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“Soul Murder”: Investigating Spiritual Trauma at the Royal Commission

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ABSTRACT

During its five-year tenure, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse established that faith organisations, with inadequate practices of organisational transparency and accountability, hierarchical structures of power, and patriarchal cultures, have poor track records in child protection and high levels of child abuse. Evidence from the Royal Commission hearings identified spiritual trauma as an outcome of child sexual abuse across several religious organisations including the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Salvation Army, the Yeshiva Jewish School in Melbourne and Sydney and the Satyananda Ashram in NSW. The Catholic Church had the highest levels of institutional child sexual assault and was the site of most of the narratives of spiritual suffering. This article examines existing research on spiritual trauma with regard to child sexual abuse, applies a five-point classification model developed by Kenneth Pargament and colleagues for identifying and analysing spiritual damage, and examines the evidence from both survivors and expert witnesses that was heard during relevant public hearings involving the Catholic Church at the Royal Commission. Institutional responses to spiritual injury will be considered and it will be argued that the Catholic Church is a distinctive institution that has produced a powerful culture of spiritual identity and belonging, where the impact of child sexual abuse has resulted in a loss of faith for many survivors, families and communities.

KEYWORDS

Child sexual abuse; spiritual trauma; the catholic church; sacramentalism; the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse

Introduction

In the twenty-eighth public hearing held in May 2015, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse¹ heard evidence from survivors of child sexual abuse across a number of Catholic institutions in Ballarat, Victoria. Their narratives expressed the pain and suffering that they and their families had been subject to both during the period of abuse and later, after disclosing their abuse to church and civil authorities. As well as evidence from survivors, a number of expert witnesses were called to give evidence on the impacts of sexual abuse on mental and physical health. Dr Carolyn Quadrio, a well-known child psychiatrist, noted the interrelation between different forms of abuse when she said, “It’s impossible to sexually abuse a child without

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¹Hereafter, Royal Commission.

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psychologically and spiritually abusing them as well”.² What was unusual about her comment was the way in which she cited spiritual abuse as, firstly, a recognisable form of abuse and, secondly, its embedded relationship to sexual and psychological harm. This article will examine the evidence of spiritual injury³ that emerged during the public hearings of the Royal Commission and argue that not only is it a worthy subject of social analysis but it is essential to a full understanding of the impact of sexual abuse on individual identity and wellbeing and the social cohesion of affected communities.

Evidence heard during the Royal Commission hearings supports existing research demonstrating that the impact of sexual abuse at a young age constitutes a particularly damaging form of personal injury with serious outcomes.⁴ The Adverse Child Experiences Study has documented the risks associated with childhood trauma, such as mental health issues, substance abuse, physical health problems and mortality.⁵ In Australia, research by Middleton et al. and Kezelman et al. indicates that the effects of childhood trauma last long after the event has happened and have significant economic implications.⁶ Survivors may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, disruption to affective adaption, difficulties maintaining personal relationships and problems with self-identity. Most patients in the mental health system report experiences of childhood sexual abuse, and it remains a causal indicator of poor social and economic outcomes as well as increased risk behaviour, disease burden and early death.⁷ While responses to childhood trauma are individualised and not all victims are affected by mental illness, many of the survivor accounts that were heard by the Royal Commission reflect these documented outcomes of personal suffering and loss of life opportunity that result from sexual abuse in childhood.

Evidence of spiritual trauma emerged consistently in the fourteen public hearings involving the Catholic Church,⁸ and it became clear that this phenomenon was a socially constituted form of personal harm that significantly impacts individual and collective wellbeing.⁹ This article will examine the phenomenon of spiritual trauma as an outcome of child sexual abuse, based on the evidence from relevant public hearings of

²Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 28 Transcripts,” 25 May 2015, C081, 8450. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-may-and-november-2015>.

³In this article, harm done to a person’s spiritual life by sexual abuse as a child is described as either harm, trauma, injury or distress. These terms reflect the usage in the research literature and are used interchangeably.

⁴Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora Press, 1996); Warwick Middleton et al., “The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 48, no. 1 (2014): 17–21; Warwick Middleton et al., “Institutional Abuse and Societal Silence: An Emerging Global Problem,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 48, no. 1 (2014): 22–5.

⁵Valerie Edwards et al., “Relationship Between Multiple Forms of Childhood Maltreatment and Adult Mental Health in Community Respondents: Results from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 160, no. 8 (2003): 1453–60.

⁶Middleton et al., “Institutional Abuse and Societal Silence”; Cathy Kezelman et al., *The Cost of Unresolved Childhood Trauma and Abuse in Adults in Australia, A Report for the Blue Knot Foundation* (2015). https://www.blueknot.org.au/Portals/2/Economic%20Report/The%20cost%20of%20unresolved%20trauma_budjet%20report%20fnl.pdf.

⁷Middleton et al., “Institutional Abuse and Societal Silence”, 22.

⁸Explanations for why the institutional Catholic Church had such high levels of child sexual abuse have been addressed elsewhere. See, for example, Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and Catholic Church: Gender Power and Organizational Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kathleen McPhillips, “The Church, the Commission and the Truth: Inside the NSW Special Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (2016): 30–51; Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).

⁹Not surprisingly, the expressions of spiritual trauma that I have identified in the public hearings deal almost exclusively with religious groups. It may well be the case that spiritual trauma is an outcome of any kind of child abuse and not limited to religious groups, but, in this article, I focus on religious groups.

the Royal Commission. I will do this by first defining the term as constituted in the research literature. I will then adopt and expand one classification system for identifying the narratives of spiritual trauma by Kenneth Pargament et al.¹⁰ and apply this to survivor-witness and expert testimony at Royal Commission hearings involving the Catholic Church. In expanding the model, I include two distinctive elements of Catholicism that contribute to the production of powerful forms of Catholic spiritual identity, and the responses that church officials made to claims of spiritual injury.

In reporting on the Catholic Church, the Royal Commission noted the high percentage of survivors that reported abuse in Catholic Church settings. Thirty-seven per cent of those reporting their abuse in private sessions were harmed in Catholic Church settings, and thirty per cent of public hearings involved Catholic organisations.¹¹ Senior Counsel for the Royal Commission, Gail Furness, noted that child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church led to “significant social, health and mental issues for survivors including higher levels of suicide and premature death; neglect and shunning of victims by their own families and the institutions in which they were abused; a loss of faith and connectedness to the Catholic Church communities; and a lack of community cohesion.”¹² As the Catholic Church is a central institution in modern Australian social life, it is essential to understand how an organisation that holds pastoral responses to human vulnerability as a key value systematically abused children then mishandled the spiritual needs and suffering of adults who disclosed their abuse to church authorities.

Spiritual trauma and sexual abuse: defining the field

Research studies looking specifically at the intersection between sexual abuse and its spiritual impact¹³ report overwhelmingly that there is a high level of spiritual injury. Spiritual trauma as an outcome of child sexual abuse is a subset of a wider field of psychosocial research concerned with spirituality, religion and trauma.¹⁴

Pargament¹⁵ notes that, while some survivors found support in their faith following sexual abuse, many experienced ongoing spiritual distress. Spiritual belief was particularly damaged when believers were abused sexually as children¹⁶ and where the perpetrator was

¹⁰Kenneth Pargament, Nichole Murray-Swank, and Annette Mahoney, “Problem and Solution: The Spiritual Dimension of Clergy Sexual Abuse and Its Impact on Survivors,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17, nos 3–4 (2008): 397–420.

¹¹Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Religious Institutions*. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/religious-institutions> (accessed 18 February 2018).

¹²Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 28 Transcripts,” 19 May 2015, C077, 8110. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-february-2016,-ballarat>.

¹³Nichole Murray-Swank and Lynn Waelde, “Spirituality, Religion and Sexual Trauma: Integrating Research, Theory and Clinical Practice,” in *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion and Spirituality* vol. 2, *An Applied Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Kenneth Pargament, Annette Mahoney, and Edward Shafranske (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 334–5; Stephen Rossetti, “The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Attitudes Toward God and the Catholic Church,” *Child Sexual Abuse and Neglect* 19 (1995): 1469–81.

¹⁴For key texts in the broader field, see Yung Chen and Harold Koenig, “Traumatic Stress and Religion: Is there a Relationship? A Review of Empirical Findings,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 45, no. 3 (2006): 372; Donald Walker et al., “Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 1, no. 2 (2009): 130; Roger Fallot and Andrea Blanch, “Religious and Spiritual Dimensions of Traumatic Violence,” in *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion and Spirituality* vol. 2, 371–87.

¹⁵Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, “Problem and Solution,” 398.

¹⁶Murray-Swank and Waelde, “Spirituality, Religion and Sexual Trauma,” 336.

a religious leader. Rossetti's study of Catholics found that adults who reported sexual abuse as a child, by a Catholic priest, had significantly less trust of the church than those who had never been abused.¹⁷ Rossetti notes that "this sharp decline in trust for those abused by Catholic priests was notable. Catholic priests have been powerful and trusted religious symbols of the Catholic faith. Violations of this trust through child sexual abuse is associated with measurable declines in confidence of victims in the Church, in the priesthood, and in their relationship to God."¹⁸

The small body of research investigating the condition of *spiritual trauma* as a consequence of sexual abuse¹⁹ documents a complex relationship between spirituality, religion and sexual trauma with variable outcomes, including significant levels of spiritual injury.²⁰ Spiritual trauma resulting from child sexual abuse by clerics is again a smaller field where research is focused primarily on the Catholic Church and tends to be interdisciplinary and interpretive. In this literature, spiritual trauma is associated with the following: a loss of the spiritual dimensions of self-identity; damage to the ability to construct meaning; and "a conflicted or broken relationship with God, a loss of trust in religious institutions, and an impaired ability to develop spiritually".²¹

Research by Murray-Swank and Waelde reports that increased spiritual distress is directly linked to an increase in psychological difficulties such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.²² Pargament et al. report that clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse is associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression, loss of function and increased risk of mortality. These studies show that the recognition of spiritual trauma as an outcome of child sexual abuse has increased over the last twenty years but the research literature remains small and in need of further development.²³

A model of spiritual trauma

In order to analyse spiritual injury resulting from child sexual abuse in evidence presented at the Royal Commission, I will utilise the five-level classification model for identifying and analysing spiritual damage, designed by Kenneth Pargament, Nichole Murray-Swank and Annette Mahoney. This model provides an effective analytic framework.²⁴ However, I will expand the model to integrate two specific elements of Catholic religious

¹⁷Rossetti, "The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse," 1478–9.

¹⁸Rossetti, "The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse," 1479.

¹⁹Fallot and Blanch, "Religious and Spiritual Dimensions of Traumatic Violence"; Thomas Doyle, "Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy: The Spiritual Damage," in *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002–2012*, ed. Thomas Plante and Kathleen McChesney (California: Praeger, 2011), 171–82; David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1991); Murray-Swank and Waelde, "Spirituality, Religion and Sexual Trauma"; Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kimond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution"; Joseph Guido, "A Unique Betrayal: Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Context of the Catholic Religious Tradition," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17, no. 3–4 (2008): 255–69.

²⁰Murray-Swank and Waelde, "Spirituality, Religion and Sexual Trauma," 335.

²¹Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 398. Further, the singular phenomenon of spiritual abuse, documented principally in religious organisations, has been the subject of several, mostly notably by Oakley and Kimond, *Breaking the Silence*, but will not be discussed in this article.

²²Murray-Swank and Waelde, "Spirituality, Religion and Sexual Trauma," 336, 337.

²³Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 398. Pargament et al. also note that the relationship between spirituality and trauma is under-researched in the social sciences and health discourses and that it has been largely ignored as a field of research (Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 398).

²⁴Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 403.

practice, namely sacramentality and the ontological status of celibate priesthood. This will produce a model encompassing the central elements of Catholic spiritual belief and practice, which will provide an enhanced understanding of the impact of spiritual trauma on survivors.

Pargament et al. begin their analysis by utilising Durkheim's definition of the sacred as central to understanding child sexual abuse as a form of desecration or violation of sacrality.²⁵ Durkheim understands the sacred as a compelling and permeating experience where "people learn to imbue many aspects of life with divine qualities, such as transcendence, ultimacy and boundlessness".²⁶ The sacred is preeminently a distinctive construction of the social world but in such a form that the ties to sociality are hidden and the divine is represented as wholly independent from human labour and existence.²⁷ The sacred infuses elements of social life—time, space, objects, people, life events and transitions, cultural products, social and psychological attributes and roles—with deep meaning and, when embedded institutionally, produces communities with powerful forms of belief and belonging. When the sacred is desecrated, identity can easily be shattered.²⁸

The five-point classification system demonstrates the ways in which processes of desecration impact on survivors. The first point suggests that child sexual abuse is a violation of the uniqueness of a person's identity and spiritually of their soul. In his evidence in Case Study 50 given in February 2017, expert witness and canon lawyer Tom Doyle called this "soul murder":

When the leadership—the bishops—say, "Well, father was passed by two psychiatrists, we're going to let him back in ministry"—when all they can see is that he has passed, they don't comprehend what has happened to those victims, that's never going to go away. It is never going to go away. That's soul murder, and sometimes those murdered souls stay dead.²⁹

In Case Study 28, which investigated the Catholic Church's response across schools and parishes in Ballarat, Victoria, one survivor commented that "I was never able to be a normal child at school, I was always in fear of something happening to me. Brother Best didn't just take my soul, he crushed it. What he did to me was put fear and horror into me".³⁰

Secondly, it is a violation of trust when a person who occupies a sacred religious role, such as a priest, brother or nun, betrays the protection of the spiritual life of the child, as they are in effect "legitimated to enact the role of God".³¹ Priests in particular, through the sacramental rite of ordination, have significant power to affect the spiritual life of believers, so "when a clerical figure violates his or her ordination, responsibility, and privilege as a

²⁵Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 401.

²⁶Cited in Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 401.

²⁷Emile Durkheim *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).

²⁸Cited in Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 401.

²⁹Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 50 Transcripts," 7 February 2017, Day 243, 24826. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney>.

³⁰Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 28 Transcripts," 19 May 2017, C077, 8170. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-february-2016,-ballarat>.

³¹Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 403.

representative of God in a human relationship, it is as if God himself has committed the violation”.³² In Catholicism, the priesthood is overlaid with a sense of mystique. In representing the divine order, the celibate priest is ontologically separate from the lay person, and priesthood is considered the highest form of clerical authority and thus beyond question. This encourages docility and compliance from the laity and particularly from children. Keenan observes that “Clerics saw themselves as set apart and set above. The laity viewed them as God’s men on earth. An attitude also prevailed that it was sinful to make any unkind accusation against a priest or bishop ... An extension of this attitude was the belief that priests and bishops could and would do no wrong.”³³

When such a status is combined with a hierarchical organisational structure and poor practices of accountability, abuses of power are inevitable.³⁴ For a Catholic child to disclose sexual abuse by a member of the clergy, he or she must act against their spiritual instincts as learned from childhood, their sense of shame and guilt and the power of priest in representing God.

A survivor-witness from Case Study 26 into St Joseph’s Orphanage in Rockhampton, Queensland noted the following:

As a child, I did place all of my beliefs wholeheartedly in something that I felt gave me the strength to endure, that became my comfort, my solace, my secret companion in those dark years, someone to reach out to in those difficult and unbearable times. As a child, I could identify with the sufferings on the road to Calvary. My beliefs were shattered by the actions of his representatives and I have never forgiven those violations and the abandonment I felt. The hypocrisy of his so-called representatives caused me to lose faith in the God I held so dear, and in humanity.³⁵

This testimony of abandonment and betrayal is central to spiritual trauma as stated by expert witness Carolyn Quadrio:

The sense of betrayal is particularly shattering because it’s kind of like, it’s not just one bad person, well it feels like, God is bad. The loss of faith and shattering of belief is really very damaging to a child ... a child could grow up believing everybody’s bad including God ... usually the child’s family or the entire community may be strongly affiliated with this particular religion, and that means when children make disclosures they very often get a bad reception and are told they are lying ... The negative response from family and community can compound the damage enormously.³⁶

The third level of violation occurs when the institution that defends and protects the faith tradition fails to protect and respond to the child’s distress and instead protects the cleric and the reputation of the church. This was particularly evident in Case Study 8, which examined the experience of John Ellis as he sought to address his abuse by the

³²Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, “Problem and Solution,” 403.

³³Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 172.

³⁴Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 50 Transcript,” 8 February 2017, Day 244, 24940. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-studies/case-study-50-institutional-review-catholic-church-authorities>.

³⁵Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 26 Transcripts,” 14 April 2015, C0070, 7359. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/45935098-7d22-4a41-921f-166267c1da73/case-study-26,-april-2015,-rockhampton>.

³⁶Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 28 Transcripts,” 25 May 2015, C081, 8471. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-february-2016,-ballarat>.

parish priest over several years. When he finally approached church authorities and began the process of redress via the *Towards Healing*³⁷ protocol, one of his earliest requests was to ask for spiritual advice and help. Despite requesting several times, he never received help.³⁸ Instead, church representatives told him that he would not receive an apology from the cardinal and no spiritual advisor would be provided unless he signed a Deed of Release,³⁹ which, following legal advice, he refused to do. In this particular instance, the Deed of Release served to protect the institution from a wider public gaze and potential legal action.

Asked by the Royal Commission what he wanted from the *Towards Healing* process, John Ellis stated the following:

The most important things for me were: firstly, to be believed, secondly to be told that it actually mattered to somebody what had happened to me; and thirdly, to have that spiritual assistance, because ... some of the practical impacts on my life, some of the psychology and psychiatric impacts on my life, my spiritual life has been totally trashed by this and that was one of the most important things that I wanted the church to help in and that's why I was talking to the church about this. It just seemed to be crazy making that they would say "You can have a spiritual director if you sign a deed of release".⁴⁰

Spiritual direction would have assisted Mr Ellis to reconcile his deeply felt faith conviction with his experience of abuse by his parish priest:

I wanted someone who would help me to reconcile within my head what had happened to me with an institution that I trusted and believed in and with a faith, that up until then, had been the foundation of my life ... that became totally shattered once I had approached the church with this complaint ... and I needed to have that reconciled ... That was one of the most important things I asked from the church.⁴¹

In Case Study 50, expert witness Professor Hollins noted the following:

The thing which is often overlooked is the spiritual needs of the survivor. A number of people have said to me that they haven't lost their faith in God, but they find it very difficult to go into a church or to go to a service in a church where there's a priest officiating, particularly if nobody has helped them to try to make sense of the spiritual aspect of their experience and

³⁷*Towards Healing* is one of two protocols used by the Catholic Church to manage complaints of clerical sexual abuse. See <https://www.catholic.org.au/professional-standards/towards-healing>. The other is the Melbourne Response <http://www.cam.org.au/Professional-Standards/Melbourne-Response>.

³⁸Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 8 Transcripts," 10 March 2014, Day 052, 5295. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/6c8c5e48-5c11-4902-a5e3-7f5988493fcf/case-study-8,-march-2014,-sydney>.

³⁹For a number of years, survivors who sought to address their abuse through the protocols used by the Catholic Church were forced to sign a Deed of Release, which is a legal contract binding the individual to silence regarding the details of the case and compensation and foreclosing any further legal action against the church. The function of the Deed of Release as articulated in the *Towards Healing* protocol was to act as part of a healing pastoral response and provide closure for the survivor. However, many survivors expressed concern that this form of confidentiality agreement acted as a way of ensuring their silence on the details of the abuse and protecting the institution of the church by not making any further legal claims (see Kate Gleeson, "The Money Problem: Reparation and Restorative Justice in the Catholic Church's *Towards Healing* Program," *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 26, no. 3 (2015): 318–32).

⁴⁰Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 8 Transcripts," 10 March 2014, Day 052, 5393. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/6c8c5e48-5c11-4902-a5e3-7f5988493fcf/case-study-8,-march-2014,-sydney>.

⁴¹Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 8 Transcripts," 11 March 2014, Day 053, 5393. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/6c8c5e48-5c11-4902-a5e3-7f5988493fcf/case-study-8,-march-2014,-sydney>.

their attempt to come to terms with and to live with what happened for them. So many people will have stopped going to church, because they find it too painful to be in church.⁴²

Fourthly, child sexual abuse is a violation of the sacred rites, objects and symbols that contain and express religious faith, history and identity. Returning to Durkheim, it is clear that sacred rites act as a cultural glue that binds congregants together in the life of the church and its traditions. In Catholicism, this is most clearly seen via the practice of sacramentality, where the material world is imbued with the presence and activity of God and is enacted through religious rites known as sacraments: for example, the rite of communion during Mass, the act of penance, the rite of marriage.⁴³ Sacramentality infuses everyday life with a sense of the mystical and creates a divine order, language and ethics system and structures the entire world that the embodied individual inhabits. This is, says Guido, more than a symbolic reality—it is the incarnation of deity in material life and speaks of a cosmos that is profoundly sacralised.⁴⁴ For example, during the Mass, bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, not symbolically as in Protestant traditions, but materially and in reality.⁴⁵ Sacraments such as marriage, ordination and penance are more than signs: they convey the real presence of God in material life.⁴⁶ Research by Hoge⁴⁷ found that “Catholics of every generation rated the sacraments as the most important element in their identification of themselves as Catholics”, suggesting that a sacramental world view is deeply embedded in individual identity as well as culturally valued. As seen in the testimony of survivor-witnesses, sexual abuse can shatter deeply held world views, creating a crisis of meaning and leaving survivors as spiritual orphans as demonstrated by the following survivor testimony: “My parents were utterly shattered, shattered, by the revelations of abuse to their three sons. Their faith and their trust in the church was destroyed. They had entrusted their most precious gifts, their things to them to the church and the church abused them ... My family were heavily involved in the Catholic Church for three generations. Our faith has now been lost.”⁴⁸

In his evidence to the Royal Commission in Case Study 50, canon law expert Dr Thomas Doyle⁴⁹ noted that for Catholics, sacramental activity was the pathway to salvation: “The Catholic Church revolves around the sacraments, the seven ceremonies that are connected with various important parts of your life—communion, baptism, confirmation—and our way to salvation, to the door to the other side, is through the sacraments. The sacraments are controlled by the clergy.”

Doyle notes that in controlling the sacraments, clerics have significant power over managing sacred rituals and, through this, influencing Catholic identity.

⁴²Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 50 Transcripts,” 23 February 2017, Day 254, 25950. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney>.

⁴³Joseph Guido “A Unique Betrayal: Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Context of the Catholic Religious Tradition,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17, nos 3–4 (2008): 255–69.

⁴⁴Joseph Guido, *A Unique Betrayal*, 257–9.

⁴⁵The theological term for this sacred process is *transubstantiation*.

⁴⁶Joseph Guido, *A Unique Betrayal*, 259.

⁴⁷Cited in Joseph Guido, *A Unique Betrayal*, 260.

⁴⁸Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 28 Transcripts,” 21 May 2015, C079, 8348. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-february-2016,-ballarat>.

⁴⁹Royal Commission into institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 50 Transcripts,” 7 February 2017, Day 243, 24832. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney>.

The final level of classification is the violation of the child's understanding of God as a loving force who is there to protect and nurture them.⁵⁰ A survivor from Ballarat told the following to the Royal Commission: "Apart from the tragedy of what happened to my family, the events also had an impact on my faith. I have lost my faith, which was historically a huge part of my life. I have also lost my trust in the Catholic Church because I felt that it protected the offender but did nothing to protect the victims. I still hold that view today."⁵¹

For many survivors, the outcome of sexual abuse engages them in a spiritual struggle that "shakes their spiritual edifice to its foundations".⁵² A survivor from Newcastle stated, "I have been a practising Catholic all my life. I spent many years involved in the Catholic Church in a voluntary capacity always trying to come to grips with what happened in my high school days. I feel totally let down by the church."⁵³

Many survivor-witnesses described feeling bereft and angry with the church and disconnected from their faith, and left their religious communities unable to reconcile the trauma they suffered with the reality of being abused by adults representing spiritual authority. Others continued to find solace in their beliefs but experienced difficulty in relating to authority figures.⁵⁴ The evidence suggests that while there are different responses to the damage that spiritual trauma causes, the belief system of survivors was irreparably damaged.

Francis Sullivan, from the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, summed up the cause of spiritual damage when he noted the following during his evidence in Case Study 50: "This data, along with all we have heard over the last four years, can only be interpreted for what it is: a massive failure on behalf of the Catholic Church in Australia to protect children from abusers and perpetrators: a misguided determination by leaders at the time to put the interests of the Church ahead of the most vulnerable; and a corruption of the gospel the Church seeks to profess."⁵⁵

Care of the soul? The church response to spiritual trauma

A central question for this article is the church response to spiritual trauma experienced by adult survivors as articulated in evidence from the Royal Commission. It has been noted by a number of commentators that church responses to survivors have tended to be focused on the psychological and emotional damage rather than the spiritual injury,⁵⁶ and even where this injury has been acknowledged by church officials, there have been many failures in providing adequate pastoral services to survivors.⁵⁷ This

⁵⁰Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 404.

⁵¹Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 28 Transcripts," 20 May 2015, C078, 8297. <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-february-2016,-ballarat>.

⁵²Pargament, Murray-Swank, and Mahoney, "Problem and Solution," 404.

⁵³Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 43," 8 September 2016.

⁵⁴Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 43 Transcripts," 31 August–8 September 2016.

⁵⁵Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 50 Transcripts," 6 February 2017, Day 242, 24715. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney>.

⁵⁶Tamara Blakemore et al., "The Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse: A Rapid Review of the Evidence," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 74, (December 2017): 35–48; Thomas Doyle, *Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy*, 171.

⁵⁷Elaine Bain "The Abuse of Faith," in *The Dark Night of the Church: Examining the Child Sexual Abuse Scandal*, ed. Brendan Geary and Joanne Marie Greer (Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew Press, 2011), 197–205.

was evidenced in a number of hearings at the Royal Commission, demonstrating the limitations of institutional responses. In case study hearings 4, 8 and 16, which documented complaints made to the Catholic Church redress schemes, *Towards Healing* and Melbourne protocols, it was clear that, although rhetorically premised on a pastoral response and reparation processes, often the main concern was the management of compensation payments and the protection of the church's reputation through confidentiality clauses that imposed an unjust silence on survivors.⁵⁸ Parkinson notes that although the *Towards Healing* protocol was effective for some people in seeking a compassionate response to their disclosure of abuse, for others it was clearly inadequate and at times re-traumatising.⁵⁹

The evidence noted some very poor institutional responses to requests for help with spiritual trauma. John Ellis asked for spiritual direction and it was refused. In his evidence during Case Study 50, expert witness Thomas Doyle noted that the church failed to comprehend the depth of spiritual trauma for survivors, their families and congregations:

I will say that one of the massive holes in the Roman Catholic Church's approach to this issue, still today, is a failure to completely comprehend the depth of the spiritual damage that is done to the victims, to their families, especially their parents, to their friends and to the community itself. There seems to be no ability to even ask the proper questions. I have never seen anything coming out of the Holy See dealing with the spiritual damage. All I've seen is, "Get them to go back to church", which is nuts. That's crazy. But I've not seen anything anywhere. I've seen a lot of people, both priests and religious, who have tried to figure out how to deal with this, in bringing aid and comfort and support to the victims. But as an institution, I have seen nothing.⁶⁰

There is however, a conundrum at the heart of the church response where the sexual abuse crisis was continually framed by church officials as a failure of spiritual and moral responsibility. This might be termed as a discourse of spiritualisation, which can be defined as a sociotheological practice where church officials, clerics, including recent popes, position child sexual abuse as primarily a sin against God rather than a crime against a child. This positions child sexual abuse as a *moral* failure rather than a criminal act and leads to responses based on traditional formats of prayer and penance to prevent sin, and positions confession as the primary form of re-socialisation for offenders and victims.⁶¹ It has seen the church enact some strange and hurtful requests, such as asking victims to pray for perpetrators and even forgiving perpetrators.⁶² This was acknowledged by senior church official Archbishop Mark Coleridge during Case Study 50 when he stated that "the other thing that happened, it seems to me, is that things like abuse were spiritualised, so that our strength became our weakness ... But there

⁵⁸Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse, *Report of Case Study No. 4* (Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016), 4–6. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/public-hearings/findings>.

⁵⁹Patrick Parkinson, "Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches," *The Smith Lecture*, Sydney, 2013. <https://smithlecture.org/city-sydney/episode/child-sexual-abuse-and-churches>.

⁶⁰Royal Commission into institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "Case Study 50 Transcripts," 7 February 2017, Day 243, 24812. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney>.

⁶¹Geoffrey Robinson "Changing the Culture," in *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002–2012*, ed. Thomas Plante and Kathleen McChesney (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 171–82.

⁶²See Joan Issacs, *To Prey and to Silence: One Survivor's Story of Child Sexual Abuse and her Fight for Justice* (Concord: A and A Book Publishing, 2016).

was a spiritualisation of what was going on, which amounted to a complete blindness to the reality.”⁶³

Notably, it has been clerical offenders who have benefited most from institutional responses to spiritual and psychological distress. In Case Study 31, Geoffrey Robinson, a retired bishop, gave evidence about a national therapy program for priests called *Encompass Australia*. The program was established in Sydney in 1997 and included the treatment of religious sexual offenders. It was costly and, as Robinson notes in his evidence, it involved a professional program run by teams of specialists, which aimed for best practice and included a six-month intensive psychosexual program.⁶⁴ It closed in 2008, ostensibly because it was too expensive to run. There is evidence that religious men who were treated in this facility were then returned to work in the church or pensioned off with full financial assistance.⁶⁵ In the USA, clerical sexual offenders have had access to treatment facilities for decades, including private Catholic psychiatric hospitals, which treated men who the institutional church then returned to ministry, often with disastrous results.⁶⁶ The implication here is that when the church oversees or funds the treatment of offending priests, it constitutes a conflict of interests.

Despite the centrality of pastoral care to Catholic theology and social practice and its articulation in the redress protocols, the Royal Commission listened to evidence that church officials demonstrated a poor understanding of the ways in which sexual abuse caused spiritual trauma and jeopardised a central element of children’s (and later, as adults) sense of self and agency.

Conclusion: spiritual recovery and redress

As the church hierarchy responds to the final report of the Royal Commission,⁶⁷ it is very clear that cultural, institutional and theological change will be a significant challenge for the Catholic community. With regard to spiritual trauma as experienced and expressed by survivors, I would argue that it is their needs and responses that should guide spiritual redress and reparation. I have noted the following as emerging from the research and the data findings that would need to be included in any program of spiritual redress:

- The church must acknowledge the damage that child sexual abuse does to spiritual life and take responsibility for providing programs of restitution and recovery.
- Spiritual assistance must be included and properly funded in pastoral responses and redress schemes.

⁶³Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 50 transcripts,” Day 254, 26038-9. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney>.

⁶⁴Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 31 Transcripts,” 24 August 2015, Day 156, 16039. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/67173cc9-3256-4cf9-8564-8df9f7357195/case-study-31,-august-2015,-sydney>.

⁶⁵Richard Baker and Nick McKenzie, “Catholic Church’s Secret Sex Files,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 2012. <http://www.smh.com.au/national/catholic-churchs-secret-sex-files-20121116-29hkb.html>.

⁶⁶Ellen Barry, “Priest Treatment Unfolds in Costly, Secretive World,” *Boston Globe*, 3 April 2002. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/04/02/priest-treatment-unfolds-costly-secretive-world/deAcqZXnaXuLvHcPbNip7L/story.html>.

⁶⁷Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report> (accessed 21 December 2017).

- Trauma-informed models of care must be included in spiritual recovery programs.
- Spiritual knowledge must be de-linked with compliance to organised religion.
- Models of spiritual education must be provided for believers that develop styles of spiritual autonomy and promote spiritual agency.
- Research into best practice spiritual redress programs should be undertaken at a global level.

During Case Study 50, the Catholic bishops of Australia announced that there will be a national plenary council for the Australian Catholic Church in 2020, which represents an opportunity for the church community to reflect on and consider the impact of the clerical child abuse crisis on church communities and culture, and evaluate programs of change.⁶⁸ In discussing the announcement of the plenary council, Dr David Ranson, expert witness in Case Study 50, argued that for this meeting to have any legitimacy, it must include the voices of those who have been abused: “There is no alternative going forward: the voice of those who have been hurt has to be at the very centre of how we imagine the future.”⁶⁹

It remains to be seen just how the Catholic Church will respond to the spiritual damage that the tragedy of child sexual abuse has caused, but clearly the testimony collected at the Royal Commission hearings and the data and research findings reported on above suggest that spiritual trauma has most definitely been an outcome of institutional child sexual abuse, and institutional responses to this trauma have been poor.

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⁶⁸“The Journey to 2020: Opening the Conversation to the Plenary Council,” Broken Bay Institute. <https://www.bbi.catholic.edu.au/news-events/110/article/1615/the-journey-to-2020--opening-the-conversation-to-the-plenary-council> (accessed 13 November 2017).

⁶⁹Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Case Study 50 Transcripts,” 6 February 2017, Day 242, 24781. <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney>.