

# Chapter 9: Obeying God’s Plan? The Spiritual Abuse of Nuns

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The term ‘spiritual abuse’ is helpful for an understanding of systemic mistreatment experienced by six former nuns who belonged to the community “Servants of God’s Plan” (*Siervas del Plan de Dios*, or SPD) in Peru, Chile, Colombia and Ecuador. None of the nuns reported sexual abuse, so unlike other chapters in this volume, the focus in this chapter is on spiritual abuse. However, when sexual abuse takes place within a religious institution, it is very common for spiritual abuse to be an enabling factor. A better understanding of spiritual abuse can therefore contribute to a better church response to sexual abuse.

One of the most nuanced and helpful definitions of spiritual abuse is offered by the British scholar Lisa Oakley,

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2019), 31. This definition builds on Oakley’s definition in Lisa Oakley, “Understanding Spiritual Abuse,” *Church Times*, February 16, 2018, [www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/16-february/comment/opinion/understanding-spiritual-abuse](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/16-february/comment/opinion/understanding-spiritual-abuse).

Oakley frames spiritual abuse within emotional and psychological abuse but still recognizes distinctive features in spiritual abuse which deserve special attention. In this essay, these distinctive features include the significant symbols, texts, teachings, rituals, prayers, or leaders operating in the institutional context of the Servants of God's Plan. These features contributed towards a distorted understanding of obedience that contributed towards a systemic culture of abuse. Spiritual abuse is an issue in its own right, but examining it also shows how and why spiritual abuse can make members of religious institutions more vulnerable to sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup>

### **Servants of God's Plan**

Luis Fernando Figari founded the Servants of God's Plan (SPD) community of nuns in 1998. Figari had previously founded the *Sodalitium Christianae Vitae* (SCV), or Sodalicio, in Lima, Peru in 1971. Sodalicio is a Society of Apostolic Life within the Church in which the majority of members are lay consecrated men; there are also a small number of priests. In 1991, Figari also founded the Marian Community of Reconciliation (MCR), which is a female branch made up only of lay consecrated women. The mission of SCV and MCR was to serve young people, assist the poor, and evangelize the culture. The SPD community of nuns was therefore the third community founded by Figari. SPD's charism was to serve the sick and the poor, and as a mark of their identity, they wear the traditional religious habit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A particular risk factor for abuse is when nuns are not esteemed or valued for either their inherent worth or their significant contribution to the Church. See especially Anne E. Patrick, "His Dogs More than Us?: Virtue in Situations of Conflict Between Women Religious and Their Ecclesiastical Employers," in *Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women's Church Vocations* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 27–50.

<sup>3</sup> Elise Ann Allen, "Peruvian Ex-Nuns Report Abuses of Power, Conscience Inside Order," *Crux*, November 27, 2021, [www.cruxnow.com/church-in-the-americas/2021/11/peruvian-ex-nuns-report-abuses-of-power-conscience-inside-order](http://www.cruxnow.com/church-in-the-americas/2021/11/peruvian-ex-nuns-report-abuses-of-power-conscience-inside-order).

In 2010, the Peruvian journalist Pedro Salinas, a former Sodalicio member, accused Figari and other leaders of physical, psychological and sexual abuse. In 2015, after five years of investigation, he wrote the book *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados (Half Monks, Half Soldiers)*, which contained victims' testimonies.<sup>4</sup> In response, Sodalicio appointed a special commission interviewing more than fifty of their former and current members. On April 16, 2016, the commission published a ten-page report that affirmed: "The damage was perpetrated in a situation in which the superiors assumed a dominant position asking for perfect and absolute obedience achieved by the practice of extreme discipline ... . This way of exercising power was an attempt to destroy their individual will."<sup>5</sup>

Figari was sanctioned by the Vatican in 2017 and is now barred from having any contact with the communities he founded. Sodalicio recognized sixty-six victims and set aside a fund of nearly 2.6 million US dollars for reparations.<sup>6</sup> Yet, during the special commission, none of the nuns were interviewed about their experiences. Alejandra, who had left the order by the time we interviewed her, said, "We did not have access to the commission. The authorities of SPD did not communicate with us about the commission or whether we could ask to be interviewed. We were told by them that the SPD did not replicate the viciousness that occurred in Sodalicio and that is why we were the joy of the spiritual family in the middle of a crisis."

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<sup>4</sup> Pedro Salinas, *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados: Todo lo que el Sodalicio no quieres que sepas* (Lima: Planeta, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Comisión de Ética para la Justicia y la Reconciliación, "Informe Final," April 16, 2016, [www.comisionetica.org/blog/2016/04/16/informe-final/](http://www.comisionetica.org/blog/2016/04/16/informe-final/).

<sup>6</sup> For further information, see Rocío Figueroa Alvear and David Tombs, "Lived Religion and the Traumatic Impact of Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru," in *Trauma and Lived Religion: Transcending the Ordinary*, ed. R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sreman (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019), 157–159.

From 2016 to 2021, nearly thirty former nuns from SPD made complaints to ecclesial authorities in Peru, Chile, and the Vatican.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, Juan Luis Cipriani, then the Cardinal Archbishop of Lima opened a canonical visit to SPD. However, in March 2019, Cipriani retired with the visitation still in process. The new auxiliary bishop of Lima José Salaverry was tasked with carrying the visitation through to its completion. However, the nuns who met the delegates were advised how to respond, and after their meeting, they were spoken to by leaders of the community. In June 2021, further complaints were sent to Chile's Pastoral Office for Complaints (OPADE), at the Archdiocese of Santiago, and in December 2021, the new Archbishop of Lima, Carlos Castillo, ordered a second canonical investigation of the order.<sup>8</sup>

## **Voices from the Community**

In light of these issues, we wanted to hear directly from women who had been part of the SPD community. The primary goal of this study was to give voice to the women and their experiences in the community that were often painful and difficult. Six former-nuns participated in this study. They belonged to the community for a period ranging from six to seventeen years and now range in age from twenty-nine to forty years old. After receiving approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee, we developed and conducted structured personal interviews with each of them.<sup>9</sup> Each interview was conducted in Spanish and lasted about an hour. The interviews were recorded on a digital audio system, and all information was transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English

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<sup>7</sup> Elise Ann Allen, "Church Authorities Order Second Inquiry into Troubled Peruvian Order," *Cruce*, January 21, 2022, [www.cruce.com/church-in-the-americas/2022/01/church-authorities-order-second-inquiry-into-troubled-peruvian-order](http://www.cruce.com/church-in-the-americas/2022/01/church-authorities-order-second-inquiry-into-troubled-peruvian-order).

<sup>8</sup> Allen, "Church Authorities Order Second Inquiry."

<sup>9</sup> Ethics Committee Otago University, Ref. 21-125, Ethical Approval October 29, 2021. We especially thank the participants for their willingness to take part. We are also grateful to our project consultant, Dr. Tess Patterson, Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Otago, and the University Ethics Committee for their support for this research.

and analyzed. They describe mistreatment that took place from their novitiate to their temporary vows.

Figuroa, lead researcher for the study, was previously a member of MCR, one of the female branches of Sodalicio. Figuroa served as the MCR General Superior for 9 years (1991–1998). Since 2006, victims from Sodalicio and its branches have contacted her for support following sexual and spiritual abuses perpetrated within the communities. During this time, Figuroa developed a relationship of trust with many of the victims. The transcription of the interviews has been anonymized to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Their pseudonyms are Jessica, Maricarmen, Gabriela, Rosanna, Alejandra, and Rosa.

The participants joined the community, first and foremost, because of a strong commitment to the community's mission of service and help. Rosa and Alejandra felt attracted by the opportunity to work for the poor and give support to the needy. Gabriela says, "The mission of the Servants responded to the desire that I had since I was a kid to help others." Maricarmen talked of her motivation as a deep yearning, "When I was a little girl if someone asked me what do you want to do, I responded that I wanted to be a nurse or a doctor and help kids under the bridge." A second motivation was the appeal of life in community. Gabriela reported, "Something that attracted me was their joy. They smiled all the time. They were very approachable, and I wanted to be like that." Jessica felt that the community could become the family that she was lacking at the time when she met the nuns, "I was in a very vulnerable situation. The nuns were the support that I needed. ... I found the protection that I did not have in my family." A third motivation was the charisma of the leader. As Rosanna said, "She was spontaneous and joyful and apparently very friendly." In view of these aspirations, and their overlap with the stated mission and character of the community, we discuss below some of the institutional dynamics which served to frustrate or disappoint these hopes and, which in some cases, amounted to spiritual abuse.

## **God's Plan**

Rosa explained that the ideal of the SPD was to become saints, but this holiness was understood as perfectionism, "I had to be perfect," Rosa said, "In everyday life, there was an enormous pressure to do things correctly and to achieve perfection. There were rigorous and millimetric demands that generated a huge inner tension in me. I had a very exaggerated fear of the slightest mistake and of being mistreated afterwards." This perfectionism was instilled by an almost military regime. Gabriela recalls how the authorities constantly mentioned the importance of being tough, "They wanted to make us strong women—a characteristic that was highly esteemed in the Servants." Rossana gives us an example, "I did not know how to swim. Those responsible for formation would ask me to jump into the pool and if I held on to the edges, they would dislodge my fingers with a stick. When I expressed my concern to another superior, I was told that if I wanted to serve God, I should be a strong woman and never question the sisters in charge. Because of this instruction in my head I let it continue." For Gabriela the goal was to "love the charism above everything else,"

I think that the way the order presented themselves attracted me: their use of the habit and their style of life was a very radical option. They made us love the charism as being better than any other charism around: we were radicals, we prayed, we were perfect. In our collective unconscious, we considered that we were the best; and to achieve that goal, the community had an excessive care for appearances: the authorities would tell sisters who were overweight to eat less and exercise in the evenings. For example, a sister was sent after dinner to do exercises at 11 p.m. at night during Chile's winter because she was too fat. It was just considered inconceivable to be fat.

Closely linked to the idea of holiness, frequent appeals to 'God's plan' could also become a means of abuse. Whilst a shared commitment to God's plan is hardly surprising in view of the name of the community, and

a strong personal commitment to God's plan was obviously appropriate and to be expected, the way that God's plan was presented could be abusive. Discerning God's plan was not something that had room for a nun's own sense of direction or discernment. Gabriela explained, "They decided what was God's plan for you: according to what I was taught by the sisters who guided my vocational discernment, God's plan was ONE, one vocation, one path and it was directly related to my happiness. I believed that if I did not become a Servant of God's Plan I would never be happy."

When Maricarmen remembers her years in the community, she said, "A problem is the way the vows were lived. The obedience was lived in a very repressive way, without freedom, without freedom of thought." This lack of freedom was also manifested during the vocational discernment. Jessica claimed that she was manipulated by the nuns in her discernment process, "In the community they never told me about discernment. On the contrary, they always repeated that they were confident that I had a vocation and that my doubts were due to my anger and rebellion, but that deep down they saw that I had a vocation."

Some of the participants revealed that they had little spiritual freedom and control over their own personal relationships with God. Jessica was obliged to pray what the authorities asked, "They sent us to pray but they gave us the specific texts of the Gospel which they wanted us to meditate on, and they also gave us specific commentaries of the Gospels. We never prayed or read anything that we wanted to. We never prayed to other saints: for example, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was forbidden." Alejandra remembers, "We would pray at our desks. Some of us had a holy card or a picture of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus. We were told to remove that saint because she was not from our charism."<sup>10</sup> Maricarmen mentioned a similar prohibition, "I was singing a song to the heart of Jesus. The superior told me it was too sentimental, and I was forbidden to sing that song."

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<sup>10</sup> St. Theresa of the Child Jesus is a name for the widely venerated French Carmelite nun Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897).

Particular phrases were also used to make the nuns identify with the community. Examples were “be holy,” “obey God’s Plan,” or “love the charism.” Jessica stated, “You arrived and they taught you catch phrases from the moment you woke up.” Rosa quotes some of the phrases, “Other favourite phrases of the sisters were ‘she who obeys is never wrong,’ ‘a servant does not set limits to love,’ ‘authority is the voice of God.’ It is impressive to see how all the sisters constantly repeated the same phrases.”

According to Jacques Poujol, spiritual abuse happens when the individual’s very expression of self is changed and a type of auto-identification with the group is demanded.<sup>11</sup> According to Poujol, in a dysfunctional group, the community becomes the necessary and only intermediary between God and the person. All relationship between God and the person is evaluated or mediated by the community. In this de-personification, spiritual freedom to create their own identity and spiritual self is denied and lost.<sup>12</sup>

## **Absolute Obedience**

Strict obedience and absolute submission are two of the most important values in an abusive system. For Oakley, a common feature in spiritual abuse is the requirement of obedience to an abusive authority which is often accompanied by the belief that the abuser has a divine position.<sup>13</sup> Regarding this sacralization of authority in SPD, Gabriela explained, “We were told that in the house the superiors were God.” And because the superiors had this divine position the person has no say and the authority had no limits. She continued, “They taught me not to question the authorities; we were forbidden to think badly regarding authorities. So, the point of departure was that I was wrong and that I was not seeing reality. I was the one who had to make the effort to change my thoughts.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Poujol, *Abus spirituels. S’affranchir de l’emprise* (Paris: Editions Empreinte, 2015), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Poujol, *Abus spirituels*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Oakley and Katherine Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 21–22.



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Authorities were simply beyond any opinion we could have about them.” She continued, “I got used to the fact that an authority had my life in her hands. The authority became a kind of confessor, and she would always be right about me; in this way I lived obedience, which was nothing else than an absolute submission of my being.”

According to Jessica, “We were requested to do things that made no sense, such as picking leaves from a bamboo or to disassemble six beds and then reassemble them again for no reason, many days of fasting and everything in the name of obedience.” Rosanna described an accident when she obeyed an order from her superior, “I did not like to go down some stairs because it was dark. My superior obliged me to go down those unlit stairs to overcome my fear. I fell down them and fractured my tibia and fibula. That was the first of fifteen surgeries I had in the community. When they asked me how I fell, I said they forced me down those stairs. The superior corrected me and made me write one hundred times that she who obeys is never wrong. She told me that I could not question, and that God had allowed that accident.”

Rosa described how the emphasis on obedience could lead to abuses. She said, “They wanted to test how far we would go for the love of Jesus.” She remembers,

One day we were asked to go for a run, and we had to do it with our arms outstretched for half an hour. Then we were asked to do more exercises. I have asthma and I needed to get my inhaler, but the superior would not let me. Afterwards we went to pray the Stations of the Cross. While I was praying, I fainted and then I vomited. The superior shouted at me, “Why are you waiting to get up? A Servant is prompt, and you should clean what you did.” I was not able to get up, nor to clean up, I had no strength; I was hyperventilating.

The participants were taught that the “the superior represents God” and actually “was God in the house.” So to obey all the rules and values of the community, and obey their superiors, was a way to “test how far they could

go for the love of Jesus.” Jessica said that “your brain gets molded as they wished, and we began to normalize things that were not normal.” Likewise, Maricarmen said, “They annul your capacity to think. This generates all type of abuses because you are not critical, you will not communicate.” The problem was not obedience *per se* but the idolizing of a blind obedience without limits or conditions.

## **Coercive Control**

In order to achieve this blind and absolute obedience religious leaders often resort to coercive control.<sup>14</sup> Our participants reported high-levels of control in community life. According to Rossana, the authorities tracked and monitored the daily activities of the nuns. She remembers, “if we watched films in the community evenings and one of us fell asleep, we had to get into the pool late at night and swim until the superior told us to stop. We were also woken up in the early hours of the morning for exercise; it was said that this would make us stronger to be Servants of God’s Plan.”

The control extended to everyday life and the superiors scrutinized the nuns’ activities and their use of time in all its details. Rosanna explains, “The superior had a total military regime: nine minutes for the shower, extreme discipline for the fulfilment of the timetable, not a minute more, not a minute less, and if one arrived late the punishments and corrections exceeded the limits of charity with shouts and insults towards the person who arrived late.”

Coercive control also shaped their inner life. Rosa recalls how she could not complain about her tiredness or show any emotion,

The spiritual abuse was violent. I could not complain about any suffering. You know that we consecrate ourselves to the Sufferer ... . A question of the examination of conscience was, did I show my tiredness to others? If

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<sup>14</sup> David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1991), 57. On the nature of coercive control, see especially Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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we were tired we could not show it or express it. If the sisters saw me with a grumpy face, they called it the bump face. To express any kind of emotion was seen as a sin; we were repeatedly told that we had to let the old man die and let the new man be born. I ended up blocking and freezing any emotion or feeling. Not having a healthy space to express my emotions ended up making me sick.

Coercive control often induces anxiety and undermines a person's sense of self-confidence. Alejandra speaks about the loss of her subjectivity and the loss of her emotional and spiritual freedom, "When I shared something personal and I was moved by it, I was always told that I had to be tougher. In this way I learned to keep to myself and not to express my emotions, whether they were of joy or sadness. So I came to a kind of a state of emotional anesthesia." Rosa reported, "They made us do a daily examination of conscience. They asked you: have you been moved by your emotions? Have you wasted your time instead of loving the mission? Have you had an emotional disorder seasoning the food? Did you eat what you like? It was a constant pressure. I lived eight years controlling and evaluating my eating: did I eat more? Did I put too much salt on?" Participants described how little by little this constant pressure eroded their sense of well-being in different ways. Alejandra speaks of "emotional anesthesia," and Rosa states clearly that it "ended up making me sick."

Coercive control put limits on disagreement, raising concerns, or discussing certain topics within SPD. The participants talked about emotional repression and the erosion of their critical thinking and reasoning. For Rosa, obedience was understood as always accepting the authority of superiors, "To say what I felt or to express any kind of disagreement was to be against authority and it was seen as a sin and a betrayal of the community." She says that the devil was used to discredit and reject other persons' ideas or reasoning, "We were constantly told that having doubts came from the devil; many things bothered me inside, but it was very difficult for me to express them." Rosanna remembers that anyone who left the community "was demonized." The comments were,

“She is a traitor; whoever puts her hand to the plough and looks back is not worthy of the kingdom of heaven.”

Maricarmen describes what happened when she asked questions, “I was very curious and during some classes I always wanted to understand better. One day I began asking questions and my superior got upset by my questions and said to me, ‘Are you silly? You are worse than my little nephew.’” Maricarmen added, “In the Servants there were no discussions. There were no different points of view. Perhaps about your favorite color your own view was okay, but for other topics that required thought you had to adhere to the superior.” Jessica remembers that when she was told what her new mission would be, “The superior asked my opinion (although it was not for discernment, since the decision was already made) and because I said what I thought, she corrected me saying that I should be a woman of God and trust the authorities because they know what God wanted for me.”

Differences of opinion, variety of gifts, and diversity of experiences were not accepted. Rather than being seen as a strength—in the manner described in Paul’s image of church as the body of Christ, in which each member is different but is important in its own right and works together with other members—diversity is seen as a threat to the cohesion of the group. These are signs of a unhealthy community. Homogeneity is valorized, and anyone who thinks differently faces sanction.<sup>15</sup>

The experiences reported by participants suggest that a redefinition of the vow of obedience ought to be modeled on Jesus’s own example in the Gospels, in which Jesus consistently said he was obeying his Father’s will. The obedience in the Gospel is an act of trust, an act of following God’s commandments, and following his love. It is an obedience marked by love and trust in a relationship between the Son and the Father. The rules and statutes of the community should be a means to achieve this obedience rather than ends in their own right. The vow of obedience entails obedience to the one who leads the community as someone who

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<sup>15</sup> Pujol, *Abus spirituels*, 30.

should care for both the common good and the dignity of the individual. Authority in religious life can only be exercised regarding religious sisters' external forum. Obedience should take on a stronger connotation of cooperation. Members could voice concern if they have questions about an instruction they receive. This would help to desacralize the insistence on absolute obedience to superiors and propose a more horizontal type of obedience made up of dialogue, coordination, and discernment in serving God's plan.

### **Secrecy and Silence**

For Johnson and Van Vonderen, the most powerful rule in an abusive system is what they call the "no-talk rule" in which the problems cannot be exposed because "if you speak about the problem out loud, you are the problem."<sup>16</sup> Maricarmen spoke of "secrecy and impenetrability" within the community. She said, "They teach you that. There is no air or light that enters the community. You feel that there are some strange things, but you don't have anyone to talk to about them." Sharing concerns with those outside the community is prohibited, "You cannot tell them to your family. Nothing is allowed." According to Gabriela, silence was pervasive even when there were good reasons for the nuns to share their thoughts, "We were living the worst crisis: the accusations of sexual abuse against the Founder. No one talked about it. I was amazed by how the crisis was hushed up and you would only talk in secret with your closest friends. They gathered us to give us the news of our new statutes and we had a big celebration. This was the *modus operandi* of the community: to silence voices by diverting attention to what was good and what was shining and silence the crises."

Secrecy was especially required in dealings with family. Rosa reported, "My formators and superiors were very insistent in this sense. I could not trust anyone else. I could tell my family absolutely nothing about what was happening to me. Several times my formation supervisor listened to my

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson and Vonderen, *The Subtle Power*, 67.

conversations with my family. She asked me to put the call on speaker. On one occasion, I told my parents that I was ill and afterwards my superior told me that I don't have to tell my family about it." When Rosanna needed a surgery because she broke her leg following the order to go down the stairs, she wanted to call her family. Her counsellor told her, "Remember that dirty laundry is washed at home. Don't give details to your family, why worry them when you are so far away, you have ten minutes to talk to them."

A common practice in spiritual abuse is to distance a person from their family and circle of friends making the person more dependent on the community. Rosa was told that she could not trust anyone, apart from the institution, and she should not even trust her own family. Gabriela was isolated from her family and expected to break contact with her friends, including her personal friends in the community. Gabriela explains, "My best friend was also a nun in the community and she was a year ahead of me. I was not allowed to share anything with her." Gabriela commented that she could rarely speak with her family,

The few conversations with the family lasted less than ten minutes, and I was generally accompanied by a sister. On one occasion, I visited my family, and I was not in good health. ... My family was concerned when they saw me and they wanted to take me to the doctor, an action that was flatly rejected by the community that did not want my family's intervention; this was inexplicable for my family, why couldn't they participate in my affairs? Why couldn't they take part when they saw my health at risk?

The isolation included restrictions on interests and educational activities. Maricarmen, for example, described how the first years they were not allowed to read the newspapers or to go online. Jessica, after her formation period, was never allowed to study what she wanted, "I was thirty years old, and I did not have a university degree since I was never allowed to study in the community. I wanted to study special education

and they did not let me. They made me study philosophy that I never liked, and my family had to pay for it. I only did one semester.”

Isolation promoted a culture of secrecy which made it less likely that abuses would be challenged. Anything that might lead to scrutiny or questioning was not allowed to be shared outside the congregation. At the same time, access to external information was restricted and controlled by the authorities.

### **Spiritual Abuse as a Context for Other Forms of Abuse**

In view of the accounts offered by the nuns, the belief that the mistreatment was a form of spiritual abuse is justified. This judgement is based not on any one specific event or action but on what Oakley describes as “a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context,” which “can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it.”<sup>17</sup> Spiritual abuse is especially concerning because it is closely connected with emotional and psychological abuse and can also contribute to other forms of abuse, including sexual abuse.

The emotional and psychological consequences of the abuse in SPD were profound. One of the dynamics in community life that was mentioned was frequent humiliation and shaming in public. Over time, this eroded self-confidence and undermined self-esteem. Maricarmen recalled examples of verbal abuse, “The general superior continuously yelled at me. She always made me feel stupid ... and when I entered, I had the perception of myself as a clever woman; I had good marks at school, and my parents always said that I was ahead of my age. I left the community feeling that I was silly and stupid. My superior humiliated me regarding my intelligence: ‘move your intelligence, use the only neuron that you have.’” These humiliations sometimes involved public shaming. Rosanna often stammered if she got nervous, and she was mocked for this, “When I tried to speak, they would automatically start banging the table and chanting throughout the house, ‘she’s shy, she is going to cry.’ This

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<sup>17</sup> Oakley and Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, 31.

would go on until I managed to hide the tears that this humiliation caused me.”

Gabriela remembers that the public humiliations were daily, “The dialogues at meals were very tense: they were used to make public corrections and we learned to be humble, accepting that the others were right because the opposite was a sign of pride. I was corrected many times, and afterwards, the authority and the sisters reprimanded me. I had to accept that they were right and ask for forgiveness, even though I was sure that the situation was not as they saw it.” When Jessica was in charge of the kitchen, she told the woman who cooked to mix two different types of noodles, “My superior in front of all the community said, ‘you are useless, everything you do is wrong, the sisters always have to cover your faults and negligence.’” Alejandra said that her superior criticized her severely in what amounted to verbal abuse,

You are useless. You do not do anything right. Many times, she slammed the door on my face when I did something wrong and she said that she did not want to talk to me . . . . When I moved to another community in Colombia, the superior was the same as my former superior. She shouted at me as she shouted to the dogs. Once, some keys were lost, and she threw the rubbish in front of me to find them. I had to search in the middle of the rotten food.

Although none of the participants reported sexual abuse, their experiences suggest that in other contexts—such as in Sodalicio—spiritual abuse can be a significant factor in enabling sexual abuses in church settings. Spiritual abuse makes people more vulnerable to other forms of abuse because it claims religious authority and sanction for practices which are abusive. Spiritual abuse also reinforces a culture of obedience and secrecy that makes it harder for perpetrators of sexual abuses to be held to account. When sexual abuse take place within a religious institution, it is almost inevitable that it will be accompanied by spiritual abuse.



## **Conclusion**

In the Servants of God's Plan, a nun's loyalty to her vows can make her vulnerable to mistreatment. There is no reason to think that this problem is limited to just the SPD community. The demands on nuns to see the community's authorities as representatives of God and always submit to them does not do enough to protect either the nuns themselves or those in authority. The language of spiritual abuse is a helpful tool for understanding these dynamics at a deeper level. It brings to the fore the significant symbols, texts, teachings, rituals, prayers, and leadership roles which operate in this institutional setting. It also shows how spiritual abuses can support and sustain other forms of abuse, including the emotional and psychological abuses reported by the participants. Spiritual abuse is also an obvious risk factor for sexual abuses. Although sexual abuses were not reported in the SPD community, the accounts participants gave of spiritual abuses provide a deeper understanding of how sexual abuses can be perpetrated within religious institutions.



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