

Transcript from Una Allen

How can (an understanding of) Pastoral Theology inform action to heal the spiritual damage caused by clerical child sexual abuse?

‘Soul Murder’ is a term which is often used to describe the effects of sexual abuse, especially when the perpetrator is associated with the Church, because in this context, the abuse of power, particularly against the vulnerable, strikes at the very heart of our belief and connection to a loving God. The term is even more meaningful when used to capture the spiritual dis-ease suffered by the child victim and the adult survivor of clergy sexual violation.

Whether experienced in childhood or as an adult, this type of abuse by Church personnel – real spiritual damage – traumatises not only individuals, but whole communities. The impact emanates out from victims and survivors providing a shock wave to families and friends, all levels of community, and ultimately to society as a whole. We now know that the spiritual injury associated with religious sexual abuse has the capacity to destroy faith in religious institutions and erode belief in God or any higher power, shatter spirituality and the spirit within, leading to loss of purpose in life. The trauma of betrayal experienced throughout Irish society and indeed throughout the world in the last number of years as a result of clerical and institutional abuse is proof if such were needed, that the subsequent consequences from the outrage of abuse has had repercussions for entire generations, especially our faith communities.

The question naturally arises then “Can the soul recover?” The answer is: we don’t know. Only the survivor can answer that. But what we do know, because we have heard it from survivors themselves, is that many have expressed a desire to reconnect to the God from whom they felt they were so cruelly severed or never had the chance to know. Arising from this it is my belief that a real understanding of pastoral theology can be one of the building blocks which not only can, but *must* inform action if we are to join the dots and in so doing, begin to heal the wounds caused by clerical child sexual abuse.

Thomas Merton taught that no matter what anyone has done to us in the past, or is doing to us now, or might do to us in the future, there is within every one of us, at our innermost

core, a hidden centre of ourselves that remains invincibly established in God as a mysterious Presence, as a life that is at once God's and our own. It is in being awakened to this innermost centre of ourselves with God that we find the courage to continue on in the challenging process of healing, grounded in a peace that is not dependent on the outcome of our efforts, because it is the peace of God, which depends on nothing, and on which everything depends. In coming to explore and understand the true role of pastoral theology, I believe we have the ability to inform action to deal with the spiritual damage inflicted by clerical child sexual abuse, and in doing so unearth that hidden presence within ourselves from whence we can begin to heal because, as Richard Rohr says, if we do not transform our pain, we will almost inevitably transmit it.

Theology is often defined as faith seeking understanding in the context of human experience. At its best, theology means figuring out how to bring faith and life together: People reflect on their lives from the perspective of faith and on faith from the perspective of their lives; quite simply bringing life to faith and faith to life.

Pastoral theology coming from the notion of care and concern lies within the broad spectrum of theology and cannot be neglected because of its fundamental importance and relevance to both Church and society. In more recent decades pastoral theology has become increasingly recognized as an integral part of theological study and education. Not too long ago, it was considered a matter of instructing those in preparation for ordained ministry in the administration of the sacraments. But since Vatican II and especially in recent times we have witnessed a more fluid dynamic and deeper understanding of pastoral theology with an accompanying pastoral task of responding to particular human, individual and communal needs and circumstances.

Pastoral theology bridges the relationship between Church and society. It traditionally encompasses those dimensions of Christian life that are to do with care, particularly the care of the Christian community through ministry. It has its foundation in the role of Jesus Christ as shepherd and arising from people's experience of life and of faith seeks to reflect on and serve that faith commitment. Theologically fundamental to pastoral care is the belief that God is the prism upon which and through which all other assumptions and practices of religiously-based pastoral care are shaped. Ultimately it is about growth. Through pastoral care a person may be assisted to grow personally relationally and spiritually.

Pastoral theology has at its core the desire to journey with our fellow travellers in the human desire for God. It raises the theological issues of meaning and truth in relation to living out of the life of faith. It brings together theory and practice. It relates to pastoral skills and ministry training, but it is also concerned for every aspect of social policy and cultural experience of the individual. Pastoral theology is not static. It evolves with each context and continually tries to read the signs of the times. The specific task of the true practitioner of pastoral theology is mediating or making real the presence of God in the concrete everyday experience. Pastoral theology in the person of the one who is ministering seeks to guide and help people to find solutions to various problems and life's questions healing and aiding them to find wellness and reconciling people to restore relationships. As I say it is a practical theology that grounds ministry. In helping us take a deeper look at our inherited religious traditions and our own lived experience, we can hopefully, in humility, reinterpret those traditions in a manner that assists healing, corrects distortions and expands our vision.

Research tells us that the spiritual wound associated with abuse can be unbearably painful. People who have experienced sexual abuse, at the hands of clerics who consciously or unconsciously are experienced as 'God representatives,' begin to question the nature of God. As I alluded to earlier, many have spoken about their struggle with their faith, and the sense of rejection by a Church who betrayed them, their feelings of loss, and darkness, of deep mistrust and suspicion of that Church but most of all a sense of abandonment by God. *Where was God when I was being abused as a small child? Why did this abuse happen to me? Does God care about me? Did God ever care about me? Is there a loving God?* These theological questions and many others inevitably arise in the aftermath of abuse in a spiritual context – God questions which cannot always be explored in the context of counselling, but may be begun to be understood in the realm of true pastoral care.

With an understanding of the essence of pastoral theology as building a bridge between Church and society we can build on our knowledge that clerical child sexual abuse has wounded the entire Church and that now the entire Church is called to put right what has happened. The entire Church is called to put itself right in its relations with the kingdom and with Jesus Christ. As Archbishop Diarmuid Martin says: *Healing is not just a question for the counsellors; it is a theological and ecclesiological necessity.*

In all aspects of pastoral theology the notion of theological reflection is prime. In prayer and reflection we are enabled to look at our past in a positive way, to discover seeds of growth and peace where we once only found grounds for fear. In that story from the gospel of Luke that unfolds on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples first share with an unknown stranger (who is in fact Jesus) the sadness, the utter loss and the devastation that weighs upon them, and then he helps them to reframe their past in a new light. Jesus does not force them to ignore their wounds, but listens patiently to them, hears their hurt, their anger, their struggles to understand; he stays with them. This story of the disciples on the road demonstrates that the Emmaus story is not about the magic of instant transformation. We all must go through a healing process; together we must first face, listen, share and process the wounds of the past before we can endeavour to recognise anew the indwelling Spirit – the God within – of whom Merton speaks.

Our Church must be transformed into a place where children are safe, but it must also be transformed into an honoured and privileged place of healing for survivors. It must be transformed into a place where survivors, with all their reticence, their wariness, and with all their anger and resentment towards the Church, can genuinely come to feel that the Church is a place where they will encounter healing. In conjunction with this pastoral theology teaches that our response to help heal the spiritual damage caused by clerical sexual abuse must also be one which attempts to bring healing to a wounded, many would say fearful Church also in need of understanding and healing. Our way forward must be robustly responding to all those who have been wounded by abuse. Pastoral theology teaches us to be able to suffer with those who are hurting and to companion those who seek hope in a loving God. The healing of the Church comes through how the Church works to heal survivors.

There is no doubt that each person's spiritual journey is highly individual, but the role pastoral theology in seeking to heal the spiritual damage caused by clerical child sexual abuse is to give us the tools which enable us to witness that unique journey with God and to provide support and encouragement towards each individual's own experience of freedom, flourishing and spiritual peace. As well as opening up ways of communicating with God however we perceive God to be, through our understanding of pastoral theology emphasis

is always placed the lived and concrete experience of the person and Christianity teaches that each of us meets God in that unique personal experience.