "I didn't ejaculate", it is rape if there was penetration, and whatever form the penetration took.

I need to come back to the notions of violence, constraint, threat and surprise.

Violence in religious circles exists. I received a woman who was forced to fight, in the sense of physically fighting, with a priest who wanted to have sex with her. This remains, I believe, rare.

I am going to tell you a sad story to illustrate my point, a story which unfortunately is not uncommon; it is the story of a nun. In sharing this story, I am not betraying anything. There are unfortunately enough cases for everyone to be able both to recognize themselves in the story and at the same time understand that it is about someone else.

This nun has a spiritual director who is highly regarded. Everybody trusts him, calls on him, is happy to know him. After a few meetings, one day the spiritual director complains of a backache and asks the nun to massage him. Surprised, she hesitates, but she is comforted when the accompanier tells her that he has very important appointments and that he does not have time to go to his physiotherapist. The nun accepts to do this because acting as a physiotherapist is not dangerous. The scene repeats itself. The nun continues to accept, because she now thinks that by doing this she is participating in the beautiful work of this accompanier. She then says to herself that this surely comes from God, because her dream, as a little girl, was to be a physiotherapist. Then one day the spiritual director points out to her that she seems tense, her massages are hesitant. They aren't doing anything for him, and are even rather annoying. The nun feels humiliated, feels like crying, and yet she continues to apply herself. Seeing this, the "good priest" takes her in his arms to console her and tells her that he will show her how to do it. And he massages her. The nun has a sudden burst of lucidity, and asks to pray because she finally dares to say what she has been thinking: "What does this have to do with my accompaniment?" The priest scolds her over this question. How can one pray when one is as tense as she is, because one must pray with one's whole soul but also with one's whole body. Since he is very kind, they are going to recite the rosary together while massaging each other. The nun feels very sad and even humiliated to be like this, so inept that the priest is unable to accompany her spiritually. "What a beautiful communion!" exclaims the priest at the end of the rosary/ massage session. "I truly believe at last that the Lord has chosen us to live great things together."

I'll stop here because it would be too long and too painful to continue, but know that the people who have suffered this have had their lives turned upside down. From an innocent, simple, beautiful life filled with prayer, they have entered the hell of incomprehension and psychic dissociation, and even self-destruction.

What do we see in this example?

- The surprise: the person did not anticipate this request for massage, and then sex. She was trusting. A spiritual director said to one of my patients, in the course of spiritual direction, "Lie down on the floor." The young woman naively did so, believing that it was an act of humility. When he laid down upon her, she was paralyzed, dumbfounded. Here the victim is deceived by the trickery of the aggressor. In any case, since the event occurs in a context of spiritual direction or comes from persons recognized by all for their integrity, the victim cannot expect to be treated in this way.

- The threat: in our example, the nun understands that the spiritual director will abandon her spiritually; he makes her understand that she is useless if she does not respond positively to his requests for a massage. One of my patients who asked to stop these sexual practices was told that she was so immature that she understood nothing of the spiritual delights that were generously offered to her, and so the priest was going to abandon her.
- Coercion: is rarely physical, it is most often moral. This concept of “hold” that I will now develop is a modus operandi, a variant of constraint. George Tron, (former Secretary of State in France), has just been sentenced this week to 5 years in prison, including 3 without parole, for sexual abuse of adult women.

In general, people are not stupid, and if they are fooled in one way or another, it is either because they do not realize the seriousness of what is happening or they are in such a state of surprise that they cannot react; this is what I mean by being under a psychological hold.

Each story is unique. There are many forms of abuse. However, the pattern of a psychological hold is almost always the same.

For the victim, the first stage is made up of trust, even admiration, joy, gratitude. The second stage is made up of incomprehension, uncertainty, silence, imposed secrecy, and isolation, which usually leads to dependency. (My patients have always hoped that the situation would return to normal because it was impossible for them to measure clearly what was happening to them; seeing, acknowledging, would lead to an unbearable collapse of one's beliefs and hopes.) A third stage is made up of devaluation, loss of self-confidence, humiliation, confusion, loss of bearings, insomnia, and then physical and mental illness. To this can be added, in a Christian environment, a collapse of hope and even a loss of faith.

Whereas for the perpetrator, the first step is most often seduction, giving of care and attention or even flattery; but all this hides a desire to satisfy desires for greatness, power, money, sex or even mystical or erotic-mystical or other delusions, but sometimes also a great naivety (“I am taking a little advantage here, but I will know how to stop in time”) or again, as I have also heard, the perpetrator lives this as a right (“With all that I do for the Lord, I have a right to this”), or too much self-confidence that will turn into the rapture of God. The perpetrator will take the place of God. This is the unbearable mystical fraud around orgasm.

There is a betrayal of one's own personal commitments or vows (or in any case a major distortion with what is said about or of the person), but it is a betrayal that the other, the person abused, cannot know and cannot see.

Dependence also sets in with the perpetrator, but this is accompanied by lies and deception. It can become an addiction, and at worst, a pleasure to do evil.

Thus, the perpetrator mistreats as soon as he or his purpose, good or bad, takes precedence over the good or the dignity of the other.

During this kind of abuse we always find some level of transgression.

AND a transgression most often of the rules of accompaniment:

➔ *Spiritual direction as well as psychological or other coaching or counseling relationships are based on rules that no counselor can ignore.*

*The responsibility of respecting these rules rests exclusively on the one who accepts to this kind of coaching or counseling relationship.*

*In particular, the right distance must be established between the counselor or director and the person being counseled: a physical distance which of course requires that there be no physical contact between the two people, and a psychological and spiritual distance which preserves the freedom of the person being accompanied.*

*Spiritual direction or coaching is not a sharing of friendship but an inspired guidance whose goal is that the person advances freely in his or her journey of faith and union with God.*

*From the date of the first session of direction and during any such support session, the rules that I have just cited come into force and the person being accompanied has the right and the duty to entirely trust his/her director. It is up to those who accompany and to them exclusively to watch over the one being counseled or directed with respect and benevolence.*

***Thus, as soon as we are referring to a relationship of spiritual direction or accompaniment, we cannot speak any more, whatever the facts, of free consensual relations between adults.***

*If sexual touching is part of a framework other than that of spiritual direction, it is up to the one who is, by their role, in a position of religious responsibility and therefore in a position of authority, to ensure the total freedom and the total consent of the other. And among Catholics, it is commonly accepted that sexual closeness is usually experienced in a global sharing of life (which can be called marriage) and not furtively, in secret, outside of a common project and/or with several people over the same period.*

➔ *Any psychological or spiritual director knows the risks of transfer, attachment, projection ... which can occur during a therapy or an accompaniment. It is up to them to handle this with respect for the person being accompanied. If the accompanier does not feel capable of doing this or is feeling overwhelmed, it is essential that he/she withdraw immediately.*

These are common rules that cannot be disputed.

### 3. Spiritual abuse will allow, foster, sexual abuse;

**it will numb the consciousness of the victims, and of the people around them - even those who are very close.**

I received this baffling testimony from a former Legionary of Christ. When Father Martial Maciel was absent, as we know today, to go and see one of his mistresses, the seminarians were speaking enthusiastically among themselves, thinking that he was going to do charitable works among the poorest, and that his humility did not allow him to make this known. This former seminarian used to tell me, 'We were already imagining with joy what we would be discovering after his death!'

But also, in a less spectacular way, the story of this priest who abused several women and children, and whose cook and housekeeper, who was there every day, never ever suspected him of anything.

Why is it so difficult for everyone to recognize these things?

### **1/ Good, traditional notions of the Church (or virtues) are being changed or destroyed:**

- Obedience: in the name of obedience, one can enslave someone
- Humility, smallness, spiritual poverty: open the door and can cover all kinds of humiliations.
- The gift of self: can go as far as making people accept psychic annihilation but above all will authorize sexual abuse: let yourself be guided, leave your fears behind, abandon yourself, retain nothing, give everything.
- Forgiveness: when there is not yet recognition of the extent of the consequences of the abuse, or even when the abuser reverses the roles and the abused is asked to ask forgiveness from the abuser.
- Silence: becomes censored speech (denial and imposed silence). This silence will make it possible to act with impunity.

= not divulging "particular graces received" (thus preventing any true discernment), going as far as to become "a divine secret".

= preserving the "harmony of the community": so the concerns are not shared and issues, meetings, important decisions are made in secret and organized in such a way that they are not known.

= "sign of progress in the spiritual life" (so no one knows that others are experiencing the same horror)

= or what I call a delirious silence on the pretext that humanity or the Church is not yet ready to receive this or that message. People cannot understand and, indeed, they do not understand...

- Compassion: is often solicited by the abuser to commit his wrongdoing: "I need this favor in order to live my mission in a balanced way."
- Mercy: which forgives and protects the abuser and particularly does not set limits, the forbidden. "We're not going to sue him, are we?! God is great enough to overcome all this!" Or again this expression that I cannot bear: "In every human, there are human flaws".
- Praise becomes denial of reality or even a magical act.
- Deliverance prayers and exorcisms

### **2/ Apart from these traditional virtues which are destroyed, there are also misleading demands such as:**

- The demand of non-criticism which is put in place to avoid gossiping or murmuring, becomes a blinding of the people surrounding you. When questions are asked, the reply is, "Trust." There is a kind of concealment that gradually becomes established.
- The transparency that refers to Mary's transparency to the Holy Spirit and which, when imposed, quickly becomes intrusion in the intimacy of people, allowing for extreme manipulation.
- Spiritual threats (e.g., "If you reveal this you will have to confess it, if you confess it to a certain priest you will be responsible for the difficulties of the community, do not confess it to anyone but me", or "Say that you have sinned against chastity" after a rape...).

### **3/ Confusion between what is internal and what is external, but also confusion of body and mind.**

#### 4 - Elements that facilitate abuse, whether sexual or spiritual

- Ignorance and lack of training, particularly among spiritual directors, but also among everyone who is undergoing any kind of coaching or spiritual direction. Many things would not have happened if everyone knew that this could happen. Lack of respect for the most basic rules of common sense. Absence of anthropological, human sciences but also theological knowledge, and ignorance of civil law and canon law.
- Misleading teachings which, under the guise of intelligence, elitism, and closeness to God, will directly lead people to commit evil and in particular sexual abuse (friendship love, the Word made flesh, the Song of Songs, the connection between Mary and Jesus, the 3rd way: polygamous celibacy higher than marriage or chaste celibacy because in this way one can give oneself to everyone).
- The abuser insinuates that "you have been chosen": an exceptional relationship, willed by God, requested by Mary... which will make us believe that we can live our relationship with God through the intermediary of the abuser.
- The statutes of communities or the functioning of a group that gives a single person all the powers, without right of supervision, without respect for collegiality.
- The rules of life, approved by Rome 'ad experimentum' that are full of theological errors.
- Private revelations, unverified private revelations, are often dramatic in their consequences.

What are these revelations?

They can be outright apparitions of the Virgin, or mystical beliefs: "It is the Virgin who dwells in me in a mystical way," or sexual revelations that can go as far as erotic-mystical delusions ("Through me, it is Christ who loves you, who consoles you. This hand that caresses you, it is Christ's, I am Christ for you"...).

There are procedural norms for the discernment of presumed apparitions or revelations. Here it is the responsibility of the governance of the Church that is at stake and at fault.

Document elaborated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, signed in February 1978 by Cardinal Franjo Seper and Archbishop Jerome Hamer and approved by Paul VI. It was distributed only to the Ordinaries, that is, essentially to the bishops in office in a diocese. The document was not made public until December 2011.

- Fascination and taste for charismatic personalities. The search for the absolute will merge with the fixation on a person and will freeze that person on a pedestal. We then let them do everything.

#### 5. Spiritual abuse, both major and "minor", can occur in three specific ways:

- Spontaneously: "Your soul is ugly", a young girl was told.
- To justify mistreatment and in particular sexual abuse: it is "for the glory of God", "for the mission", "for the service of the Church", "for a better union with God" "is the desire of the Virgin". Or: "The sexual organs are the noblest part of our being, to honor them is to honor Christ".
- To "erase" the mistreatment: "God is happy with what we have done", "Heaven is in jubilation", "What we have lived has nothing to do with a sexual act - between us everything is now a sharing of divine love".

Examples of major spiritual abuse with a goal of "erasing" what has been done:

- Some priests celebrate Mass right afterwards to continue "celebrating the Glory of God."
- Others give absolution without being asked for anything and, most importantly, by reversing the responsibility (this is worse than the absolution of the accomplice, a sin that can only be released by Rome).

## 6. Sustainability of the system

The use of spiritual authority will greatly encourage all abuse.

Abuse will be very difficult to recognize because each person will be affected differently. Some will receive only good things and others will experience horror. And the sophisticated system put in place by the abuser will silence the victim and anesthetize those around him.

But this spiritual authority is also helped along by the proximity of the method and the means, to a true journey towards God (stripping oneself of "the old self", the shifting back and forth of spiritual darkness and light, the heroic aspect of faith, union with the sufferings of Christ, surrender to providence...). This closeness will prevent the person from becoming aware of the harmfulness and destructiveness of what they are experiencing because they can't trust their own perceptions anymore.

**In conclusion**, I will answer one of the questions I am often asked, "Why all this concern about something that will destroy someone's good name, when there are (only) 20 victims, or even 6, or even 1, that could possibly be overlooked?"

I will take the answer from Saint Teresa of Avila:

"God is the supreme Truth, and humility is to be in the truth."



### **Biography Isabelle Chartier-Siben**

*Isabelle is a Doctor of medicine, psychotherapist and victimologist with a background in theology.*

*in 2002, with psychiatrists, lawyers and other specialists who noticed the increasing frequency of abuse, Isabelle founded and became president of "C'est à dire", an association to help victims of physical, psychological and spiritual abuse.*

*Originally specializing in working with abuse within families, the association responded very quickly to increasing demand from people who were victims of abuse of all kinds in religious settings. In 2015, it began work with the victims of the terrorist attacks.*

*In 2016, she was decorated with the Légion d'Honneur for her work with the association and her research work on psychological hold (grooming) and psychological trauma.*

*The association works with theologians, canonical scholars and church leaders. Since its creation, it has helped hundreds of victims, many of them from Catholic communities. Today, Isabelle contributes to numerous training and prevention initiatives.*