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The Loss of the Self—Spiritual Abuse of Adults in the Context of the Catholic Church

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Abstract: Interest in spiritual abuse is a fairly recent phenomenon in research. Originally, it received attention only in the context of child sexual abuse perpetrated by the clergy in the Catholic Church before it was recognized as a specific form of abuse in its own right. In line with Paul Ricœur, I agree that a narrative best describes a person's identity. I, therefore, give space to the voices of three women who were spiritually abused as adults in France in the context of new religious communities that originated after the Second Vatican Council: Sophie Ducrey, Anne Mardon and Marie-Laure Janssens. The social constructionist method allows the uniqueness of each of their narratives to be recognized, while also accounting for shared experiences such as the dynamics of control, desocialization and intrusion into the private spheres of life. Spiritual abuse, which is at the hinge point between the moral and spiritual and the psychological realms, is perpetrated by a spiritual leader who has power over women. The abuse serves to fulfill the psychological or sexual needs of the leader. Abuse of the conscience, theology and spirituality are the spiritual means used, alongside the psychological ones, to cause the women to become dependent. In the process, their desire for God and the affective needs that some may have are abused. The consequences are many, but the loss of self, of which faith is the core, summarizes it well.

Keywords: Roman Catholic; spiritual abuse; sexual abuse; adults



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1. Introduction

In this article, I intend to explore, from a practical theological point of view, the spiritual abuse some women suffered in new religious communities that originated in the context of the Catholic Church. I situate my practical theological approach within the hermeneutical paradigm that is further expanded by social constructionism and postfoundationalism (Demasure 2006; Demasure and Müller 2006). A narrative is constructed based on actions but also allows feelings and thoughts to be explored. The answer to the question “Who am I?” (Ricœur 1985, p. 355) is best responded to by telling stories, because stories, more than concepts, respect the individuality of a person. After all, concepts can be applied to many individuals, while a person's story is unique. According to Paul Ricœur, one cannot understand him or herself in a direct way but only through the “detour” of the life story; therefore, he does not use the concept of “I” but that of the “self” (Ricœur [1960] 1969). In a postfoundational approach, context is not only part of the interpretation but is central to it. Wentzel Van Huyssteen (Van Huyssteen 1997) is the founder of the postfoundational theology. Postfoundationalism is situated in the hermeneutical paradigm but expands it further (Demasure and Müller 2006). It acknowledges that reality is always interpreted but adds that contextuality plays a crucial role in this interpretation. The postfoundationalist approach invites us to firstly listen to the stories of people struggling in real-life situations. After these experiences are carefully listened to, they are then described within their specific and concrete context. Although the “local” is central in a postfoundational approach, at the same time, it points beyond the confines of the local (Müller 2009). The question can be raised as to what extent the elements that make up a person's specific story can be generalized. Abuse of women in the western world may be different from, e.g., abuse of

women in Africa. Nevertheless, some common elements can usually be identified and can, therefore, convey meaning in another culture. Social constructionism introduces the notion of power in practical theology. Every society creates master narratives that form the framework in which we live and interpret our own experiences. Master narratives are shared stories that express and guide thought, beliefs and behavior. These stories are not about individual, personal experiences but instead serve as broad, cultural templates for how to tell particular types of stories, both in content and in structure. Thus, the construction of one's own life story is influenced by the master narratives that circulate in society.

The interpretation of experiences is always influenced by tradition and what Ricœur calls "prefiguration". One always interprets, from previous knowledge, an initial understanding. Each exploration of the subject has the potential to lead to a better understanding and, thus, to a transformation. Stories normally use innovation and sedimentation. In other words, they are unique while using existing narrative frameworks that are available in the culture. Master stories are, therefore, important (Cf. Demasure and Müller 2006). In western culture, master stories circulate in which women who say they were abused as adults by members of the clergy are considered not to have been abused but to have seduced the priests. Another master narrative states that all relationships between adults are consensual. In such a context, disclosure is very difficult because the responsibility is put on the victim. Therefore, the creation of a counternarrative in which women's voices are heard is important.

Indeed, telling a story has the potential to lead to a transformation for the listener, as well as for the person who tells it (Ricœur 1983, 1985). A story is, first and foremost, about actions; therefore, transformation leads not only to a redescription of reality but also to a change in the field of actions (Demasure 2004, pp. 104–54; 2006, 2012; Demasure and Müller 2006).

With this contribution, I hope to participate in the creation of a counternarrative that is based on both reading the books in which three women in France tell their story and listening to their voices in interviews available on the internet. Counternarratives give voice to alternative ways to tell a story. They dispute dominant narratives that are powerful and recognized as "truth" by offering new perspectives. Often, dominant narratives exclude the voice of the marginalized or the oppressed, while a counternarrative wants to restore the dignity and agency of those formerly denied in the dominant narrative (Given 2008).

In 1989, Sophie Ducrey came across the Community of Saint John. The Community of Saint John brings together three religious congregations: the Brothers of Saint John (1975), the Apostolic Sisters of Saint John (1982) and the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John (1984), as well as oblates (lay-people who follow this spirituality). The community of Saint John was founded by the Dominican priest Marie-Dominique Philippe (1912–2006). When Sophie Ducrey met the community, she was 16 years old. Having strong spiritual aspirations, she confided in a priest who became her guide. In her book *"Étouffée. Récit d'un abus spirituel et sexuel. Témoignage"* (Ducrey 2019), she testifies to the psychological hold she fell into, as well as the spiritual and sexual abuse she suffered, from the time she was 18 years old by the priest Brother Lamorak (not his real name). It has to be noted that he denies these claims.

Marie-Laure Janssens was a religious sister of the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John. The community was founded in 1982, also by Marie-Dominique Philippe. Janssens entered the community when she was 23 years old and left after 11 years in 2010, a year after the Vatican intervened and tried to stop the abuses in her congregation. In her book *"Le silence de la vierge. Abus spirituels, dérives sectaires: une ancienne religieuse témoigne"* (Janssens and Corre 2017), she testifies to the spiritual abuse she experienced in this community.

Anne Mardon found the faith when she was 20 years old. She was baptized at l'Arche by Thomas Philippe (1905–1993), brother of Marie-Dominique Philippe. Pierre-Marie Delfieux founded the community of the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem in 1975, of which Mardon became first a postulant, and, later, she took the religious habit. The

community includes two separate religious institutes of monastic inspiration—one for men and one for women. She describes the spiritual and sexual abuse and the reaction of the hierarchy in two books: *“Quand l’Église détruit”* (Mardon 2019) and *“Silences dans l’Église: par action et par omission”* (Mardon 2020a).

2. Defining Spiritual Abuse

Interest in spiritual abuse is a recent phenomenon in research. Originally, it received some attention in the context of sexual abuse perpetrated by the clergy as one of the methods used in the grooming process (Applewhite 2014; Farrell and Taylor 2000; Joulain 2018; Spraitz and Bowen 2019).¹ Members of the clergy or religious communities try to convince the child to commit or submit to sexual actions by using spiritual justifications. While, within the Protestant context, spiritual abuse has already been addressed (Johnson and Van Vonderen [1991] 2005; Oakley and Kinmond 2013; Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Poujol 2015), spiritual abuse has only received more attention in the Catholic Church with the broadening of the range of recognized victims from just children to other vulnerable persons (Cf. Pope Francis 2019). Also, for adults, spiritual abuse, at first, was discussed in the context of sexual abuse before it became recognized as a specific form of abuse in its own right (de Dinechin and Léger 2019; de Lassus 2020).

As interest in spiritual abuse came in the wake of sexual abuse, definitions often link both forms of abuse. For example, in the following quote from de Dinechin and Léger: “spiritual abuse does not always lead to sexual abuse, (. . .) but it is the antechamber to it” (de Dinechin and Léger 2019, p. 19)². Anne Mardon speaks in the same vein:

“There is the temptation to possess the soul of the other, and when one is master of the soul, there is a gradual shift towards the body. This taking of total possession is more pleasurable than sexual abuse alone. If the priest is not very vigilant, not very balanced, not aware that this phenomenon is almost inevitable, the relationship deviates”. (Mardon 2020b, p. 8)

Thus, there may be a shift in the relationship from spiritual to sexual abuse, sometimes without premeditation. Celine Hoyeau, a journalist who investigated the abuses in the new communities in France, also reflects this position: “(. . .) these sexual abuses were only extensions, so to speak, of a more profound spiritual hold and undoubtedly as much deleterious, because it touched the soul” (Hoyeau 2021, p. 124). She does not, however, express an opinion as to whether premeditation occurred.

Marie-Laure Janssens, who was not sexually abused, does not link spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. She defines spiritual abuse as: “a religious variant of emotional and psychological domination. A hijacking of the most intimate dimension of the human being: his relationship to the transcendence” (Janssens and Corre 2017, p. 15). Poujol also gives a definition of spiritual abuse that is not necessarily linked to sexual abuse. He writes: “[. . .] spiritual abuse is an abuse of authority that is further aggravated using divine authority to dominate one or several persons” (Poujol 2015, p. 12). This domination may, then, have the aim of sexual abuse, as well as potentially serving to feed the narcissistic core of the person abusing. Thus, the abuse serves the needs of the abuser, which can be psychological or sexual.

Poujol’s definition includes two elements; it is about dominating, and it is performed while invoking divine authority. Divine authority may have its origin in the use of biblical texts or theological arguments to justify the abuse, but the divine authority can also be found in the position of the abuser. Mark Stibbe writes that John Smyth (the leader of the group) defined his own position as follows: “God is our father in heaven, but not on earth, and therefore he, Smyth, had to be that father to us” (Stibbe 2019, p. xvii). That is, setting oneself up as God, assuming a divine position.

Referring to a previous publication, Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys write that “Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context [. . .]” (Oakley and Humphreys 2019, p. 16). This definition puts the emphasis on the

context as the core element of the abuse. The authors avoid including the term “leader”, although, in the first attempts to define spiritual abuse, the “leader” was identified as the abuser. However, their experience showed that leaders themselves can also be victims of spiritual abuse, which is why Oakley and Humphrey avoid the term and replace it with “spiritual context”. Spiritual abuse, according to their definition, can, therefore, take place in an individual, spiritual accompaniment, as well as in a spiritual, sectarian group or a religious community. The abuse can be committed by the leader of the group, the superior, but also by a spiritual director, a novice master or a mentor. However, the person who abuses must, in some way, have a position of power over the victim, since abuse necessitates power.

For the purpose of this article, I work with the following definition: spiritual abuse is the manipulation, domination and coercion by one person of one or several persons within the context of the Catholic Church for the purpose of fulfilling the psychological or sexual needs of the abuser.

Spiritual and psychological abuse are closely related. I do not want to go so far as to view spiritual abuse as a form of psychological abuse, as Oakley and Humphreys (Cf. [Oakley and Humphreys 2019](#), p. 31) and Janssens (Cf. [Janssens and Corre 2017](#), p. 15) do, but spiritual abuse has proven difficult to separate from psychological abuse. Indeed, if behavior is coercive, controlling and dominating, then we are talking about psychological abuse. However, the spiritual element whereby the perpetrator’s almost divine position or biblical and theological texts are used to demand submission is, for many, the most traumatizing aspect of the abuse. Moreover, the consequences of the abuse are not only psychological but also affect the spirituality and faith of people. I agree with how Celine Hoyeau puts it: spiritual abuse is situated “at the hinge between the moral and spiritual field and the psychological field” ([Hoyeau 2021](#), p. 153). Hoyeau locates the abuse of conscience not as part of the spiritual abuse but as an element that is positioned on the same level as the spiritual field. In this article, I consider the abuse of conscience as a form of spiritual abuse because I define spiritual abuse as a coercion, which includes the abuse of conscience, and because of the religious context in which it appears.

Poujol points out that spiritual abuse can be perpetrated by a single person—for example, in spiritual accompaniment—or it can be systemic. In the latter case, this concerns religious communities that have deviated from the greater tradition to which they belong or communities that often arise around a charismatic leader. There are similarities between spiritual abuse in individual accompaniment and abuse in communities, but there are also differences. In this contribution, I focus my analysis on abuses in religious communities that originated after the Second Vatican Council as those were the communities of the women to which I was listening.

All forms of spiritual abuse lead to the loss of the self. Mardon writes that they abdicated all reason, that they were asked to get rid of their own will because it was the cause of all vices and that this spirituality “was gradually taking away all common sense, all reference points, all instinct of conservation” ([Mardon 2019](#), p. 47). Sophie Ducrey puts it as follows: “I am worthless” ([Ducrey 2019](#), p. 58). Anne Mardon says: “I was no longer a person” ([Mardon 2020b](#), p. 4). Marie-Laure Janssens says that they were “dispossessed of themselves” and that she “has been erased in the service of the community” ([Janssens 2019](#)).

How can it come to this? Two topics need to be explored: the dynamics of abuse and the position of the leader.

3. Dynamics of Spiritual Abuse

I will discuss several dynamics: dynamics of control, desocialization, the intrusion into all facets of personal life and the prohibition to criticize the one in charge.

3.1. The Dynamics of Control

Sophie Ducrey and Marie-Laure Janssens entered the religious community because they had a longing for God (Cf. [Janssens and Corre 2017](#); [Hoyeau 2019](#)). Ducrey also

mentions that she had affective needs, as did Anne Mardon. Anne Mardon came from an atheist family and had no knowledge at all of Catholicism. Captivated by the liturgy in the church of Saint Gervais (Paris), she was approached by Pierre-Marie Delfieux who said he perceived her religious longings. Anne Mardon was marked by a difficult childhood, with parents who did not get along. Her father died when she was 12 years old. She stayed home from school for four years and lived in a fusional relationship with her mother. She was looking for a father figure. Those flaws were exploited by Pierre-Marie Delfieux (Cf. [Mardon 2021](#)). Sophie Ducrey tells of the maltreatment she suffered at home when she was a child and how she also was looking for another “Father”. She became, as she testifies herself, the ideal prey. She was looking for the truth, a meaningful life, for God, and, at first, she found the spiritual food she was looking for. She thought she was in heaven (Cf. [Ducrey 2021](#)). She fell in love with the priest, and he took up all aspects of her life. Marie-Laure Janssens, on the other hand, was raised in a Catholic family. She does not talk about affective needs as Sophie Ducrey and Anne Mardon do, but she did have strong religious longings that originated in her Catholic education. She wanted a life in which she could encounter God. When planning to study theology at the “Institut Catholique” in Paris, she was advised by Brother Régis Marie to go to St Jodard (France), the Centre for Formation of the Community of Saint John.

In the first phase, the women feel very welcome and supported, and those positive experiences make it very difficult to recognize the harmful behavior that follows (Cf. [Oakley and Humphreys 2019](#)). Slowly, a web is woven through which the person becomes more and more dependent on the spiritual leader. What follows is a game of attraction and repulsion, in which the victim is humiliated and made to feel guilty only to be approached positively again afterwards. Although there were some difficulties from the very beginning, Mardon experienced the first few years as a honeymoon. She and Pierre-Marie talked a lot, traveled together and went for walks in the countryside (Cf. [Mardon 2019](#), p. 36). Later, “Pierre-Marie, for his part, did not slacken his vigilance, passing from blackmail to caresses, from anger and threats to indifference” ([Mardon 2020b](#), p. 3). Sophie Ducrey explains the mechanism of attraction and rejection quite well:

“To that end, [to empty the inner freedom of the person] he uses, in particular, the game of the alternation between proximity and distance, warm and then cold feelings, compliments followed by making the person feeling guilty and denigration. All this to the point of driving the victim crazy, which he will blame on her flaws”. ([Ducrey 2019](#), pp. 107–8)

Ducrey is of the opinion that spirituality was used to mask the psychological manipulation. It is important to note that Mardon points out that being under the power of someone, being manipulated, does not necessarily mean that the victim loses her critical sense. However, she allows it because she does not want to lose the person who means everything to her and takes up all parts of her life (Cf. [Mardon 2021](#)). She only felt free of his invasive power when Pierre-Marie Delfieux died and, only then, could she disclose the abuse.

3.2. *Desocialization*

Members of abusive communities are cut off from the outside world. They form a family as God intended and, therefore, consider themselves an elite group. The world outside must be avoided and fought against because it is evil. Information from the outside is filtered by those who pull the strings. Parts of reality remain hidden, and the group lives in a parallel world that does not tolerate outsiders that have a critical perspective of it. Janssens writes that they had no radio, no newspapers and that it was only through some homilies that they heard some news from the outside world³ (Cf. [Janssens and Corre 2017](#), p. 117). Communication at the horizontal level, between members of the group, is not permitted (Cf. [de Lassus 2020](#), pp. 101–6) or is at least strictly regulated. As Marie-Laure Janssens writes: questions and doubts should not be expressed with other novices and personal difficulties or feelings should not be shared with lay-people who were close to the

community. This vertical structure led to a vast solitude, she says. They lived next to one another without even knowing each other and without being able to support one another (Cf. [Janssens and Corre 2017](#), pp. 56–57).

This isolation places members of the community completely under the control of the one who abuses them. Contact with family and friends is controlled or limited. The community in which one lives is defined as the real family, which is worth more than the original family. Anne Mardon writes that Pierre-Marie Delfieux did not forbid contact with her family. On the contrary, he encouraged it, while at the same time saying that her old family was obsolete (Cf. [Mardon 2019](#), p. 96). She felt alienated from her family of origin and contacts remained superficial. She never opened up about what she experienced, and, even when they saw that she had no interest anymore in things that she enjoyed before, they did not say a word (Cf. [Mardon 2020a](#), p. 51). Marie-Laure Janssens describes visits to her family as theater. The visit had to be perfect, so she faked that everything was fine. By being cut off from external relations, as well as relations within the religious community, Janssens points out that everything became focused on Sister Marthe, novice mistress. To fulfil her need to talk to someone, to have someone she could trust, someone with whom she could have a privileged relation, she became the assistant of Sister Marthe, and the communion with God transformed in a fusion with Sister Marthe (Cf. [Janssens 2019](#)).

3.3. *The Spiritual Intrusion in All Aspects of Life*

Every aspect of life is spiritualized, as Marie-Laure Janssens testifies in an interview with Yves Casgrain:

“Everything is spiritualized in these communities. I think this is one aspect of spiritual abuse. Everything is judged and looked at by a spiritual standard. The way you walk down the halls, the way you eat, the smile you have or don’t have on your face, the mail you send to your family, your reading, your studies, etc. Everything, everything, everything is looked at from a spiritual perspective”. ([Janssens 2021](#), p. 76)

Moreover, total transparency is asked in the name of obedience. Of course, this gives the one in charge considerable power. Janssens had to open up her heart about her mistakes, doubts, evil thoughts, etc., to someone she did not choose. Mardon reveals that the “*petites laures*”⁴ as they were called, and of which she was part of, had to write down their activities, their feelings and their questions by the hour and report everything weekly.

3.4. *Prohibition to Criticize and Obedience*

Sophie Ducrey states: “in the community of Saint John, we do not criticize. We just follow, blindly, the teachings of Father, the founder” ([Ducrey 2019](#), p. 11s). Uniformity is mandatory, and different points of view are not accepted, because the power of the superior is considered to be of divine origin.

While the leader’s view is considered to be of divine origin, critical comments from members are identified as coming from the devil, the great Divider. Those who hold a different opinion are isolated and possibly ostracized from the community. Furthermore, because of confusion in roles, it is difficult to criticize. Pierre-Marie Delfieux was, at the same time, the founder, the prior, the novice master, the confessor and the spiritual guide ([Mardon 2020c](#)). Even during an apostolic visitation, members of the group were pressured not to speak—Delfieux was constantly walking up and down the corridor so that the members did not feel free to speak out.

4. The Spiritual Leader

Spiritual leaders who commit abuse can be male, as in the case of Anne Mardon and Sophie Ducrey, but they can also be female, as in the case of Marie-Laure Janssens. The superior of the community of the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John to which Marie-Laure Janssens belonged was Sister Alix (Parmentier). She was, however, not the person in power. Marie-Laure names Sister Marthe as the one who pulled the strings and who served as a

combination of many roles; she was the general assistant to Sister Alix, the novice mistress for the mother house (Saint-Jodard in France), the referent for the novitiates abroad and, for the young sisters, she was the only teacher (at least in France), the spiritual mother of most sisters and the person in charge for the constructions of the congregation. “She was for us a mother, a superior, a confidante, a formator, a teacher, a model, a living model, and the person close to Father [Marie-Dominique]” (Janssens and Corre 2017, p. 73s), the only person to really confide in. She knew all secrets and sometimes betrayed them (Cf. Janssens and Corre 2017, p. 58).

For Anne Mardon, the leader was Pierre-Marie Delfieux (1934–2013), who was the founder of the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem. She describes him as being obsessed with his foundation, easily enraged and someone who put people under pressure. In the newspaper *Lacroix*, she says: “Very quickly, Pierre-Marie became everything for me, my father and my mother, I could not do without him” (Hoyeau 2019). For Sophie Ducrey, it was Brother Lamorak who had a hold on her. He had a lot of influence, which made it difficult to denounce him.

Leaders of new communities are often charismatic figures. Marie-Laure Janssens speaks about the exceptional charisma of Sister Marthe. Charismatic figures have the ability to persuade people to join the community or to remain in it. The first time Sister Marthe saw Marie-Laure Janssens, she said: “Your place is with the sisters, when are you going to join the congregation?” (Janssens 2019). Most often, charismatic leaders make people dependent through seduction but, sometimes, as in the case of Anne Mardon, by coercion, after she had become emotionally and spiritually dependent on Delfieux. For some leaders, their spiritual authority resides in their priesthood. Sophie Ducrey states that Christ lives in priests and that, by consequence, they reach the divine perfection of God. Therefore, they are called “father”, as God himself is called “Father” (Ducrey 2019, p. 20). Their spiritual aura is above mortals, which the group recognizes (Cf. Hoyeau 2021, p. 61). In other cases, it is not the ordination but the charismatic aura that gives the leader power. They claim that their insights and interpretation of the Bible stem directly from God. To obey them is to obey God (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 25s; Mardon 2019, p. 32). However, for Anne Mardon, obedience was a problem from the start. Officially, she says, it was about the glory of God, but unofficially it was about obedience to the organization, its founder and the superior. She did not want to disown herself (Cf. Mardon 2019, p. 32). She rebelled during the entire period that she was a part of the religious community, while, at the same time, doing what Pierre-Marie Delfieux asked of her. He was convinced that her opposition was diabolical and wanted to bring her back into line with neuroleptics, the opening of the chakras and exorcism and then sent her to a hermitage (Cf. Mardon 2020a, p. 83). Although she realized that he was always focused on himself and his foundation, that he considered himself chosen and sent by God and that people were just pawns to him, she felt that she needed him—and that is what made her dependent on him.

Hoyeau shares the psychological analysis by Gerard Ribers of such leaders. Ribers distinguishes between those leaders who are perverts and those who suffer from narcissism. The first group does not recognize laws except those they have made themselves. They justify those laws that ensure their omnipotence with arguments such as: “others cannot understand that. We should not throw pearls before swine”. Or they invoke divine law. They enjoy controlling and “owning” their disciples and, eventually, destroying them. Sophie Ducrey’s therapist states in a similar vein: “The great majority of abusers deny the facts, in order to be able to continue in their perversity and thus not be deprived of their power and pleasure, which are the only things that count for them” (Ducrey 2019, p. 98). It is the suffering of the person that precedes their enjoyment. Anne Mardon writes that the (female) superior made it clear to her that “to see me annihilated will give her a certain satisfaction” (Mardon 2019, p. 33).

Those Ribers calls narcissistic—Poujol terms egocentric (Cf. Poujol 2015, p. 16)—have a need they seek to fulfil. They suffer from an affective or sexual deficit that they seek to satisfy but unfortunately cannot (Cf. Poujol 2015, p. 17). Their narcissism is strengthened

by living in a community that glorifies the leader, which prevents him or her from facing reality (Cf. Hoyeau 2021, p. 159s). The alterity of the followers is not recognized by the leader. Followers are only perceived as an extension of his or her narcissism: as pawns in a game.

Each of the three women experienced a privileged relationship with a leader. Anne Mardon agreed to join the religious community because of this relationship. He spoke to her in the following terms: “my darling little girl I will never, ever leave you” (Mardon 2019, p. 42). She addressed him with “daddy dearest”. She felt unique even when she figured out that she was not the only one to have a privileged relationship (Cf. Mardon 2019, p. 84). That was not the case for Sophie Ducrey. She perceived that several young girls gravitated toward Brother Lamorak and that a rivalry developed between them. The ones who obeyed him most, and, thus, obeyed God, were the preferred ones (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 25). Later, she realized that she was only an object to him, replaceable with anyone else (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 55).

The community that responds to such a leader is portrayed as an elite group. The Community of Saint John was established by God to prepare for the approaching end times, and Ducrey was happy to belong to the privileged few (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 33; Janssens and Corre 2017, p. 7). Janssens protests at the contempt of some friars for diocesan priests and religious of other congregations (Cf. Janssens and Corre 2017, p. 38). The group has blind trust in their leader, or at least obedience, which results in a cult of the leader who becomes the ultimate reference in both action and thinking.

5. The Abuse of Theology, Spirituality, and Conscience

In the case of the three women, the theology of Marie-Dominique and Thomas Philippe, both Dominican priests, played a role in enabling spiritual and sexual abuse. Although, in 1956, the Vatican, following a canonical investigation, forbade Thomas Philippe to exercise any priestly ministry, which deprived him of his capacity to carry out any public or private ministry—celebration of the sacraments, spiritual direction, preaching, etc.—he nevertheless continued his activities more or less in a clandestine way (*L’Arche International* 2020). The mystico-erotic theology that the Philippe brothers developed promised a religious experience through sexual activities with them or their followers. Their spirituality, or at least the interpretation thereof, focused on “amour d’amitié” (friendship love) (Ducrey 2019, pp. 27–32), which asserts the physical–erotic overlap as part of spiritual accompaniment and divine pedagogy. Those experiences should, however, be kept quiet because outsiders would not understand this “special grace” (Hoyeau 2015). Brother Lamorak points out that it is not the corporal, but the spiritual virginity that is important (Ducrey 2019, p. 28). Mary at the cross was offered by Jesus to John. Therefore, women are made to be given, to sacrifice themselves. This is, after all, the real holiness for women (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 31).

Sophie Ducrey also elaborates on the spiritual arguments that are used to enable sexual abuse: “Be like Mary who said yes to everything, even before understanding” (Ducrey 2019, p. 28). Brother Lamorak encouraged her to give up her critical mind. In addition, how people live inside the community should have to be kept a secret because outsiders would not understand it. “To understand, one must enter into the spirit of St. John and the pearls must not be cast before the swine” (Ducrey 2019, p. 30). However, in her interview, she also points to the beautiful elements they were taught. She appreciated many of Philippe’s writings—they answered her needs and her quest for meaning and truth—but that is exactly how one becomes trapped. The fundamental problem for her was that the beautiful and true words and the abusive actions did not match. Those words were merely used as a seduction strategy (Cf. Ducrey 2021). Marie-Laure Janssens took a class with Marie-Dominique Philippe who taught them “philosophical realism”: Aristotle for philosophy, Thomas Aquinas for theology and Saint John for mystical wisdom. The Bible had to be read intuitively and with love. This intuitive reading allowed for the manipulation of the gospel of John. The relation between Jesus and his disciple John was interpreted in a quasi-physical way. Clearly influenced by those ideas, Pierre-Marie Delfieux saw his

relationship with Anne Mardon as a mystical union and their relationship as the image between the bridegroom and the Church, identifying himself as Christ and Anne Mardon as the Church (Cf. [Mardon 2019](#), p. 38).

Spiritual abuse can also occur when a victim wants to reveal their sexual abuse. In the case of Sophie Ducrey, it was pointed out by a fellow Brother that, if there was no rape, it was a shared “weakness”. Thus, she should ask for forgiveness for her part in the abuse and stop slandering the reputation of Brother Lamorak who was widely respected. By slandering the Brother, Ducrey was told, she was besmirching the whole community, as well as the Church (Cf. [Ducrey 2019](#), p. 79).

Both Mardon and Janssens experienced abuse of conscience: officially joining the community or taking vows under pressure. Janssens wrote a startling testimony about this. In a letter to her parents, she wrote: “The choice to spend my life in this community was no longer mine. I put it in the hands of my superiors, who would know perfectly well how to decipher the signs that I was not receiving” ([Janssens and Corre 2017](#), p. 52). The will of God was expressed through her superiors. She considered them to be the only ones who had the grace to discern (Cf. [Janssens and Corre 2017](#), p. 85). Mardon reports the words of Delfieux when she hesitated and opposed wearing the liturgical cloak and, later, the monastic habit: “if God is, he is everything, and that in this case, we must give everything” ([Mardon 2019](#), p. 41). Pierre-Marie Delfieux said her intuition betrayed her and that he knew better what her deepest desire was, even when she told him clearly that she did not want to vow chastity, poverty and obedience (Cf. [Mardon 2019](#), p. 47).

During an interview with Anne Mardon by the independent commission that investigates abuses in the Catholic Church (CIASE), CIASE’s president Marc Sauvé summarized: “It seems clear that there was a hold on you, an abuse of consciousness and power. The taking of the habit that you relate in your book was of great violence. All this in the context of an emotional relationship” ([Mardon 2020b](#), p. 13).

6. The Loss of the Self

The narratives of the women show that spiritual abuse leads to loss of the self. That is probably the worst thing that can happen. Sophie Ducrey says: “I have to feed my passion [for people and for life] not to become ashes that scatter in the wind” ([Ducrey 2019](#), p. 11); “We don’t talk about ourselves, we forget ourselves” ([Ducrey 2019](#), p. 12); “I am the shadow of myself” ([Ducrey 2019](#), p. 53); “I am worthless” ([Ducrey 2019](#), p. 58); “I am only rottenness” ([Ducrey 2019](#), p. 99). During the sexual abuse, she dissociated, which she describes as death (Cf. [Ducrey 2019](#), p. 109). She was an object in the hands of the priest—she did not exist as a unique person. He could have had sex with anyone.

The sexual abuse left Ducrey with a feeling of being dirty, and, although Janssens does not consider her relationship with Sister Marthe to have been sexually abusive, she said that her caresses and kisses made her feel very ambiguous about her sexual identity. The sexual relationship between Anne Mardon and Pierre-Marie Delfieux is more difficult to describe due to her history, which had made her very vulnerable—she had had a sexual relationship with a Jesuit that led to a pregnancy and abortion. As for Delfieux, she did not see him as a sexual predator, limiting himself to kisses and caresses. He was afraid of sexuality and, as long as nothing happened at the genital level, in his opinion, there were no gestures that violated chastity. However, this physical relationship contributed to her dependence on him, kept her chained carnally, and she confirmed that she was troubled by this, not knowing where she was, who she was and what her place was (Cf. [Mardon 2020a](#), p. 123). Mardon says that she no longer knew who she was, that she was absent from herself, that she had to live a life that was not her own. She had to reconstruct her identity, although she prefers to use the phrasing “construct her identity”. This took her 20 years because she had to face all the time she lived in Jerusalem and accept this as the basis on which to construct her identity.

During her stay in the Philippines, Marie-Laure Janssens experienced this time as a new freedom until Sister Marthe comes to visit. “My soul (. . .) fell back into her trap, like

a butterfly irresistibly attracted by the light that will burn its wings” (Janssens and Corre 2017, p. 134). She summarizes her experience of abuse as follows: “I was dispossessed of my own judgment, of my discernment and of my personality” (Cf. Janssens 2019).

Faith is the most profound part of our identity, and the abuse also affects faith, touching what is most intimate. Janssens did not lose her faith; however, she is no longer a part of the Catholic Church.

Sophie Ducrey convinces herself to go to Mass but can no longer pray, and this makes her anxious. Her abuser celebrated Mass immediately after the abuse. He assured her that every time one attends Mass or celebrates it, one is forgiven. For her, this is both an abuse of the sacrament and an abuse of God (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 146s). She wonders how one can celebrate the sacrament of unity after he himself created division in the victim who, to escape the horrible reality of abuse, dissociates by leaving her body.

In her book *“Silences dans l’Église”*, Anne Mardon writes that she completely abandoned religious practice without giving up the search for God (Cf. Mardon 2020a, p. 112s). In her interview with Pascal Hubert, however, she testifies that she can identify the moment she lost her faith. She compares it with lights going out. First, they dim and then it is dark, and she knew: “I have no faith anymore” (Cf. Mardon 2021). The pressure to take vows and the ambiguous relationship with Pierre-Marie Delfieux led to Anne Mardon being sent to consult with a psychiatrist. He had been chosen by Delfieux and took a dim view of medical confidentiality. Mardon wanted to die, the final loss of the self. For some victims, suicide is the only way out and, although both Sophie Ducrey and Anne Mardon struggled with the thought of taking their own life, they finally found the strength to go on living.

There were also physical consequences: Sophie Ducrey tells of her back pain and her chronic fatigue. These were interpreted by Brother Lamorak as attacks from the devil. She became anorexic (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 30). In her married life, she experienced sexual blockages and panic attacks. She felt any sexual gesture as dangerous and any pleasure a possible path to death (Cf. Ducrey 2019, p. 56). Even after a long journey of counseling and of seeking justice, she writes: “I do not even know if my husband will ever be able to touch me again. The disgust is so intimate. Even contact with my children has become problematic” (Ducrey 2019, p. 184).

Anne Mardon reports depression and feeling like a zombie. When she finally had to leave the community, she did not know how to eat anymore or sleep. She was haunted by anxieties, taking too many medications which caused hallucinations. She summarizes by saying that she did not know how to live anymore (Cf. Mardon 2021).

7. Conclusions

Although the women’s stories contain unique elements, such as whether spiritual and sexual abuse were combined or if they were abused by a man or a woman, there are some common threads that run through all three stories. All three reveal how their identities came under such pressure, which can be summarized as the loss of the self at both the individual and the social level.

At the individual level, the pressure to integrate into the community and conform to its rules was experienced as an invasion of conscience. The identity had to be molded, and individuality had to disappear. Obedience was interpreted as submitting to the norms of the leader and community. The strategy to make this happen was to make the women dependent on the leader by seduction, affection and threats. Even when they gained insight into the process, leaving was difficult because of the losses they might suffer. Moreover, they might no longer know how to live outside the community because their social identity had become virtually nonexistent. Previous relationships with friends and family were either forbidden or severely limited. Horizontal relationships within the community were frowned upon or outright forbidden. Relationships were limited to the leader. Even the sacrament of confession was regulated—it was indicated to whom one could go for confession or one could eventually confess only to the leader.

Paul Ricœur's insights indicate that, by telling their stories, a transformation has taken place. First, the stories of Sophie Ducrey, Anne Mardon and Marie-Laure Janssens demonstrate how they managed to integrate this experience into their life stories after having been silenced. They talk about the loss of the self, while, at the same time, creating a new self. By giving voice to their experience of abuse, they construct a new narrative identity. Furthermore, a transformation also takes place in the reader. As Ricœur points out, one addresses a text with an initial understanding. This prefiguration is formed by master narratives, conversations and reading texts on the subject. The prefiguration determines the categories with which one approaches the text. However, exploring new readings and listening to formerly silenced voices can open up new categories. The initial understanding is different for every person. Reading and exploring the texts of Ducrey, Mardon and Janssens can lead to a deeper understanding of the experience of spiritual abuse and its consequences. It can also lead to changes in the master narratives about the abuse of adult women in the context of the Catholic Church.

The current master narrative of the abuse of adult women within the Catholic Church is constructed by the perpetrators and/or by the institutions that protect the perpetrator. This discourse puts the responsibility on the victim by claiming that decisions were made in total freedom, ignoring the asymmetry in power, and accusing women of seduction. This research indicates some important elements that should be taken into account in the creation of the counternarrative. The women did not seduce their leaders; on the contrary, they were seduced by the charisma of the leader. Ducrey, Mardon and Janssens were victims of the abusers—not consenting partners. The psychological and spiritual dynamics made them dependent on the leader who possessed all the power. The asymmetrical aspect of the relationship invalidates any so-called consent. Furthermore, the master narrative on sexual abuse that states that only sexual abuse—and, more specifically, penetration—harms is put into question. The experiences of Sophie Ducrey, Anne Mardon and Marie-Laure Janssens bring to light their feelings of being desecrated, deceived, manipulated, seduced and destroyed, despite no sexual abuse or penetration taking place. Spiritual and psychological abuse can be as damaging as sexual abuse.

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Notes

- ¹ The text of M. Applewhite is used in the e-learning program of the Centre for Child Protection at the Gregorian University, Rome. The education program on Child Protection has been distributed worldwide since 2018. The topic of cognitive distortions, including religious and spiritual distortions, is addressed in the sixth unit: Keeping Children Safe. Understanding Perpetrators.
- ² All originally French citations have been translated by the author.
- ³ She also discloses that when elections were announced, a priest told them how to vote, which is another abuse of conscience.
- ⁴ Pierre-Marie created "les laures". The word is borrowed from Eastern traditions and indicates a group of sisters living in solitude in rooms around the church.

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