



**Recognising Jesus  
as a Victim of  
Sexual Abuse**  
Responses  
from Sodaliccio  
Survivors in Peru

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*Recognising Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse: Responses from Sodalicio Survivors in Peru*

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## Summary

This report identifies a number of publications – Tombs (1999), Heath (2011), Gafney (2013), Trainor (2014) – which have independently and explicitly identified Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse in published work. It also identifies other research which has indirectly connected the cross to sexual abuse, but not explicitly named Jesus as a victim. It then presents the initial findings from pilot interviews held during 2018 with a small group of adult male survivors on their responses to Tombs (1999) naming Jesus as sexually abused, and what this might mean for survivors and/or others in the Church. Each member of the group experienced abuse by leaders of the Sodaliccio society in Peru when they were teenagers or young men. Many of the same participants were interviewed in previous research examining the impact of the abuse, with particular attention to the spiritual impact (Figueroa and Tombs, 2016). The 2018 interviews suggest that: (1) most in the group found the historical evidence for naming Jesus as victim of sexual abuse to be persuasive; (2) the group were sharply divided on whether this was of direct value to survivors of sexual abuses; (3) all of the group indicated that, regardless of its direct value to survivors, recognising Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse could make a significant difference to how the Church understands abuse and treats survivors.

# 1. Introduction

The sexual abuse crisis within the Catholic Church compels a reassessment of topics within both pastoral theology and Christology. The possible connection between the Passion narratives and the reality of sexual abuse is an obvious, but so far neglected, resource for this work.<sup>1</sup> The research project ‘When Did We See You Naked?’ at the University of Otago (2018-20) investigates three related areas.<sup>2</sup>

1. The historical question: ‘Did the torture and crucifixion of Jesus involve some form of sexual abuse?’
2. The pastoral question: ‘What difference should this make for the Church today?’
3. The theological question: ‘What consequences does this have for a theological understanding of God’s gracious and healing presence in the world?’

The voices of survivors should take a central role in exploring these questions. This report offers a brief discussion of theologians and biblical scholars who have identified Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse, and presents initial findings from pilot interviews with a small group of survivors on their responses to this, and their thoughts on its significance.

The idea that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse is almost always initially met with surprise and shock. Many people have told us that when they first heard the idea it seemed absurd, even offensive and insulting. Some have gone as far as to suggest that it might be blasphemous and should not even be raised. Yet after hearing more about the Gospel accounts, and having a chance to reflect on these, people often change their mind. The idea no longer appears strange; what seems strange is that something so clear could be hidden for so long, and that it could stay hidden in what amounts to plain sight within the texts.

For evaluating the evidence in the biblical texts discussed below, it is helpful to make an initial distinction between sexual humiliation and sexual assault as different aspects of sexual abuse. As an extensive feminist literature has argued, sexual abuse is best understood in terms of power and control expressed in sexualized ways. Viewed through the perspective of power and control, sexual humiliation and sexual assault are both forms of sexual abuse, and they are often closely entwined with each other and hard to completely separate. However, drawing a provisional distinction within sexual abuse between sexual humiliation and sexual assault is useful for clarifying what is explicit in the biblical texts and what might be left unsaid.

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1. See David Tombs, ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse,’ *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (1999) 53, 1-2, pp. 89-109; available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/6067>

2. For the ‘When Did We See You Naked?’ project at the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago, New Zealand, see [www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/projects](http://www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/projects). The project research team includes: David Tombs, Rocío Figueroa Alvear, and Jayme R. Reaves.

Examples of what we describe here as ‘sexual humiliation’ include sexual mockery and sexual insults, which can include forced stripping and involuntary nudity. These sexual abuses can have a devastating impact on the victim even when the abuse falls short of contact with the genitals, bodily violation, or other sexual assault. By contrast, we use ‘sexual assault’ to cover other forms of sexual violence on the physical body, extending from forced sexual contact, to sexual penetration and rape of different forms, to violence against sex organs, and/or genital mutilation.

When we refer to Christ as a victim of sexual abuse, we are recognising that the Gospels make clear that the crucifixion of Jesus involved severe sexual humiliation when he was stripped and exposed naked.<sup>3</sup> The Gospels also leave open the possibility of other forms of sexualized violence, including sexual assault, but the Gospels do not provide a definitive answer on this. Our focus here is therefore on sexual abuse through severe sexual humiliation. However, this is not to suggest that sexual humiliation and sexual assault operate in isolation from each other. Survivors may feel that an act of sexual humiliation, such as enforced stripping and exposure, is a form of assault even if it stops short of other bodily violation. This is not surprising given the powerful impact the stripping is likely to have on a person’s sense of vulnerability. In addition, stripping can also carry a disturbing threat of subsequent sexual assault, especially when it is carried out with force and by a hostile group. Likewise, sexual assault can be an instrument of sexual humiliation, and the humiliation can sometimes have more traumatic consequences than the assault itself. Drawing this distinction between sexual humiliation and sexual assault for a reading of Jesus’ experience is therefore not intended to create a false hierarchy between the two forms of sexual abuse, or to imply that they can be neatly separated from each other. Instead we offer the distinction as a way to make clearer the sexual abuse which is explicit in the texts (sexual humiliation), and to identify the further questions which might be asked of the text (in relation to sexual assault).

The starting point used below for our reading of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is the abuse of adult political detainees documented in torture reports from both the present and the past. Our argument is that when Jesus is recognised as a victim of sexual abuse in light of these torture reports, then the need to consider the implications of this for other forms of sexual abuse becomes unavoidable and long overdue. It is extraordinary that so much has been written on church responses to child sexual abuse in recent decades without this being acknowledged. Recent acknowledgment of the abuse of nuns and religious women by priests (first reported in 1994) reinforces the significance and urgency of this discussion.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Katie B. Edwards and David Tombs, ‘#HimToo – Why Jesus Should be Recognised as a Victim of Sexual Violence’, *The Conversation* (23 March 2018); available at <https://theconversation.com/himtoo-why-jesus-should-be-recognised-as-a-victim-of-sexual-violence-93677>.

4. See Patsy McGarry, ‘The Irish woman who exposed abuse of nuns by priests 25 years ago’, *Irish Times* (10 February 2019); John L. Allen and Pamela Schaeffer, ‘Reports of abuse. AIDS exacerbates sexual exploitation of nuns, reports allege’, *National Catholic Reporter* (16 March 2001). Retrieved from [http://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601a.htm](http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601a.htm); Jason Horowitz and Elizabeth Dias, ‘Pope Confirms Abuse of Nuns by Clergymen’, *New York Times* (6 Feb 2019), p. A1.

## 2. Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse

In the ancient world, Roman crucifixion was meant to do more than just kill the victim. It was also intended to dehumanize him and reduce him in the eyes of society.<sup>5</sup> The victims were crucified naked as a form of sexual humiliation. This humiliation also served as a warning to the public about the terrible consequences of rebelling against those in power. The passion narratives offer details about the Crucifixion of Jesus in which the sexual element is clear. According to Matthew (27:28-31) and Mark (15:18-19) after being condemned by Pilate, the guards took Jesus into the governor's headquarters. In front of 'the whole cohort', that likely numbered over five hundred soldiers, the guards 'stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him' (Mt. 27:28). He was mocked, beaten and spat upon by a crowd of soldiers before being stripped again according to Mark 15:20 and Matthew 27: 31.

Based on what the Gospels affirm, Jesus was first stripped naked to be flogged. The soldiers then stripped him again and dressed him for his journey through the city. They then stripped him once more and exhibited him naked on the cross until he died before a mocking crowd. The Gospel of John, known for its detailed descriptions, states that when the 'soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic: now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top' (Jn. 19:23).

The biblical scholar Raymond Brown concludes that even though the Gospels don't specify that Jesus died fully naked, the evidence favours a complete despoliation during the crucifixion. Brown writes:

Certainly John, who gives the greatest attention to the scene, is so specific about every item of clothing that one would have the impression that nothing was left. The normal Roman pattern was to crucify criminals naked, as attested by Artemidorus Daldianus (*Oneirokritika* 2,53).<sup>6</sup>

For both the Romans and the Jews, nakedness during execution was a sign of humiliation and absolute powerlessness in which shame and dishonour were integral factors in the punishment. However, the sexual component of Jesus' mistreatment has been minimized in the artistic representations of the crucifixion that depict him wearing a loincloth. These images distance us from the biblical text. Is this because, historically, the sexual element was considered too disturbing to confront?

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5. We use male pronouns because most references to crucifixions are for men, though there is evidence that women were also crucified; on the crucifixion of a woman by Tiberius, see Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3. On the purposes of crucifixion beyond the death of the victim, see David Tombs, 'Lived Religion and the Intolerance of the Cross' in Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac (eds.), *Lived Religion and the Politics of (In)tolerance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 63-83.

6. Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 Vols. Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994), Vol. 2, p. 953.

As far as we know, the first published acknowledgment of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is the article: Tombs, 'Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse' (1999).<sup>7</sup> Tombs is originally from the United Kingdom but is strongly influenced by Latin American liberation theology. He rereads the passion narratives in the light of reports of political prisoners in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. The article shows how sexual violence is very prevalent in torture practices and is used to humiliate torture victims. According to Tombs, a reading of the passion narratives indicates that the stripping of Jesus and his naked exposure was an integral part of his crucifixion. Although the stripping had not previously been named as sexual abuse, there can be little doubt that it should be recognised as such. Beyond this, there is the possibility that there might have been sexual assault that the texts are silent upon. This further question deserves to be recognised and taken seriously, but it is unlikely that there will ever be a fully conclusive answer to this.

In recent years at least three other scholars, working from independent and different perspectives, have also named Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. Scholars who have explicitly named Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse include: Elaine Heath, Wilda Gafney, and Michael Trainor.

Elaine Heath, Professor of Mission and Pastoral Theology at Duke Divinity School, addresses the silence of the churches on Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse in her book *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse*.<sup>8</sup> Heath notes: 'Being stripped publicly prior to his crucifixion was a calculated act of sexual violence. In Jesus' culture, as in Middle Eastern cultures today, to be stripped naked in front of a watching crowd was an act of sexual violation.'<sup>9</sup> She points out that Christian art has depicted Jesus with a loincloth even though he was crucified naked. Heath is herself a survivor of sexual abuse and argues that one of the reasons Jesus' sexual abuse has not been discussed is that the experience of sexual abuse survivors has not been considered important to the formulation of Christology.<sup>10</sup>

Wilda (Wil) Gafney, a prominent African-American bible scholar at Brite Divinity School, and an Anglican (Episcopalian) Priest, also speaks of the crucifixion as a form of torture and sexual violence. She describes the cover-up which has prevented this from being recognised.

On this Good Friday (2013) as on many before, I consider anew the full range of torture and humiliation to which Jesus of Nazareth was subjected, physical and sexual. The latter is so traumatizing for the Church that we have covered it up – literally – covering Jesus' genitals on our crucifixes. But the Romans (and others) who used crucifixion as more than a form of execution, as a form of state-sponsored terrorism – really lynching – to control subject populations were not inclined to respect the human or religious dignity, culture or customs of their targets.<sup>11</sup>

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7. David Tombs, 'Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse' (1999) based on a paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting in July 1998. The article has recently been republished as David Tombs, *Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse: Text and Context* (Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago, 2018); available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/8558>.
  8. Elaine Heath, *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011).
  9. Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, p. 123.
  10. Heath, *We Were the Least of These*, p. 123.
  11. Wilda Gafney, 'Crucifixion and Sexual Violence', *Huffington Post* (28 March 2013) [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/crucifixion-and-sexual-violence\\_b\\_2965369](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/crucifixion-and-sexual-violence_b_2965369).



According to Gafney, it is too difficult for the Church to talk about the sexualized connotations of the Son of God: ‘the reason the Church has such a hard time thinking critically and talking about sexual violence is because it has a hard time thinking critically and talking about sex.’<sup>12</sup> She considers that almost all the congregations and denominations of the churches have difficulties talking publicly about sex and that is why ‘they are unable to speak authoritatively about its antithesis and perversion, the use of sex as a weapon.’<sup>13</sup>

Michael Trainor, a Catholic Priest and biblical scholar in Australia, offers an extended and careful treatment of crucifixion as abuse, especially in his book: *The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse: How the Gospel Passion Narratives Inform a Pastoral Response*.<sup>14</sup> His reading is particularly informative because it is a full book-length study and this allows him to give attention to the specificities of the different Gospel accounts.<sup>15</sup> Trainor’s primary exegetical approach is historical-critical but he is always mindful of the clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church as a challenging hermeneutical context. In a number of places, he acknowledges that students in his classes have offered him insights into sexual abuse through their comments.

We do not claim that these three examples are exhaustive of all the work in this area or all publications on it. There are others who have come very close to describing Jesus in this way, or who suggest it indirectly in their work. For example, Australian Beth Crisp, in her collection *Beyond Crucifixion: Meditations on Sexual Abuse* (2010), reflects on crucifixion in John 18:1-19:42. She writes: ‘Many survivors have likened their experience of abuse to that of crucifixion.’<sup>16</sup> Crisp recognises that many survivors connect their own experience to crucifixion, but she does not appear to explicitly name the crucifixion of Jesus as an historical example of sexual abuse.

Gloria Durà-Vilà, Roland Littlewood and Gerard Leavey, from University College London, offer a specific example of this in their psychological study of five nuns in Spain, who were sexually abused by priests. They discuss how the nuns coped with the abuse. Several saw Jesus as sharing in their abuse. One of the nuns said: ‘I felt I was very much a victim and I felt Jesus very much a victim too. I felt great solidarity with the Lord: we were both undergoing this horrible moment.’<sup>17</sup> She felt that Jesus was with her during the abuse and also suffered with her. Identifying Jesus as a victim helped her in regaining her spiritual well-being. Although none of the nuns are recorded as explicitly naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse in his own right, the connection they made between their own suffering and Jesus’ suffering is very striking.

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12. Gafney, ‘Crucifixion and Sexual Violence.’

13. Gafney, ‘Crucifixion and Sexual Violence.’

14. Michael Trainor, *The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse: How the Gospel Passion Narratives Inform a Pastoral Response* (Melbourne: Morning Star Publishing, 2014).

15. See also, Michael Trainor, ‘Sexual Abuse and Luke’s Story of Jesus’ in Hilary D. Regan (ed.), *Child Sexual Abuse, Society, and the Future of the Church* (Adelaide: ATF Australia, 2013).

16. Beth Crisp, *Beyond Crucifixion: Meditations on Surviving Sexual Abuse* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), p. 99.

17. Gloria Durà-Vilà et al., ‘Integrating Sexual Trauma in a Religious Narrative: Transformation, Resolution and Growth Among Contemplative Nuns’, *Transcultural Psychiatry* (2013), 50 (1), pp. 21-46 (33). See also, Gloria Durà-Vilà et al., ‘The Dark Night of the Soul: Causes and Resolution of Emotional Distress among Contemplative Nuns’, *Transcultural Psychiatry* (2010), 47, pp. 548-557.

At a theological level, a number of prominent North American feminist scholars have critiqued the cross as a form of abuse, and argued that in some atonement theories Jesus' death on the cross amounts to divine child abuse.<sup>18</sup> However, although a focus on abuse is central to these critiques, it is primarily directed at the theological interpretation of the cross, rather than the historical practice of crucifixion. The central focus is on soteriology and atonement theory and the main target is the penal substitution model and its consequences. They connect the cross to abuse but they do not appear to explicitly link Roman crucifixion to sexual abuse, nor do they explicitly connect sexual abuse in crucifixion to their understanding of the cross as divine child abuse.

This report is not the place to delve further into the historical arguments and the Roman values and practices that support the claim that crucifixion was used as form of sexual abuse. Instead, it will now turn to the interviews held during 2018 on how a small group of male survivors respond to the suggestion, and what they see as its significance. Survivor views are offered as a way to extend the discussion beyond the scholars who have already written on this, and to consider the pastoral and theological implications that might follow from it.

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18. See especially Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (eds.), *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

### 3. Sodalicio survivor responses to naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse

The interviews for ‘Recognising Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse: A Case Study of Sodalicio Survivors in Peru’ (2018) were conducted as a pilot strand within our wider project ‘When Did We See You Naked?’ (2018-20). The interviews build on an earlier study by Rocío Figueroa Alvear and David Tombs, titled ‘Listening to Male Survivors of Church Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru’ (2016), which involved many of the same participants.<sup>19</sup>

In a discussion of theological and pastoral perspectives in the Tombs (1999) article on ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse’ it is suggested:

At the pastoral level, confronting the possibility of sexual abuse in the passion of Christ could provide practical help to contemporary victims of torture and sexual abuse. Recognition of sexual abuse in the treatment of Jesus could bring a liberating and healing message to the women, children, and men of Latin America and elsewhere who have also been abused. The acceptance that even Jesus may have suffered evil in this way can give new dignity and self-respect to those who continue to struggle with the stigma and other consequences of sexual abuse. A God who through Christ is to be identified with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matt. 25:31-46) is also to be identified with those suffering abuse and torture in the modern world.<sup>20</sup>

The possibility that Jesus himself was a victim of sexual abuse was not raised with the group in the earlier study. The second round of interviews therefore offered an opportunity to explore whether a group of survivors agree or disagree with this suggestion. The interviews asked about survivor reactions to the idea, and sought survivor perceptions of the difference this idea might make to survivors and to the wider Church. Whilst the conclusions cannot be generalised, and are only a very small study, it is important for survivor voices to be heard on this subject so that their responses can guide further research.

19. This study was completed in 2016, and funded by a University of Otago Research Grant; see <https://www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/projects/2016/sodalicio.html>. The project report is available in English and Spanish: Rocío Figueroa Alvear and David Tombs, *Listening to Male Survivors of Church Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru* (Dunedin: University of Otago, Centre for Theology and Public Issues, 2016); available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7052>; and Rocío Figueroa Alvear and David Tombs, *Escuchando a sobrevivientes masculinos de abuso sexual en la Iglesia*, (Dunedin: University of Otago, Centre for Theology and Public Issues, 2016); available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7053>. See also Rocío Figueroa Alvear and David Tombs, ‘Lived Religion and the Traumatic Impact of Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru’ in Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac (eds.), *Lived Religion and Trauma: Transcending the Ordinary* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), pp. 155-176.

20. David Tombs, ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse’, p. 109.

The Sodalicio Society was founded by a lay man Luis Fernando Figari in 1971, as a society of Apostolic Life within the Catholic Church. Sodalicio has a presence in schools and churches and runs retreat facilities and Youth Centres with communities in Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Italy and the United States. Although their members are mostly lay Catholics the society also includes clergy. In 2010 the Peruvian journalist Pedro Salinas, a former Sodalicio member, accused Figari and other leaders of the community of physical, psychological and sexual abuse. In 2015, after five years of investigation, he wrote the book *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados*<sup>21</sup> (*Half monks, half soldiers*) which contained victims' testimonies. Currently, Sodalicio has recognized 66 victims and set aside a fund of nearly 4 million NZD dollars for reparations.<sup>22</sup>

After receiving approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee, we developed and conducted structured personal interviews with eight survivors from Sodalicio who had previously participated in 'Listening to Male Survivors of Church Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru'. The participants were provided with a Spanish translation of the full Tombs, 'Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse' (1999) article, as well as a summary (in Spanish) of the article. Participants were asked to read the full article and/or the summary as preparation for their interview.<sup>23</sup>

Each individual interview was conducted in Spanish and generally lasted for about forty minutes. The interviews were recorded on a digital audio system and all information was transcribed verbatim into Spanish and then translated into English and analysed. We then made a qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts to assess and examine the impact of naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse.

We had three goals: one at the historical level, one at the pastoral level, and the other at the theological level. At an historical level, we wished to hear from survivors whether they found the argument in the article historically plausible and worthy of further investigation. We did not expect them to offer scholarly or professional historical opinions, but just to speak for themselves, and how they saw the evidence and arguments presented in the article in light of their own experiences.<sup>24</sup> We also wanted to get a sense of whether they had previously thought of this possibility, and how they first reacted to the suggestion that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse. At a pastoral level, we wished to assess whether they felt that seeing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse might help survivors towards a fuller healing process. At a theological level, we wanted to explore whether the idea of the sexual abuse of Christ might deepen a Christian understanding of God's solidarity and compassion towards those who experience abuse, and how this might impact on the wider Church and its understanding of its mission.

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21. Pedro Salinas, *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados: Todo lo que el Sodalicio no quiere que sepas* (Lima: Planeta, 2015).

22. For further information, see Figueroa Alvear and Tombs, 'Lived Religion and the Traumatic Impact of Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru', pp. 157-159.

23. We wish to record our great thanks to the participants for their willingness to engage with the study and the time they took on the reading it involved. As in our previous study, the good relationships with the participant rested on the high level of trust from previous contact with Rocío Figueroa Alvear.

24. For a scholarly reflection on the argument in the article, and the application of Latin American liberation hermeneutics to this issue, see Fernando F. Segovia, 'Jesus as Victim of State Terror: A Critical Reflection Twenty Years Later' in David Tombs, *Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse: Text and Context* (Dunedin: University of Otago, Centre for Theology and Public Issues, 2018), pp. 22-31; <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/8558>. See also, Michael Sandford, 'Masculinities, Sexual Abuse, and Imperial Violence in Luke's Passion Narrative', available at <https://independent.academia.edu/MichaelSandford>.

## a. Initial reactions

### *What was your first reaction about the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse?*

None of the survivors had encountered the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse before, or thought of it for themselves. One said that he was initially sceptical but changed his mind after further thought.

**Lalo's** first answer was: *'to be honest I had not thought about this matter before'* and

**Jeremias** states: *'the first time that I ever thought about the possibility of the sexual abuse of Christ was after reading David Tombs' text about the crucifixion. That text caused the same sensation in me as when I first saw the photo of La Christa.<sup>25</sup> Perceptions are questioned, and prejudices fall, and that is good.'*

**Nicolas'** first reaction was one of surprise: *'I had never noticed it, and I had never thought before that Jesus was actually sexually abused'*.

**Xavier** said that he remembered thinking about the nakedness of Jesus before: *'I had thought about the idea before but I never developed it in the way that the Tombs article did. I remember myself asking myself why Jesus was naked'*.

**Santiago** recalled that when he first read about the idea, he thought it was *'forced, unnatural and very disturbing'*. His first impression was *'like trying to read an event from the past with the eyes of the present. I thought that you were trying to sell the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. The second problem was that I usually considered sexual abuse as a sexual attack that includes penetration and it was absurd for me to consider that this had happened to Jesus. I was confused trying to understand sexual abuse in a broader sense.'* Santiago said that when he initially thought of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse it caused him stress. However, when Santiago reread the material one month later, he completely changed his point of view. He said: *'I believe that it is right'*.

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25. *Christa* is a famous artwork portraying a female Christ. It was sculpted by Edwina Sandys in 1975. The bronze crucifix has been featured in the *London Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, and other major publications. It has appeared at galleries and churches throughout Europe and North America, notably a controversial 1984 showing at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Wherever this sculpture goes it triggers debate about the nature of God and the role of women. On the Christa, see Julie Clague, 'The Christa: Symbolizing My Humanity and My Pain', *Feminist Theology* (2005)14.1, pp. 83-108; Nicola Slee, *Seeking the Risen Christa* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2011).

## b. Assessment of the evidence and historical argument

### *What do you think about the historicity and evidence that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse?*

In response to the historical evidence which was presented, almost all the survivors, except one, considered that Jesus being recognised as a victim of sexual abuse was appropriate. They saw it as consistent with the historical evidence of how the Romans used all types of violence, including nakedness, as a means to humiliate the victim.

**Roberto** says:

*It seems plausible to think of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. It is consistent with the mentality of the time to think that the Romans, in their eagerness to humiliate Jesus Christ, also wanted to strip him naked and expose him publicly. How horrible it is to think of a naked man on a cross! As the Psalm affirms: 'But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people' (Psalm 22:6). He was treated like that. I would not be surprised if the soldiers even raped him. But we do not know that, and I think it is not important either.*

Along the same lines **Mattias** states:

*The idea of considering Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse seems consistent with everything. Historically, in every procedure of torture or punishment or when someone was accused, there was always a sexual element, an attempt to humiliate people sexually, because in that way their intimate identity was wounded.*

Mattias directly connects the historical evidence from the passion of Jesus to the sexual element present in all tortures and punishments. At the same time, from his own experience, he can recognize how strategically important it is for a perpetrator to sexually humiliate his victims: *'an attempt to humiliate people sexually, because in that way their intimate identity is wounded'*.

Regarding the historical evidence, **Nicolas** has no doubts about the historicity, but he considers that it must be treated in the larger context of the Passion's narratives. For him, Jesus' sexual humiliation is a very small detail in comparison to what Jesus suffered:

*It is correct, but I have this strange impression that in the context of the passion, the abuse was very marginal. If he had been flagellated, imprisoned and crucified the reality of nakedness, to me, seems a small detail in contrast with what he suffered.*

For **Jeremias** there is not enough historical evidence in what was presented:

*I do not see enough evidence on the historical level, except from stories that coincide in some areas while contradicting or omitting data in others. That makes the big picture seem somewhat incongruous.*

### c. Assessment of the significance for survivors

#### *Do you think that the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse could help survivors?*

Although most of the survivors agreed that the historical evidence supported the view that Jesus should be seen as someone who suffered sexual humiliation, they had different opinions on whether or not they found this helpful, and whether or not it would have meaning for other survivors.

**Jeremias** said that since he is no longer a believer, the idea had little impact for him. Jeremias previously had a Christian faith, but he lost it after his experience in Sodalicio. He answered:

*I do not have the vision of the believer. Therefore, that Jesus of whom you speak of is not a reference for me. For me Jesus exists only on paper, literally. The victims I know are flesh and blood.*

**Lalo** is still a believer, but he is not sure that the experience of Jesus would help other survivors. He thought that the idea would probably not be helpful for survivors because most of the victims of sexual abuse within the Church have abandoned the faith and it would be almost impossible to go back:

*I don't think it would help. I don't know if it is possible to help a victim of sexual abuse within the Church by considering a religious topic. It is more difficult to talk about Jesus' suffering with people that have been sexually abused (not just once like Jesus, but many times in their lives or for many years) by clergy or in a church setting.*

**Santiago** was certain that the idea would not be helpful for victims. He thinks that the abuse of the victims is very different from Jesus' abuse:

*The case of what happened to Jesus and what happens to victims is very different. In the case of Jesus, it was a punishment for affirming that he was God. It was a punishment conferred by the authorities of the time (whether it was fair or not). So, I do not feel Jesus' solidarity with me, nor empathy. I did nothing. I was not guilty of anything. I did not have any trial. I do not see the similarity.*

On the other hand, some survivors thought the idea might be helpful, if it was addressed in an appropriate way. **Nicolas** answered:

*I think that it could help depending on the victims. We must distinguish between victims who are still Christians and the ones who are not. I am agnostic. The idea doesn't move me. I have respect for the figure of Jesus, but this idea doesn't help me. I think that it could be a consolation for a believer and help them in the healing process. From my personal point of view, as an agnostic and ignorant, it would not help me.*

In the interview Nicolas tried to be empathetic and put himself in the shoes of a believer, even though he did not consider the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse helpful for himself. He considered the possibility that the topic, if explained in the wider context of all the abuses that Christ suffered, could be helpful for those who are still Christians.

**Roberto** suggested that the topic could be helpful for victims, but he proposed some pastoral considerations. The first concern was that this suggestion should be directed at Christian victims, but only if they are prepared emotionally and intellectually to receive the concept:

*I think that the idea of Jesus as a victim could help, but a lot of care needs to be taken to present this kind of proposal to victims. For example, I would not dare preach to any victim about Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. First, I would be sure that the survivor was a believer, and not only a believer but also one who was already instructed in the concept of the idea, because it is very shocking.*

*I think that to have such a conversation resilience is needed. Otherwise the person would just be too impacted by the image. It's like when someone throws sand in your eyes, you become unable to see.*

Roberto's other concern was to stress that Jesus suffered different forms of abuse and not just sexual abuse. From his own path of healing he felt survivors should focus not only on the sexual dimension but on abuse as a form of power. He suggested that before addressing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse he would first discuss abuse as an expression of power:

*I would talk about abuse in general. In that way we also desexualize sexual abuse. Sometimes people just focus on the sexual dimension of abuse, and they forget that sexual abuse is, above all, an abuse of power. Jesus particularly suffered all kinds of abuse including sexual abuse. I think that is why a victim could feel solidarity with Christ who suffered all kinds of abuses: insults, isolation, slander, solitude, betrayal, abandonment and sexual humiliation.*

*Sexual abuse is first and foremost an abuse of power. If we focus only on the sexual dimension, we also evade the possibility of healing. For example, in my case, because of the abuse I developed a sexual addiction. The obedience methods used by Sodalicio, that apparently tried to solve my problem, never cured me and I ended up simply falling back into the same manipulative system that they presented me.*

*I was helped in a curious way. What cured me was when people close to me, who couldn't even understand what had happened to me, or wanted to minimize the event, simply asked me not to concentrate so much on my sexual problems and try to look forward.*

*They helped me understand that I was more than just my sexuality, that even though it was something very intimate to me, sexual abuse was not my sexuality. My sexuality was not responsible for the abuse. That attitude helped me to heal.*

Roberto offered important key elements for the path of healing. Sometimes the Church tries to give pastoral responses without knowing the real needs of survivors. Survivors need to be listened to, so they can reveal the path to their healing. It is remarkable how Roberto explains that the focus must not be on the sexual dimension of abuse but on helping survivors to go to the roots of abuse as an abuse of power.

**Xavier** was positive that it would be a good topic for the victims: 'there have been so many victims of sexual abuse in the history of humanity. It is good to have Jesus in our ranks'. Likewise, **Matias** considered that it could help survivors because 'one feels identified. One sees that it is a universal problem and not a unique case'. Xavier and Matias highlighted the importance of not feeling alone. By being able to identify with Jesus survivors can achieve a feeling of solidarity.



#### d. Assessment of the significance for the Church

*Do you think that the idea could be useful for the wider Church: hierarchy, theologians, priests and community?*

According to **Roberto**:

*The idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is mainly for them. Deepening the topic may help the Church to understand the complex reality of sexual abuse. They need to understand that sexual abuse is primarily an abuse of power, a subjection of a vulnerable person by a powerful one.*

For Roberto, the ones who need to learn more about sexual abuse are not the victims, but the wider Church. According to him, the main target of this theological topic must be directed at the ones who have responsibility as ministers within the Church.

**Matias** considered that the problem in the Church is that:

*Sexual abuse has been seen from the perspective of the perpetrator for a long time. As if the perpetrator were the victim of a satanic temptation that seeks to tarnish his dignity as a representative of Christ. For example, in the stories preserved about the fathers of the Desert there was a story of a hermit. A young woman once visited his cell asking for help. He let her come into his cell. Here Satan intervened, and the hermit became tempted by the woman and finally ended up sleeping with her. When he felt remorse, he killed the woman and the monk left the hermit life and went to the city. After a while, he reconsidered and returned to his cell and for years he made penance until he regained the state of grace.*

*This story is a story of a rapist and a murderer. And yet, the one who told the story is not interested in what happened to the woman, but what happened to the perpetrator. Apparently, these sins didn't stop him from reaching the peak of holiness.*

Matias pointed out that one of the reasons that the sexual abuse crisis has never been addressed properly is that it has always been seen from the perspective of the perpetrators. In general, theological and spiritual narratives have been concentrated on the life of the clerics. In the example Matias offered, the interpretation of the facts is not centred on the victim but on the perpetrator. It is the perpetrator who is presented as the 'main' subject. Sexual abuse is seen as a sin of the perpetrator and not as a crime committed against a vulnerable person.

Perhaps one of the biggest difficulties is that the narratives continue focusing on the perspective of the perpetrators. So, the Church has been more concerned for its priests instead of the victims. In **Lalo's** opinion:

*I believe that the bishops have perceived their priests as sons and when faced with the accusations of abuse have treated them as 'sinners' and not as 'criminals'. They have looked at them with paternal compassion and forgiveness instead of looking at their abuses as a crime. A huge problem is that the bishops have not seen the victims also as their children. A bishop that has to face a sexual abuse case by a priest or cleric has also to realize that both the offending priests and the priest's victims are their children. So, if a bishop finds out that a priest or cleric has abused someone, he should also consider that it's as if a son is telling a father that he has abused his sister or younger brother. How would a father feel if the son came out and said that he had abused his daughter? I think bishops need to open themselves up to this new dimension of their real fatherhood that also includes the victims, and to see that sexual abuse is not only a 'sin' but a crime that has to be denounced by civil authorities.*

Lalo's comments offer one explanation for why crisis has not been properly addressed. He thinks that it is because it has not had the victims at the centre of the bishops' pastoral care. Bishops have covered up the abuses committed by their priests and they have not behaved as pastors with the victims.

Even though **Santiago** feels that this concept would not help the victims, he believes that it could help the wider Church:

*I think it would help the Church a lot. It would help at the theological level because it would make the figure of Jesus more real, more historical. It would clarify what really happened to him: that in his passion he also suffered from sexual abuse.*

**Xavier** offered a mixed response. He saw the potential value but was sceptical that the Church would embrace it. This was not because the idea was wrong, but more because of the hardness of the heart of some of the listeners: *I think it would not be useful for the hierarchy, but for those in the Church that follow Jesus. Not for those who live as princes but for those who try to live the Gospel.*

#### e) Difficulties in addressing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse for the wider Church

A number of interviewees addressed difficulties that might prevent the wider Church from embracing the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. Roberto's concerns are noted above as part of his response to the significance for survivors.

**Lalo** said that the first obstacle to accepting the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is that people in general have a lack of comprehension of the meaning of sexual abuse. Lalo explained that this incomprehension initially makes it difficult to understand how Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse:

*Many times sexual abuse has been wrongly understood in a very limited way as an act of sexual violence that implies intercourse, without considering that there are other acts that are sexually abusive behaviours and therefore also sexual abuse. In this light after reflecting what Jesus suffered during his Passion and death, I think that what the Romans did with Jesus not only had the purpose of condemning him to capital punishment, but it was also the most shameful way to inflict a deep humiliation upon him by exposing his nude body to the public. Under this consideration we can say that Jesus suffered sexual abuse.*

Lalo also points out another potential obstacle to the idea. In his opinion *'at least 30% of the Church is very puritan. Those people will not accept the idea of Christ as a victim of sexual abuse. For them it is too scandalous or even blasphemous to consider something like this. These people will not accept the idea of Jesus being sexually abused'*.

According to Lalo, the problem is not about the topic or the historicity of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse but *'a puritan Church is not able to face the full reality of Jesus' death and the humiliation he suffered, and that is why they have always covered Jesus with a cloth'*.

He said that the idea of Jesus as a victim has to be proposed but *'it will take time. If they cannot accept the nude image of Jesus on the cross, I don't think they will be able to accept the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse'*.

**Matias** also addressed the wider context of sexuality in Christian thought. He suggested that the Church's attitudes to sexuality will create obstacles to thinking of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse:

*Raising the issue of Jesus being subjected to sexual abuse could be considered by many as scandalous and sensationalistic. This is mainly due to how sexuality has been handled in each era. Sexuality has been considered a taboo. Sexuality, even though it is an important, and even essential dimension of human nature, has been dodged in many Christian realms as something accidental or acceptable only for married people or, worse, as a dark source of a multitude of sins. It seems that when the Scriptures affirm that Jesus was 'tempted in everything except in sin' (Heb 4:15), all sexual dimension in the life of Jesus was excluded as if sexuality were a part of sin, incompatible with the figure of a holy and full man like Jesus.*

## Conclusions

In this study we have raised the issue of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse and given a preferential hearing to the response of some survivors to this idea. Historically the voices of sexual abuse survivors have been silenced in the Church, but survivor voices must be central to theologizing about the abuse crisis, and to discussions of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse.

The participants did not appear shocked or distressed when discussing this idea. Most were initially surprised by the idea (the first question) but they faced the interviews in the most thoughtful way possible and discussed the questions in a serious way.

In response to the second question, most saw no problem in accepting the evidence and historical argument that Jesus also suffered from sexual abuse, but one participant indicated that he felt there was not enough evidence presented.

On the third question, whether this awareness would be helpful to survivors, the participants were more evenly split. Those who felt it offered little help gave these reasons: Jesus and his Passion has little impact on survivors who are non-believers; usually victims of sexual abuse have left the Church and it would be difficult to help them with a religious or theological topic; and finally, the experience of abuse that Jesus suffered was very different from theirs. On the other side, the participants who suggested that it could be helpful spoke positively of the connection it created between Jesus and survivors.

On the fourth question, about the significance for the wider Church, all of the participants agreed, without hesitation, that it would have a positive impact. All of them suggested that church ministries, clergy and lay, should embrace this topic. This would help the Church to achieve more solidarity with survivors, and also, a more realistic and historic vision of Jesus. At the same time, if the wider Church embraced this concern and deepened it theologically, it is likely to have a positive impact on victims. It might help towards changes in the Church which prioritise survivors and ensure they are treated with more compassion and solidarity.

A number of participants also offered their thoughts on how the issue might be taken up and used, and gave advice on how this might be done best in pastoral work with survivors. It was suggested the idea should not be used indiscriminately, but was most appropriate for a sustained conversation with committed believers. Even with committed believers a high level of sensitivity would be required. The topic should be explored gradually, and with sensitivity to avoid distress. It might be better to talk about Jesus' sexual humiliation within the wider context of his sufferings, and better to address all the abuses that Jesus suffered, not just the sexual abuse. In that way, the sexual abuse of Jesus can be 'desexualised', to understand it as a more complex dynamic of abuse of power.

The recognition of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse has been virtually invisible within the theological realm and in society in general. The survivors suggest a possible reason for this is the wider understanding of sexuality within the Church. The recognition of Jesus as a sexual abuse victim needs a holistic anthropology that avoids the typically limited sexual perspective of the Church. For the Church to face sexual abuse it must first begin to see sexuality as an essential dimension of humanity and what it means to be human.

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