

TRUTH AND SILENCE

Learning from Abuse

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COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY INVOLVES HARD WORK. It is grounded in the universal call to holiness; it requires a deep appreciation of the involvement of lay people in ministry. It requires a commitment to honest communication and conversation from all concerned. Inevitably there are problems of misunderstanding and disagreement between individuals engaged in a common ministry. If authority is to be exercised as a service rather than as domination, we need to cultivate good forms of communication, through which such difficulties can be honestly explored.

There is, of course, an honourable exercise of authority within the Church. The fact that authority is sometimes dishonoured does not negate that reality. Authority's intervention is not always abusive; it can be quite legitimate. This article, nevertheless, focuses on those times when legitimate authority becomes abusive authority, and on the suffering that ensues.

A breakdown in communication often leads to an exercise of dominance on the one hand, and an experience of powerlessness on the other. Both of these can lead to real and acute suffering. To redress such a situation there is a need for those who have suffered to be able to speak. There is also a need for others within the Church to listen to this uncomfortable voice of lament—a voice that calls for a conversion in the way we relate to one another.¹

Powerlessness is not an experience we welcome. Particularly difficult to endure is the inability to change an injustice inflicted either on ourselves or on another. But if a person who has suffered injustice is then forced to keep silent, there is radical suffering indeed. When such

¹ In another place, I have drawn attention to the difficulties of those who face powerlessness on the margins of society. Gill Goulding, *On the Edge of Mystery: Towards a Spiritual Hermeneutic of the Urban Margins* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000).

experiences occur within the Church, the deprivation is not just individual: it is the body of Christ that is profoundly affected. It is as though we are being deprived of the light we need to see or of the air we need to breathe.

The Church has a unique vocation within society to proclaim the unconditional love of God to all, and to exemplify that love. This vocation lies at the heart of true collaborative ministry. Injustice and abuse distort this vision of love, and undermine the very nature of the Church.² The comments and stories that follow are from men and women who are deeply committed to their ministry within the Church. They have all, to a greater or lesser extent, experienced a period of suffering, which they perceive to have resulted from an abusive exercise of authority. They all recognise and respect the authority structure of the Church, and look for signs of hope and encouragement to sustain them. None of them had been offered an arena in which to articulate their concerns, and many had been coerced into remaining silent.

The scandals of recent years involving the sexual abuse of children have brought to public attention the complex power structures within which we operate in the Church, and which we often legitimate in the name of the Lord. Although the media naturally focus on the sexual abuse of children, problems with Church power structures are not confined solely to this area; there are other kinds of abuse as well.³ These latter instances of the misuse of power and control are not illegal, but they have still had far-reaching consequences in the memories and lives of individuals. All members of the Church are diminished when individuals suffer in this way. Indeed, in these circumstances we are all victims of a reality that damages the human community, and it is this community that must be reclaimed.

² Compare John Paul II, 'Confession of Sins Committed in the Name of Truth' (12 March 2000), <http://www.cin.org/jp2/univpray.html>; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 35.

³ As a qualified observer of sexual abuse in Ireland has put it: 'while few [Catholics] experienced this kind of abuse themselves, many experienced other kinds of abuse by authorities in the Church': Eamonn Conway, 'The Service of a Different Kingdom: Child Sexual Abuse and the Response of Church', in *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse: Towards a Pastoral Response*, edited by Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy and Attracta Shields (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999), pp. 76-88.

Diminishment of Persons

Radical suffering, as Wendy Farley has put it, ‘assaults and degrades that about a person which makes him or her most human’. Such an experience can insidiously undermine the person’s own basic human dignity. ‘Anguish effaces the very humanity of the sufferer and in this way cripples her ability to defend herself.’ At its worst, it can give rise to a despair, enervating ‘even the indignation that would make one realise that one had been wronged’.⁴ Such radical suffering is taking place within the Christian Church today. This is not to say that the suffering is the deliberate desire of anyone in authority; nevertheless, it is a real consequence of the attitudes and actions of individuals.

The comments that follow originate in a series of interviews I conducted among individuals whom I knew to have felt mistreated in a variety of Church situations. In every case action was taken which questioned the integrity of the individuals involved. Some were removed from jobs, or parishes, or communities; others were forbidden to teach, or preach, or write. In each case there is a clear sense of an unjust action that was then concealed by a refusal to address the injustice. In many cases there was also a deliberate attempt to force the sufferer to collude in the injustice by imposing silence upon them.⁵

This silencing is described in many ways. ‘I felt I had no voice’, one stated; ‘I was told not to talk about it’, said another. ‘They did not even have the decency to speak to me’, exclaimed a third. ‘Why is it so difficult to be heard?’ yet another questioned. ‘It was as though no one wished to hear what I had to say’, one respondent stated, while

⁴Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Westminster, Ky: John Knox, 1990), pp. 54-55.

⁵It is interesting to reflect here on what Judith Lewis Herman has to say regarding an imposition of silence and secrecy: ‘In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defence. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalisation. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail. The perpetrator’s arguments prove irresistible when the bystander faces them in isolation. Without a supportive social environment, the bystander usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way. When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child) she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable’: Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 8.

another said 'I was more aware that suddenly I was an embarrassment to people'. Their experience was clearly something that no one wanted publicly to admit knowing about:

I could talk about anything else and that was OK. I was in the strange situation that individuals were happily still associating with me though they knew I was being misused in this way by a member of their own brotherhood. So long as we didn't talk about that, their lives could go on as normal while mine was disintegrating before my eyes.

The Body Bears Witness

This sense of being silenced can also manifest itself in physical symptoms. 'I felt a tremendous draining of energy'; 'I experienced a constriction in my throat'; 'It was as though I was trying to speak against a wall of oppression'; 'I felt my energy draining away through my mouth, taking away even my ability to speak'. This sense of being deprived of a voice is a most powerful deprivation and strikes at the heart of a person's ability to express themselves. Here Elaine Scarry's book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the Word*,⁶ helps us understand what is happening. Though focused on the victims of torture, her work makes clear that the silencing of any individual is a physically and personally destructive act. In the long term, such silencing can leave a legacy of trauma, inhibiting the sufferer from being able to articulate what is causing the suffering or how deep it is. Worse still is the effect of the sufferer's being forced to collude in their own oppression.

'I felt my energy draining away'

To Experience Betrayal

Betrayal is an important and recurring theme as individuals describe the powerlessness arising from what they perceive as abuses of authority. Such abuse is a betrayal of the trust that lies at the heart of commitment and human interaction, and that gives life to the individual and the community. Within the Church, an important part

⁶ (Oxford: OUP, 1986)—see especially pp. 27-59.

of this betrayal may be the unwillingness of religious authorities to listen to the sufferer or to appreciate and work with the sufferer's point of view: instead they lay emphasis on submission and obedience. This unwillingness results in a threefold oppression: the original situation of suffering in itself; the refusal of authority to listen to the sufferer and dialogue with them; finally, authority's insistence upon a submission that negates the individual's experience. For the sufferer this can result in an experience of violation. For one woman, this was symbolized by an incident that occurred during a period of intense suffering arising from the immature action of a cleric. She had been forced during the ensuing conflict to move her home to a new city. Then the house in which she lived was broken into. For her, this burglary seemed to symbolize the violation:

This action demonstrated what I had been unable to give voice to for all those months. In a strange way it spoke the truth that I was not allowed to utter.

Understanding Truth and Illusion

Here we enter the domain of truth and illusion; we need to recognise how truth is central to ethical practice.⁷ For Hannah Arendt, it is characteristic of a totalitarian society that truth and fiction have traded places, and that memory has been obliterated. It may be necessary to keep alive 'dangerous memories'. Johannes Baptist Metz stresses that the memory of suffering preserves something beyond the oppressive systems of exchange, something which makes protest and resistance possible. One example of this among the respondents was given by a religious sister, describing an interview with her bishop. Her employer had made it clear to her that the bishop had caused her to be dismissed from her job. During the meeting with the sister, the bishop categorically denied that he had taken such action. When the sister began to articulate how much suffering she had endured because of his precipitate action the bishop became very uncomfortable and suddenly

***Keeping
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⁷ Compare again John Paul II, 'Confession of Sins'. The section on 'sins committed in the name of truth' acknowledged that 'even men of the Church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending truth'.

stated 'Like St Paul, what I want is your happiness'. This respondent's comment was:

I just sat and looked at him thinking 'what planet are you on?' I saw he could not cope with being faced with the consequences of his actions and he just withdrew into a kind of fantasy caricature.⁸

Sufferers often felt that they were confronting an oppressive illusion, one that was determined by authority in advance. Recounting her meeting with a bishop, one woman reported:

He walked into the room with a predetermined vision of the situation, and it was from this position that he spoke and acted. When my story suggested an alternative way of looking at the facts he refused to consider it.

A man experienced this sort of imposition as a black darkness; his conversation with a priest was 'so dark, terrible—there was nothing I could say to reach him'. The illusion imposed by authority seems utterly unavoidable:

It was as though he were saying this is the way life is and it cannot be any different, and everything within me rose up to say: 'that is not true'.

How Do We Exercise Relational Authority?

The uncovering of the sexual abuse committed by some priests has led us into unknown, unfamiliar terrain, where serious questions arise about sacred authority. We need to admit that we have been brought to a situation beyond our competence. Nevertheless we can insist that authority is a 'relational reality'. It involves a series of expectations, the conferral of a certain power and the giving of service. 'The currency of

⁸ Contrast the US bishops in their *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, 27 June 2002: 'As bishops, we acknowledge our mistakes and our role in that suffering and we apologize and take responsibility for too often failing victims and our people in the past': <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/charter.htm>.

authority is competence and trustworthiness.⁹ Difficulties arise when authority's incompetence takes the form of a breach of trust. The following testimony powerfully illustrates how dialogue can break down. It recounts the undermining of an individual's integrity, and the calling into question of her professional competence by one less qualified in a specific area:

The incident concerns an occasion when my judgment, as someone charged with the task of monitoring an ordinand's growth and readiness for ordination, was sidelined by a man in a position of authority. He had had little day-to-day contact with the person in question, whereas I had travelled alongside him extensively. He had seen him only 'on his best behaviour'; I had been involved in the ordinary and the real.

My immediate reaction was that he was pulling rank, and this enraged me. We pretend in the Church that our ministerial patterns mirror God the Trinity, a communion of mutually respectful equals; we speak endlessly of co-operation, collaboration and mutual ministry; we follow Him who assumed the role of a servant. But when push comes to shove, we fall back on a military model whereby the 'top brass' 'command' the rank and file.

That was my immediate reaction. Then I found myself feeling embarrassed at having 'stepped out of line', 'said more than I should have'. Physical symptoms included blushing—I am prone to that when embarrassed—and dipping my voice, looking at my feet and trying to 'hide'. I began to feel small and insignificant, indeed rather trivial, compared to his authoritative manner and voice. I began to convince myself that he was right—so who was I to contradict him? Maybe this was unchristian?

This was immediately followed by anger at myself for colluding with his pattern of behaviour, so I reiterated my point of view more strongly and with uncharacteristic stridency, despite signals from a third party, which clearly said 'you've gone too far'. Thus I was forced into a position I would not naturally adopt nor ever wish to

⁹ Here I draw on conversations with Fr Brian McDermott SJ, and on his unpublished paper, 'The Practice of Authority as Spiritual Exercise', given at the National Catholic Educational Association Convention, Seminary Department, Baltimore, 28 April 2000.

adopt, being someone who favours dialogue, courteous listening and the forming of consensus.

My unhappiness lingered till the end of the conversation; his viewpoint 'won'—there you see, that's how the conversation appeared, a battle between two warring parties! Why, I found myself wondering, is it so difficult to stay true to who I am and what I believe in, and to put that across so that others hear and respect my viewpoint? What do I have to do to be taken seriously? I felt sure he would have 'taken' the suggestion from a man. But from me it clearly seemed uppity.

Key features of this incident are the respondent's sense of her own responsibility for the task she had been assigned, and her conscientious attempt to fulfil it. She has spent time with the individual under discussion, and knows him through a variety of experiences occurring within a learning community over a period of years. She clearly understands the collaborative exercise of authority and the theological underpinning for such a way of working. Her sense of being 'put down' by the senior authority, and her initial collusion in this, appear to be classic examples of the way in which we can so often collude with someone abusive out of a misguided sense of obedience and respect for authority. Her realisation of what was happening and, following this, her more aggressive stance—which, on reflection, she felt she had been 'forced into'—served to betray the very values that she professed to hold dear. The undermining that takes place here is threefold: firstly in her initial interaction with the authority figure; secondly, in her own collusion; thirdly in her overcorrection, which leads her to abandon the very principles she held dear. The encounter made her feel diminished, and as though her personal and professional integrity had been called into question. When she was given no opportunity to discuss the way the meeting had been handled, this feeling was reinforced.

The Theological Edge

Theologians are individuals in the forefront of the Church's thinking. They undertake a responsibility to assist the Church in the understanding of doctrine and of the Christian life. They can be characterized as working collaboratively to serve the dynamic life of the Church. However, the willingness of theologians to engage in this

area of risk has stimulated increased activity in recent years on the part of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome. This group has been concerned to maintain clear and unambiguous doctrine, and has instigated a series of juridical procedures. For the theologians involved, the result has often been the kind of suffering we have been discussing in this article.

One individual said that he passed through a whole gamut of emotions 'from annoyance to embarrassment, depression, and finally a sense of debilitated energies'. Another, by contrast, felt that his integrity was actually 'realised' in the process of engagement. Yet another stated: 'despite the temptation to take the matter personally I am not going to do so'. He felt the need to maintain an objective distance from the process so as to be able to make the necessary responses and continue to work on other projects.

A striking feature of the interviews with theologians was the willingness that they all showed to be self-critical, to be open to the possibility that they were wrong in some particulars. All the individuals considered themselves to be legitimately subject to scrutiny, and it is part of theologians' responsibility that they are accountable to the Church. What caused them difficulty was the form of the process that they were required to undergo. They spoke of its lack of clarity, of its secrecy, and of how they had no scope for entering into honest, open dialogue with those who questioned their writings.

This process also had profound personal implications. Individuals spoke of the effect upon their own faith life. More than one individual emphasized how the difficult process had led them to a more profound reliance upon prayer, to 'a need to seek the face of Christ within myself, others and the Church'.

Perceptions of Powerlessness

When asked to consider what it was within their situation that had made them feel powerless, respondents tended to focus on a feeling that they had no real existence for their perceived abuser. They felt de-personalised. For one individual, powerlessness 'is an ethos which promulgates a predetermined illusion as reality'. For another, it led to 'a sense of being distanced and excluded rather than welcomed and included'. A third spoke of being confronted with 'a refusal to countenance or engage with other than the predetermined view'. One

sister described experiencing ‘a refusal to recognise gifts, skills and abilities as beneficial for building the kingdom’. A priest felt frustrated by what he saw as ‘a focus on superficial appearances rather than the willingness to engage in depth with real issues’. A lay woman spoke of ‘being treated as an object not a personal subject’. A theologian under investigation experienced what he could later call ‘the implicit justification of injustice to achieve a desired end’. What made one of the lay male respondents feel powerless was authority’s inability to admit it had been in error, while a woman involved in education ministry talked of ‘the inability to look at the possibility of dialogue, whereby disagreeing parties might come to join in action for a common cause’. Another lay man spoke of ‘the intrinsic assumption that I am wrong and that every possible means will be manipulated to prove my error’, while a woman pastoral assistant experienced a painful confrontation as ‘the death-knell not just of real collaboration but of any minimal attempt at consultation’.

**‘ . . . the
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wrong’**

A Cardinal’s Experience

It is not, however, just those outside the hierarchy or in lower positions within it whose voices need to be heard. When Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago was falsely accused of sexual abuse, we heard an experience of suffering from the voice of an individual in the public eye, and within the Church’s decision-making processes. The way he articulates his experience echoes the words of many of the respondents in the interviews:

The accusation startled and devastated me. I tried to get beyond the unconfirmed rumours and return to my work, but this lurid charge against my deepest ideals and commitments kept consuming my attention. . . . Spurious charges, I realised, were what Jesus himself experienced. But this evolving nightmare seemed completely unreal. It did not seem possible that this was happening to me.

The nightmarish quality of this experience is a common feature in most respondents’ stories. The unreality of what occurred seemed in stark contrast to the normal pattern of life that continued around the suffering individual. Cardinal Bernardin went on to elaborate his



feelings as he faced the false allegation. ‘I was very humiliated. . . . It was total humiliation . . . my feeling was that of disbelief, bewilderment.’ After the bewilderment, ‘it turned to anger, real deep-seated anger: “Why has this person done this to me?” And then it turned to compassion and sorrow. And that’s where I am now.’¹⁰

In the progression of his emotions, Cardinal Bernardin’s experience mirrors that of the interviewees. The reflective experience enabled by prayer and support, by space and time, can lead to a deeper compassion for those who have perpetrated perceived injustice or suffering. Those who have suffered can sense that the sacrament which is their own humanity has, as it were, been tried and proven, and is now reaching out to others.

Moving Forward

Cardinal Bernardin’s story illustrates that power can be abusively exercised against authority figures as well as by them. The issue of abuse has become a challenge to our whole theology of ministry. The challenge we need to face is that of moving forward from such experiences. How can we learn from the experiences of those who have suffered from abuse, in a way that enables us to begin again? How can we begin again to focus on the central reality of ministry, on service among, with and on behalf of the people of God? How can we truly collaborate in ministry?

The stories we have heard in this paper show how we can all, to some extent, be both victims and perpetrators of abuse. We collude and deny, even if we do not actively participate. Readers reflecting upon their own stories may find points of resonance with some of the stories here, and may bring their own personal experience—their own empirical data—to interact with them. If there is to be fruitful change,

¹⁰ Homily, 19 November 1993, in *Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin*, edited by Alphonse P. Spilly, vol. 1, *Homilies and Teaching Documents* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 581-582.

there needs to be a widespread process of conversation and dialogue. It will be important to keep in mind that we can be in the wrong, as a number of respondents emphasized.

Yet being wrong is often not the most difficult issue, for being wrong can be forgiven. 'It is insisting on being right that confirms our being bound in original sin.'¹¹ James Alison insists that we need to be continually aware of the possible distortions within our own way of seeing reality, and gradually allow them to be corrected. Only thus can we hope to approach others in a way that is open and life-giving, not destructive:

Our knowledge of each other is projective and in its mode already distorted. Only in the degree to which we allow our own distortion to be corrected will we be able to know the other with limpidity.

Moreover, as Alison emphasizes, there must be a real understanding of 'the efficacious revealing of the forgiveness of sins'. Alison sees this forgiveness as the 'foundation of the Church' and as 'our only way back into God's original plan for us'. If this sense of forgiveness is truly to be the root of all relating within the Church, the voices articulated above must be heard. Moreover, as we hear them, our own experience needs to come into focus. Our next step forward has to be a commitment to listening at depth. If we listen to the narratives of suffering, perhaps we can let the language of the sufferer shape our understanding. And from there we may begin to envisage possibilities for true collaboration in ministry.

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¹¹ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), pp. 125, later quotations from pp. 144, 176.