

## From Silence to Voice: African Sisters Confront the Abuse of Religious Vows

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**A**bstract: The central theme of this work is the spiritual abuse of women religious in Africa. Its overarching aim is to analyse whether the religious vows themselves carry an inherent potential for abuse. The chapter begins with a literature review of the broader landscape of harm experienced by religious sisters in Africa, including sexual, psychological, and spiritual abuse. It then explores the concept of spiritual abuse and examines the significance of the vows in religious life and the teachings of the Church's Magisterium. The chapter presents the results of interviews conducted with thirteen religious sisters from Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, and Tanzania, detailing their experiences of spiritual abuse and exploring its dynamics. Special attention is given to the vows of obedience and poverty, which emerged as the most frequently manipulated in abusive contexts. Finally, the chapter investigates how these vows—especially obedience and poverty—have been used as instruments of abuse, questioning whether the problem lies in their misuse or in their very definition.

**Key Words:** Religious Sisters, Spiritual Abuse, Obedience, Poverty.

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**Introduction: Literature Review:** This paper opens by looking at spiritual abuse within the broader landscape of harm among religious sisters in Africa. Between 2022 and 2023, the global Catholic population grew by 1.15%, rising from about 1.39 billion to 1.406 billion. Africa now accounts for 20% of the world's Catholic population and continues to show vibrant growth in the Church's presence. The number of Catholics on the continent rose from 272 million in 2022 to 281 million in 2023, reflecting a 3.31% increase.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the number of African religious sisters has grown significantly over the past 50 years. Africa recorded a significant increase of 2.2% between 2022 and 2023.<sup>7</sup> According to the national conferences of women religious from 2015, the number of missionary and indigenous institutes has also increased. For instance, there are 52 in Uganda, 175 in Kenya, 95 in Tanzania, 42 in Zambia and 30 in Malawi.<sup>8</sup> Many of these congregations are structurally dependent on the local bishops who founded them and often do not receive the economic support they need.

The contribution of religious sisters across the African continent is invaluable. They serve as leaders in education, forming children and young people in schools and universities. They work tirelessly in zones of war and conflict and are deeply committed to promoting the social advancement of the most marginalised. Despite their indispensable work, however, the dignity of women religious is often devalued within a patriarchal and misogynist ecclesial culture. Documented cases of sexual and spiritual abuse involving priests and religious sisters in Africa have been surfacing since the 1990s. In 2001, journalist John Allen, together with Pamela Schaeffer, brought renewed international attention to a confidential Vatican report authored in 1994 by Sr. Maura O'Donohue, an Irish missionary.<sup>9</sup> Allen's piece in the *National Catholic Reporter* brought to light O'Donohue's 1994 findings: her report exposed how some priests exploited young women seeking to enter religious life, demanding sexual favours in exchange for letters of recommendation or other necessary documents. O'Donohue also recorded cases where diocesan congregations dismissed several sisters who became pregnant by priests.<sup>10</sup>

In March 1998, the issue was raised again by Sr. Marie McDonald, a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of Africa. She presented a report titled "*The Problem of the*

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6 Cf. Vatican News, "New Church Statistics Reveal Growing Catholic Population, Fewer Pastoral Workers," March 20, 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-03/new-church-statistics-reveal-growing-catholic-population.html>.

7 Cf. Vatican News. "New Church Statistics."

8 Cf. Jane Wakahiu, "Foundation of Religious Institutes and Impact of Technology Innovation on Sisters in Africa: A Sociocultural Approach," in *Voices of Courage: Historical, Socio-cultural, and Educational Journeys of Women Religious in East and Central Africa*, ed. Jane Wakahiu, Peter Gichure and Ann Rita Njageh (Pennsylvania: ASEC, 2015), 60.

9 Cf. John Allen and Pamela Schaffer, "Reports of Abuse: AIDS Exacerbates Sexual Exploitation of Nuns, Reports Allege," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 16, 2001, [https://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601a.htm](https://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601a.htm).

10 Cf. Allen and Schaffer, "Reports of Abuse."

*Sexual Abuse of African Religious in Africa and Rome*” to the Council of 16.<sup>11</sup> Despite the courage and clarity of the report, Sr. McDonald affirmed that the abuse of religious sisters received scant attention, either from the Church or in academic and media spheres.<sup>12</sup> Momentum began to build in November 2018, when the association “Voices of Faith”<sup>13</sup> held a public event in Rome, during which former religious sisters shared their experiences of abuse and the persistent culture of silence surrounding it. The issue gained further public visibility when, in August 2018, a sister in India reported to the police that her bishop had raped her several times.<sup>14</sup> In February 2019, the Vatican journal, *Osservatore Romano*, featured an article in its monthly magazine, “Women, Church, World”, addressing the abuse of nuns.<sup>15</sup> The testimonies revealed that many sisters had remained silent due nuns—the first recognition of this crisis at such a high ecclesial level. That same year, Sr. Mary Lembo published the results of her investigation into the abuse of sisters.<sup>16</sup> In an interview with Christopher Henning, Lembo affirmed that the ‘sexual abuse of women religious by priests in Africa is a gaping wound in the Church.’<sup>17</sup>

In 2019, the German mission society *Missio* Aachen undertook a research survey to provide a clearer picture of the abuse of religious sisters. The results were published in 2020 in Josephin Beck-Engelberg’s *Ergebnisse der Umfrage von missio zum Thema: Misbrauch and Ordensfrauen* (Abuse of Women Religious: Survey results from *Missio* on the topic). A total of 101 responses were received, of which 27 were from 10 African countries.<sup>18</sup> Several serious concerns are raised in the responses from African countries:

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11 Cf. Marie McDonald, MSOLA, “The Problem of the Sexual Abuse of African Religious in Africa and in Rome,” in *National Catholic Reporter*, November 20, 1998, [https://natcath.org/NCR\\_Online/documents/McDonaldAFRICAreport.htm](https://natcath.org/NCR_Online/documents/McDonaldAFRICAreport.htm). Cf. Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs, “Living in Obedience and Suffering in Silence. The Shattered Faith of Nuns Abused by Priests,” in *Sexual Violence in the Context of the Church: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Mathias Wirth, Isabelle Noth and Silvia Schoer (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 48, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110699203-004>.

12 Cf. MSOLA, “The Problem of the Sexual Abuse.”

13 Cf. Hildegund Keul, “Why is No One Speaking Up? Women’s Voices in the Abuse Crisis,” *Voices of Faith*, November 2018, (Accessed 14th December 2025), <https://www.voicesof-faith.org/voices-blog/why-is-no-one-speaking-up>.

14 Cf. Rocío Figueroa, Aton Hungyo, and David Tombs, “‘If People in the Church Knew’: Purity, Stigma and Victim-Blaming,” *The Canonist*, 14, no. 2 (2023): 280-292, <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/16572>.

15 Cf. Lucetta Scaraffia, *Women, Church, World, Osservatore Romano*, February 1, 2019: 18-20, Republished by *Bishop Accountability*, (Accessed 15th November 2025), [https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2019/01\\_02/2019\\_02\\_01\\_Scaraffia\\_WithoutAny.htm](https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2019/01_02/2019_02_01_Scaraffia_WithoutAny.htm).

16 Cf. Mary Lembo, *Relations Pastorales Saines et Matures entre Femmes Consacrées et Prêtres: Une Analyse Qualitative de cas d’Abus de Femmes Consacrées par des Prêtres* (Rome: Gregorian University, 2019).

17 Christopher Henning, “In Africa Abused Women Live in Fear. Interview with S. Mary Lembo,” *La Croix International*, October 18, 2022, Republished in *Cath News*, October 27, 2022, <https://cathnews.co.nz/2022/10/27/in-africa-abused-women-religious-live-in-fear/>.

18 Cf. Figueroa and Tombs, “Living in Obedience,” 54-55.

“(abuse of women is) ... a taboo subject in many cultures in Africa”.  
“Priests are not sanctioned but assigned to another parish”.  
“After the abuse in a religious convent, we sent a letter to all the authorities concerned ... no authority signalled or sent an acknowledgement of receipt”.  
“Nothing is done to address this subject, which is considered taboo ... I regret that priests who have committed such acts are not punished by those responsible but simply assigned to another parish.”<sup>19</sup>

Although some studies have documented the sexual abuse of religious sisters in Africa, the specific phenomenon of spiritual abuse has received far less attention. To address this gap, we conducted interviews with thirteen religious sisters from various African countries, gathering their accounts of sexual, psychological, and spiritual harm. This chapter focuses on the dimension of spiritual abuse, seeking to clarify its contours and significance within the context of religious life.

## Spiritual Abuse

To contextualise our findings, it is important first to explore the meaning and development of the term ‘spiritual abuse’. This concept is relatively contemporary.<sup>20</sup> The topic of spiritual manipulation and control was first explored in evangelical and Christian communities.<sup>21</sup> The term spiritual abuse was used initially in America, but in more recent years it has also gained prominence in Australia and England, particularly through the psychological work of Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys. Lisa Oakley defines spiritual abuse as coercive control within a religious setting:

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the

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19 Josephine Beck and Engelberg Rheinbreitbach, *Ergebnisse der Umfrage von missio zum Thema: Missbrauch and Ordensfrauen*, April 19, 2020, <https://www.missio-hilft.de/missio/informieren/wofuer-wir-uns-einsetzen/ordensfrauen-weltweit-staerken/missio-hilft-auswertungsbericht-2020-missbrauch-an-ordensfrauen.pdf>.

20 Cf. David J. Ward, “The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 14, no. 9 (2011): 899-915, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2010.536206>; Ivonne Davis-Weir, *Spiritual Abuse* (Bloomington: West Bow Press, 2015); F. Remy Diederich, *Broken Trust. A Practical Guide to Identify and Recover from Toxic Faith, Toxic Church, and Spiritual Abuse*, The Overcoming Series, Spiritual Abuse Book 4 (Bloomington: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017); Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2019).

21 Cf. Edward Plowman, “The Deepening Rift in the Charismatic Movement,” *Christianity Today* 10 (October 1975): 65-66; Ronald Enroth, *Churches that Abuse* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1992).

abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.<sup>22</sup>

In recent decades, several Catholic theologians and pastoral scholars have acknowledged the spiritual consequences of clerical sexual abuse,<sup>23</sup> which often describe the deep wounds that sexual abuse inflicts on a person’s faith, trust, and relationship with God. However, it was Doris Reisinger who pioneered a distinctly Catholic theological account of the phenomenon. She offered a systematic theological articulation of spiritual abuse as a primary and distinct form of violence within the Catholic Church. In her ground-breaking work *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*,<sup>24</sup> Reisinger defines spiritual abuse in its own right as a direct violation of a person’s self-determination, freedom of conscience, and personal relationship with God.<sup>25</sup> While Oakley’s approach emphasised the emotional and psychological dynamics of abuse in ecclesial communities from the point of view of the one who commits the abuse, Reisinger defined spiritual abuse from the point of view of the victim. This definition marks a crucial development in naming and confronting forms of abuse that occur even in the absence of sexual misconduct, but which nonetheless cause profound spiritual harm.

In religious contexts, when sexual abuse is committed by someone in a position of spiritual authority, it is fundamentally an abuse of spiritual power.<sup>26</sup> The trust placed in religious leaders and institutions is weaponised, transforming the violation into a profound spiritual betrayal.<sup>27</sup> In such cases, spiritual abuse is not simply a secondary harm—it becomes the very structure that enables, sustains, and conceals the sexual misconduct. Furthermore, in religious settings, other forms of harm—emotional, physical, or financial abuse—may also be considered as spiritual abuse. This is because they are carried out under the guise of religious

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22 Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2019), Kindle ed., location 828.

23 Cf. Marianne Benkert and Tomas Doyle, “Clericalism, Religious Duress and its Psychological Impact on Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse,” *Pastoral Psychology*, 58, no. 3 (2009): 223-238, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-008-0188-0>. Cf. Kenneth Pargament, Nicholle 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, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538710802330187>.

24 Cf. Doris Reisinger, *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2019), 72.

25 Cf. Joice Meyer, “Q & A with Doris Reisinger, Theologian at the Forefront of the #Nunsto0 movement,” *Global Sisters Report*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/qas/news/q-doris-reisinger-theologian-forefront-nunsto0-movement>.

26 Cf. Rocio Figueroa and David Tombs, *Listening to Male Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago, 2016), 11.

27 Cf. Gloria Durà-Vilà, Roland Littlewood, and Gerard Leavey, “Integration of Sexual Trauma in a Religious Narrative: Transformation, Resolution, and Growth among Contemplative Nuns,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 50, no. 1 (2013): 21–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461512467769>. Cf. Stephen Rossetti, “The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Attitudes toward God and the Catholic Church,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 19, no. 12 (December 1995): 1469–1481, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134\(95\)00100-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134(95)00100-1).

commitment, obedience to God, or fidelity to a community. When sacred texts, rules, constitutions, symbols, or roles are used to legitimise control, coercion, or subjugation, the spiritual dimension of the person is directly targeted. Understanding abuse in religious settings requires acknowledging this complex intersection. Spiritual abuse is not an addition to other forms of abuse—it is often the core structure that makes those other abuses possible and particularly devastating. In this qualitative research, we will use the following definition of spiritual abuse of sisters: Spiritual abuse of religious sisters occurs when priests, bishops, superiors, a lay person or other sisters systematically use religious symbols, constitutions, traditions, teachings, prayers, the vows, or their spiritual authority to manipulate, control, or coerce. This violates a sister's freedom, threatens or damages her spiritual self, and harms her well-being. Such abuse may cause deep physical, psychological, spiritual, and relational wounds.

We found that spiritual abuse within Catholic religious life does not occur in a vacuum—it often arises through distortions of the very structures intended to nurture spiritual growth and freedom. For women religious, these structures include the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. We focus particularly on the vows of poverty and obedience, as many of the sisters' testimonies revealed patterns of abuse rooted in the misuse of authority connected to these two vows. To understand how such distortions can occur, it is important first to consider how these vows—especially obedience—are understood theologically and canonically.

### **Religious Vows According to Church Teachings**

The Second Vatican Council, in its decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the renewal of religious life, defines obedience as follows: “In professing obedience, religious offer the full surrender of their own will as a sacrifice of themselves to God and so are united permanently and securely to God's salvific will.”<sup>28</sup> This definition emphasises obedience as a spiritual offering, linking the surrender of one's will to the salvific mission of Christ. The Code of Canon Law, in its number 601, deepens this by requiring submission to legitimate superiors who “stand in the place of God,” so long as their commands align with the constitutions of the institute: “The evangelical counsel of obedience, undertaken in a spirit of faith and love in the following of Christ obedient unto death, requires the submission of the will to legitimate superiors, who stand in the place of God, when they command according to the proper constitutions.”<sup>29</sup>

The 2008 Instruction from the Congregation for Religious Life, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, continues this tradition by affirming that the Lord “re-

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28 Second Vatican Council, “*Perfectae Caritatis*: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life,” §14, October 28, 1965, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html).

29 *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 601. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic\\_lib2-cann607-709\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann607-709_en.html).

quests obedience to the person in authority who, at that moment, represents him,” and reminds us that Christ himself “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 5:8).<sup>30</sup> Obedience, therefore, is framed not merely as submission, but as participation in Christ’s own path of suffering and transformation and as a path to gradual freedom.

Similarly, the vow of poverty is presented in ecclesial documents as a radical expression of the following of Christ. *Perfectae Caritatis* affirms: “Religious should diligently practice—and, if need be, express also in new forms—that voluntary poverty which is recognised and highly esteemed especially today as an expression of the following of Christ.”<sup>31</sup> Poverty, in this view, is not simply a matter of material renunciation but a prophetic witness against consumerism and an invitation to deeper solidarity with the poor. It is meant to free the religious person from attachments so as to be more available to God and the community. Vatican II continues:

The several provinces and houses of each community should share their temporal goods with one another, so that those who have more help the others who are in need. Religious communities have the right to possess whatever is required for their temporal life and work, unless this is forbidden by their rules and constitutions. Nevertheless, they should avoid every appearance of luxury, excessive wealth and the accumulation of goods.<sup>32</sup>

## Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, drawing on both primary and secondary data to explore the spiritual abuse of religious sisters in Africa. The primary data consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with religious sisters, supported by themes emerging from the broader literature on abuse in religious life. Participants for the research project “Abuse of Religious Sisters in Africa” were primarily recruited through workshops on safeguarding and religious life.<sup>33</sup> Some sisters accepted to participate after attending these workshops,

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30 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Service of Authority and Obedience* (Vatican: Vatican Publishing, 2008), Instruction.

31 Second Vatican Council, “*Perfectae Caritatis*,” §13.

32 Ibid.

33 In 2023, Voices of Faith hosted a workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, bringing together Dr Rocío Figueroa, Mūmbi Kīgūtha, and Lisa Spriggens to present a four-day programme titled “*Accompanying Survivors of Abuse*.” Sisters from across Africa were invited to participate and engaged with topics such as trauma and abuse, spiritual abuse, and an examination of the vows. Following this pilot workshop, the three presenters decided to formalise their collaboration. With continued funding from the Göetz Foundation, they delivered three additional workshops in Ghana (2024), Zambia, and Rwanda (2025). From 2024, the team expanded to include Catherine Shirima, Caroline Mbonu, Lynet Ohola, Rosemary Ohata and Mercy Benson, enriching the project with their expertise and regional perspectives. These workshops were targeted at Superiors and other community leaders, recognising the significant influence they hold in effecting change. While the core content has remained consistent, the intention of the programme is now expressed more explicitly in its revised title: “*Safeguarding Religious Sisters Against Harm*.”

while others were referred by participants who believed their experiences were important to include. The workshops revealed a remarkable willingness—and often a first-time opportunity—for sisters to share personal experiences of harm that had remained unspoken for years. This became the impetus for undertaking a more systematic study to document these stories and privilege their voices in the hope of fostering institutional change. The research team consists of the authors of this chapter.

The research was funded by *Missio-Aachen* (Missionswissenschaftliches Institut im Missio) and the Catholic Theological College (Auckland) and received ethical approval from the Laidlaw College Ethics Committee.<sup>34</sup> Data were collected through in-person interviews conducted during the workshops whenever possible, and otherwise through Zoom. A semi-structured interview guide served as the key instrument for data collection. This guide included open-ended questions inviting participants to reflect on their experiences of abuse—sexual, psychological, and spiritual—and how these experiences shaped their sense of self, their faith, and their vocation. Participants were also asked about the consequences they faced when speaking up about abuse. The interview format allowed for flexibility, enabling sisters to share their stories in the depth and direction they considered most important. The participants ranged in age from 30 to 67. Most had an average of almost 25 years in religious life since first profession, while one participant was in early formation with four years in community. For confidentiality and protection, pseudonyms are used for all research participants. Identifying details—including congregation, location, and specific community roles—have been generalised or omitted when necessary to ensure that sisters cannot be recognised. All participants gave informed, voluntary, written consent before participating in the study. Consent included permission to record the interviews, to use anonymised quotations, and to publish findings in academic and pastoral contexts.

Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes within the stories shared. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis process.<sup>35</sup> Interview data were coded, and key themes were identified. The research team worked collaboratively to review the coding, ensure consistency, and engage with broader themes emerging from the interviews. The words of the participants have been prioritised in the presentation of the results. This is demonstrated through the use of extended quotes from the interviews. This is an intentional practice, recognising that African women religious have had few opportunities to share their experiences.

Based on these qualitative interviews with thirteen African religious sisters from diverse countries and congregations, we explore how spiritual abuse is experi-

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34 Cf. Laidlaw College, “Application for Ethics Approval,” *Reference 202304*, 15 May 2023.

35 Cf. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>. Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, Clarke, “Thematic Analysis,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12, no. 3 (2017): 297-298, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>.

enced and articulated in their own words. While theological and psychological definitions of spiritual abuse have expanded in recent years, there remains a lack of empirical research that centres on the lived experiences of women religious themselves, especially in the African context. This chapter seeks to address that gap. Our aim is not only to highlight patterns of abuse but also to provide a theological and pastoral analysis rooted in the voices of the sisters. Their testimonies challenge the Church to reflect on how sacred commitments are proposed. Below are some findings of the interviews.

## The Vow of Obedience

Stories shared by sisters implicitly and explicitly referred to the vow of obedience and how this was misused in religious life. These acts included the use of public confession, expectation of blind obedience, expectation of obedience outside of rules and constitutions, the imposition of vocational directives, and a culture of overwork for younger sisters, with a privileging of superiors so that they are not required to contribute to the work of community life. These will be explored in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

**Public Confession and Evaluation:** Sisters spoke about the dehumanisation they experienced through the misuse of practices such as public confession and evaluation. Lara was forced to participate in a practice of public confession, which required sisters to share wrongdoings in front of the community.

And for me, it was a horrible thing that ... it's dehumanising. ... You go and meet them before the Blessed Sacrament and make... a kind of public confession. But I have been doing so, so this and that in the community or maybe, oh, I have been going out from the community without taking permission from my superior. I asked the Lord to forgive me and so on. So, people were coming out and saying all sorts of stuff. Somebody came out and said that I'm really sorry that I uncovered my head in the corridor without covering my head each time I walk along the corridor, you know, creating that situation whereby people come out and make a manifestation of conscience. For me, it was weird. Then, after the whole stuff the superior will give everybody absolution. So we tried it once, and I was like, Oh my goodness, what is the meaning of this? But you can't talk because sometimes you try to tell people this does not really make much sense ... Some people were okay with it. You just take it. This is what they said we should be doing, okay. We do it then. (Lara)

The expectation of obedience is used to ensure compliance with activities that breach constitutional rules, exposing sisters to practices that were experienced as dehumanising and left them vulnerable to further manipulation. Monika experienced evaluations that went beyond the expected process, something she did not realise until afterwards. In the following quote, Monika is sharing her experience of an evaluation:

My God, the evaluation I've received, you guys. ... So, did you actually write an evaluation for me? And what did you say? Because

there was not a single affirming thing in my evaluation, and they [members of her immediate community] were like, no, we wrote and we wrote like good things. So, I remember telling my temporary professed mistress, all this nonsense seems to have come from one person. I then discovered she [a temporary professed mistress] had asked for evaluations, even from the provincial house community, which [I] had not lived in for more than three years. (Monika)

Monika discovers her evaluation on another sister's laptop and how widely it had been shared.

And it was my evaluation that I talked about, word-for-word, but with even more detail. Like, really tearing my character. And it had been sent to the entire General Council in Rome. People who didn't even know me. The General Council was so far removed from me as a temporary professed sister. Some of them only knew about me, but they did not know me ... so you see that that was another abuse because my evaluation should have been restricted to a few sisters. But for me to be subjected to the scrutiny of over 30-something people who made up the provincial house community, and they evaluated me, you can imagine. This was not the last time such an abuse happened. (Monika)

Monika observes that these practices of evaluation led to sisters "hiding who they are" and that these processes are the "beginning of abuse in these congregations" as they are used as mechanisms to control behaviour and spread rumours about others:

I was never fully accepted from the early days. ... Being a free spirit it was frowned upon, and my gifts and talents were not celebrated but rather were explained away in nefarious ways, including a viral rumour that I was a devil worshipper. The backstabbing and maliciousness included talking to the dean of my faculty behind my back to discredit me and asking a priest who was a student in the same faculty to spy on me. ... And you can't really defend yourself. And sometimes these things, these rumours, are acted upon by leadership. Either you are delayed from making your final vows, or you are expelled. Yeah. So I found it really a kind of violence that takes away the agency of a person. Because with this evaluation judgment, you are kind of kept in a box, whereby you can't really be free to express who you are, because you know, anything you do will be judged. (Monika)

The use or misuse of public confession and evaluation, rather than contributing to a sister's formation, often results in psychological harm. It imposes judgment without dialogue and breaches trust by violating the sister's right to privacy.

Some sisters live in accusatory environments that inhibit not only their personal development in the mission but also their spiritual growth. Meg states:

They were not supporting me to grow in the mission. In fact, when there is this fear, I realised that I'm not growing even spiritually. I started to feel I'm losing the taste for prayers, because I go for prayers—these incidents are ringing in my head. What next will come to me? How? What will I be accused of? Because I was. I was feeling so fearful. I lost my freedom. I lost my happiness. I was just like now, this thing I love, but I have no freedom to continue to live. So I felt a lot of fear. This is what I can say. (Meg)

This testimony vividly reveals the internal rupture that occurs when fear replaces freedom in religious life. Her words also illustrate a state of hyper vigilance, commonly associated with trauma, where she is immediately anticipating further harm or false accusation. The statement, “I realised that I'm not growing even spiritually,” points to the paradox of a religious context where one is meant to flourish but instead experiences spiritual desolation. In reviewing the interview data, it is evident that the vows, while intended to be a freely made commitment by the religious sister, are often used as mechanisms of control by those in authority, resulting in the dehumanisation of the sisters.

**Blind Obedience and Disregard for Health and Well-being:** The vow of obedience is used to compel behaviour that is detrimental to the health and well-being of sisters. ‘Blind obedience’ is expected of sisters regardless of what harm it might cause. Teresa was still expected to carry out household chores while she was in recovery from an appendix operation and was being visited by her mother:

This sister will come to my room and ask me to go out and sweep. I could not even bathe myself. She will ask me to sweep. If I say I'm not sweeping, that is disobedience. So, the blind obedience is that you must go down and bend to sweep. Sometimes I refuse, but later I go back to do it because of the same obedience. ... I have to send somebody to buy me a long broom so that even when I don't bend, I could be able to sweep. ... My mom said, let me take you home, because my mom experience is she didn't even care that my mom was around. And when you pray, please go and sweep that. Then sweep the house. Why are you lying down as if you are the first to do [an] operation? And my mom said,, What was the meaning of that? Or I'll go and pack your things. Let's go home. I said, Mum, no, I can't go home. So, this is the way I belong now. I can't go home. I will do it. My mom took the broom. My mom was the one that swept the floor. (Teresa)

The “oppression” Teresa has experienced leads her to regret joining religious life. She observes that the expectation of obedience leads to “barbaric” acts.

I wish I have never joined. I have regretted joining several times because of the oppression. ... What annoys me most is putting all this barbaric thing and tagging them obedience. They are so barbaric the way people treat each other, like the first time I joined in terms of eating like food, the, those who are superior to you, then they feel they should eat the better food. Then you are the one to eat the one

that was left ... all the privileges come to them. You are supposed to suffer because you are a religious. ... There are some things that they ordered that it is common as a normal human being, you shouldn't order somebody to do such. ... So, there is no consideration. Once somebody is a superior, the person feels that every other person should be treated as animals. And once you want to insist on your rights, on your right as a human being, you are tagged disobedient. (Teresa)

**Functioning Outside of Rules and Constitutions:** As has been noted previously, the vow of obedience can be used to override constitutional rules and processes. Frances notes that this happens in communities with the full knowledge of members:

And her excuse at the time is that I was a student, and the congregation does not take care of students, if that. And my question then is, if that is the case, why was she taking care of other sisters who were in school with me? ... I've been a ... [sister] for long. I know that our Constitution did not say we don't take care of students. It's just that the superiors we have decide not to pay attention to that. Yes, there is nowhere in the constitution of the [Congregation] that it says, send sisters to school and let them take care of themselves. (Frances)

Frances' story is an example of vocational directives being given without appropriate consultation, information, or support. The General Superior told her that she had a mission in another country. When she arrived there, she discovered that there were only two other sisters, and the youngest one had already left the congregation, leaving just herself and one other. She then discovered the critical poverty of the community to which she had been assigned. In addition, she was neglected in terms of support for her formation processes:

So, throughout my four years there in that country, we really had to till the soil for our upkeep ... we were in high lack of our basic needs. We kept writing to the congregation. The superior general and her council will not respond [to] any of our letters. We wrote to talk about how the mission is going. We wrote to talk about our experiences, and at that point, we began writing to complain about nobody asking about us where we were sent. I wrote my applications for renewal of vows while I was there for four good years. I never received any reply from anybody, so each year I would just renew my vows until it was time for me to apply for final profession. I applied, and there was no response. ... So in our Constitution, a missionary stays for three years and goes for three months holidays. So, six months to the time for my date of completing three years, I began applying to go for holidays, but I did not receive any response from my superiors. (Frances)

When Frances finally decided to return to her community house, the Superior told her off for leaving her mission without permission.

Practices that fall outside the constitutional rules for the community are accepted without challenge, with the full knowledge of the members. Such practices cannot be questioned in an environment of blind obedience.

**Imposition of Vocational Directives:** While a degree of collective discernment is expected regarding the contribution of individual sisters to community life, some participants shared how some decisions related to their work and role within the community were often imposed upon them without dialogue. In certain cases, these decisions appeared neither to support the well-being of the sister nor the community and were perceived instead as attempts to control the individual. For example, Tina was obliged by her superior to resign from her position as a university lecturer in the middle of the semester, having been deemed too ‘proud’. At the time, she was sending her salary to her community of origin, where her sisters were hungry and lacked basic needs. This critical context was ignored when the decision was made to force her to leave her role—a position that not only supported the education of others but also helped sustain her community.

She doesn't want me to work in my profession. ... The last time she was telling me I should go for a sabbatical, and I said, yeah, but, uh, we have not discussed about this issue of sabbatical. How do you impose it on me? And you also know well that I have an apostolate which demands my presence all the time. If I wanted a sabbatical, I could have. We could have discussed ... she just wanted to interrupt ... my work and say, uh, first, uh, move away from that place and immediately you are going for a sabbatical. ... The reason, she said, is that I have been in it for a long time. I'm not. Uh, she didn't give me permission to work at the university. ... What do I do? And I have skills. I cannot just sit at home. We don't have food in the community. Even as I speak, there is no medication, there is nothing. ... So, I said, I have skills, and the university has offered me a job, which I'm doing well. They have not complained. Why can't I supplement the needs of the community through the little that I also contribute? I want to make [a] contribution as a member. ... I don't know how to describe this pain, because this scenario whereby you are given letters after letters and then ... your person goes to your place of work and goes to your employer, writes a letter, gives them and tells them to terminate your services at the university. To me, that was quite embarrassing. Although they didn't heed her request. And then calling you before a council. Uh, five of them. You are alone. And they are all determined to accuse you of disobedience. None of them asks you why you feel you cannot leave that work. What are your needs? What can we do to help you? There is nothing of the kind. I have been to them. All of them. They see it. They conspire just to insult one person. ... And it has been [an] actual insult because, like one would tell me you are stupid, you are obstinate, disobedient. (Tina)

Here, Tina highlights how the vow of obedience is treated as absolute, overriding all other dimensions of human dignity and practical concerns in religious life:

And according to the vow of obedience, you are supposed to obey your superior. You are not to question. You are supposed just to obey. Come and just sit here. Whether you, you sleep hungry or you eat, you don't work. It doesn't matter. As long as you have obeyed, you are going to be holy. ... It leaves me wondering, yeah, that is the justification. It is based on the vow of obedience. Nothing else. (Tina)

Tina challenges how the vow of obedience is being used and the impact it is having collectively:

We acknowledge that we need leaders. Yes, but let these leaders treat us as fellow human beings, as fellow sisters who are up to one goal of serving God, of evangelising people wherever we are. When we ... overstep our calling, surely we need a correction. But the issue of jealousy and envy, tribalism ... all that is diluting our calling. And I'm saying that something should be done. (Tina)

Tina's testimony illustrates how the misuse of obedience, motivated by power dynamics and what she describes as "jealousy", leads to a profound disregard for both individual and communal needs. Tina reports that the stress she has endured has impacted her health. Such experiences reveal how spiritual authority, when distorted, perpetuates trauma as a form of ongoing internal torment, affecting body, mind, and spirit. As with the other testimonies cited above, the harm is multifaceted: physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual, ultimately suffocating any possibility of hope or flourishing.

**A Culture of Overwork:** Misuse of the vow of obedience also supports a culture of overwork, particularly directed towards those with less power in the community. Susana describes the unceasing pressure to comply with all expectations, even when the expectations are in conflict with each other:

The other abuse is overwork. Being overworked, overworked. You are teaching. You are teaching from morning to ... from 8 to 2, from 8 to 5 p.m. After that, you are supposed to go and take children for work. Then you come late at night. And then you are told you are not attending community life. Yet the same, same person is the one overworking you the whole day. Evening prayer is supposed to be at six. At six you are still ... in the garden with the pupils. (Susana)

Community structures and constitutions serve to uphold a culture in which younger sisters are expected to serve and care for senior members of the community, regardless of their other responsibilities.

So, sisters, the congregation, they don't employ external workers ... postulants ... novices, temporary professed sisters are used for it. Some of the elderly sisters who can no longer help themselves, or those that are still very fit, or General Council members, each of them has a sister serving them. [It] is these sisters' apostolate [such as to] wash your pants. Everything for you has maybe a superior or

somebody who has a powerful position in the congregation. That is an apostolate for a sister based on the premise that sisters should not employ external worker. The irony of the whole stuff is some of these people that are highly placed in their place of work, they will go to work, come back, give them function to cook in the community, they will not cook. They leave it for the young sisters and say, oh, I'm very tired. I can't be doing this big work in the hospital or in my place of work and still come back to the community and do the cooking. Now the young sisters doing that stuff for these sisters suffer. The young sisters are the one[s] again being used to do these things. Employ external worker? No! Again, this thing [the practice of not having external workers] is in the Constitution, we cannot change it. Not in our time. This group of people that are saying we cannot change it, many of them are foundation members. ... And also, maybe having one powerful [ministerial] position or the other in the congregation. They are the people being served by these younger sisters and candidates. (Lara)

The unwillingness to consider alternative arrangements for community living that might support all members is noted by Lara, who is observing that those who benefit from this situation are those who hold the power to make changes that support the well-being of all in the community.

Summary: The misuse of the vow of obedience causes harm in multiple ways, as evidenced in the stories above. It is experienced as “dehumanising” and “barbaric,” and it inflicts various forms of harm on individual sisters as well as on religious communities. For some sisters, this leads to regret over the vocation they once felt deeply called to. Others experience profound spiritual distress, as described by one sister: “They put this consciousness in your mind that once you disobey, you are going to hell. You are this. You are that. You are not you. You are not a real religious” (Teresa).

Through the stories shared by participants, it becomes clear that the vow of obedience—rather than enabling the flourishing of lives—is being enacted in ways that degrade and inhibit the humanity of religious sisters. The consequence of obedience practised without respect for the personhood of the sister results in psychological and emotional harm, fostering a culture of fear: “These evaluations made me hide who I am. You can't be yourself. Everything is judged” (Monika). Many sisters shared how their physical health was disregarded and how they experienced the physical symptoms of stress due to the constant demands placed upon them. Ultimately, such blind obedience can cause spiritual harm, even leading to a loss of faith. One sister affirmed: “I started to feel I'm losing the taste for prayers. ... I lost my freedom. I lost my happiness. ... this thing I love, but I have no freedom to continue to live.” This misuse also has relational consequences. When practices of judgment and evaluation become frequent, sisters may feel disconnected from the community or unable to be authentic in their relationships, as Monika observed: “You end up hiding who you really are.”

## The Vow of Poverty

The qualitative interviews revealed systemic financial abuse experienced by members of Catholic female religious congregations. Key themes that emerged include: misuse of external funding, inequitable compensation, lack of pension and healthcare provisions, denial of basic needs, and non-payment for labour.

**Misuse of Funds:** Interviewees reported diversion of externally sourced project funds by ecclesiastical authorities. Martha recalled: “We wrote the project and gave it to her [an Irish sister]. She said she would support us ... the bishop had to sign. The bishop used the money ... to build his junior seminary, and he didn’t give us anything. That is evil.” (Martha). This narrative indicates both the vulnerability of women religious to clerical overreach and a lack of financial autonomy despite their labour and planning.

**Holding of Funds and Unequal Distribution:** Another recurring concern was the centralisation of finances in the hands of a few individuals who determined access based on favouritism or discretion: “They use their power as the custodians of the congregation’s resources to determine who they give and who they will not give. ... One person is earning; the rest are not earning” (Susana). In addition, some sisters were denied payroll inclusion altogether. In one example, Susana shares that she worked for a government school for an extended time without her name being submitted to payroll. The Headmistress had withheld the documents so that Susana was not able to be paid: “I bring it [documents] to the community, you take the documents and put them in your drawers. ... I worked for that school for two years without a salary. I worked for free that time ... she was supposed to make me [official] ... but she refused. She refused for me to be there.” (Susana)

**Lack of Pension and Healthcare Provision:** The absence of retirement and health care benefits emerged as a major form of financial neglect: “We don’t have a pension ... when we are sick ... your community should also help” (Martha). This lack of institutional support left elderly and ill sisters dependent on unpredictable charity. Martha also raised concerns about older sisters being transferred from Europe back to Africa, despite having lived overseas for decades. These transfers place a financial burden on poorer African communities, which are then expected to support them:

Because you are moving them in old age. We are shortening their life because you cut them away from their friends. We cut them away from things that they are familiar with. We cut them away from normal life, as it were, for them. And you cut them away from even their Social Security. (Martha)

**Denial of Basic Needs and Poor Living Conditions:** Many sisters shared experiences of deprivation: “We really had to till the soil for our upkeep ... we were in high lack of our basic needs.” (Frances) And they did not have their basic needs catered for. Frances stated, “They never made it a priority to follow the Constitution ... when a grown woman is given approximately 2.79 Euros to take care of her needs in a month” (Frances). Frances also shares a story of when she was sent to the United States of America to study and was denied funds to get appropriate clothing:

There was between 6 to 10 inches of snow in Omaha, Nebraska, in January, the January winter. And even the student life personnel who came to pick us were very, very surprised that we had only the habit. So, we were freezing in the morning. We called our superior and said, this is the situation. She told us that we are now in school. They are now students, so we should find a way to take care of ourselves (Frances)

**Labour Exploitation and Injustice in Compensation:** Sisters frequently described being overworked and underpaid by the bishop, even when working alongside well-compensated lay professionals: “They pay her [lay administrator] a huge amount and give the sisters peanuts” (Martha). Martha reiterated the unfair treatment at the workplace: “This doctor ... comes there twice a month. At the end of the month, they pay him a huge amount and still give sisters peanuts.” (Martha)

**Summary:** The findings reveal a troubling pattern of financial abuse within some religious congregations, marked by the misuse and withholding of funds, inequitable access to income, and systemic neglect of basic welfare. Sisters reported being denied financial autonomy despite initiating and managing projects, facing discriminatory allocation of communal resources, and being excluded from formal employment benefits like pensions and healthcare. Accounts of deprivation, poor living conditions, and exploitation in the form of unpaid or underpaid labour underscore a broader institutional failure to uphold justice, dignity, and the principles of communal care central to religious life. At a deeper level, these injustices reflect a distortion of the vow of poverty, intended as a commitment to shared simplicity and solidarity, into a tool of control and subjugation, where dependence replaces mutual responsibility and clerical authority overrides the communal ethos of the consecrated life.

**Sacralization of Obedience, Spiritual Abuse and Colonial Legacy in Religious Life:** Obedience in the tradition of religious life is ideally conceived as a loving and free response to God’s call, discerned in community and exercised through mutual respect and dialogue.<sup>36</sup> Vatican II reaffirmed this vision, emphasising the dignity and personal initiative of each religious and rejecting any notion of blind submission.<sup>37</sup> However, despite these affirmations, the theological language of obedience often remains entangled with imagery of Christ’s suffering, passion, and sacrifice. John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* explicitly links obedience with the death on the Cross: “by obedience, religious take part in the mystery of Christ, who was always obedient to the Father even to death on the Cross.”<sup>38</sup> This

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36 Cf. Caroline N. Mbonu, “Authority and Charism in the African Church,” in *Under the Palaver Tree: Doing African Ecclesiology in the Spirit of Vatican II—the Contribution by Elochukwu E. Uzukwu*, ed. Stan C. Ilo and Caroline N. Mbonu (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 147-159.

37 Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, §14.

38 Pope John Paul II, “*Vita Consecrata*: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World,” §14, March 25, 1996, [https://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/exhortations/apostolic\\_exhortations/vita-consecrata/19960325\\_hf\\_jp2\\_apost\\_exhortation\\_vita-consecrata\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/exhortations/apostolic_exhortations/vita-consecrata/19960325_hf_jp2_apost_exhortation_vita-consecrata_en.html)

connection between obedience, self-denial, and the cross is echoed across spiritual traditions. The monastic Rule of St. Benedict teaches that a religious should embrace patiently even hard or contrary commands, including injuries, as part of humble obedience.<sup>39</sup> The Carmelite mystics similarly connect obedience with self-denial and participation in the Cross; St. John of the Cross, in *Dark Night of the Soul*, describes obedience as the penance of reason and judgment, offered as a “sweet sacrifice unto God.”<sup>40</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola likewise characterises obedience as a holocaust in which the entire person is offered to God without reservation.<sup>41</sup> When obedience is closely aligned with the cross, it risks becoming a boundless submission. In this framework, to obey is to die to the self entirely.

Suffering is elevated as a spiritual ideal. De Paul, in her analysis of the Teresian tradition, demonstrates how for St. Teresa of Avila, St. Thérèse of the Infant Jesus and St. John of the Cross, suffering was considered a measure of spiritual love: “Love consists not in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved (Sayings 115).”<sup>42</sup> African sisters who participated in our workshops noted that they were educated through this vision and read works such as St. Therese of the Infant Jesus, Saint Clare of Assisi and *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas Kempis.

This idealised understanding of suffering is frequently detached from the concrete well-being of the person. In practice, this can become a theological justification for harmful practices—silencing dissent, neglecting pastoral care, and legitimising institutional control. It can also be used to justify extreme asceticism or rigorous self-denial, and to valorise detachment and endurance of hardship as inherently virtuous. Within such a framework, the call to imitate Christ’s self-emptying risks being interpreted as an absolute standard. This can lead to pressure on the individual, especially women, to subordinate physical, emotional, and spiritual integrity to an ideal of holiness. This emphasis on submission often obscures the very structures of authority and power that enable abuse. Although official Church documents stress the importance of freedom and conscience in the exercise of authority,<sup>43</sup> a persistent theological issue remains: the portrayal of superiors as direct “representatives of God.” Documents such as *Perfectae Caritatis*, The Code of Canon Law and *The Service of Authority and Obedi-*

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vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\_exhortations/documents/hf\_jp-ii\_exh\_25031996\_vita-consecrata.html.

39 Cf. Oswald Hunter Blair, M.A., ed. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (London and Edinburgh: Herder, 1907), 49.

40 St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (Newtown, CT: TAN Books, 2010).

41 Cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, “Ignatius on Obedience (1553),” March 26, 1553, accessed via EBSCOhost, [https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1553\\_ignatiusonobedience/?utm](https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1553_ignatiusonobedience/?utm).

42 Marie of the Cross de Pasu, *Carmelite Spirituality in the Teresian Tradition*, (Washington DC: ICS Publications 1997), 46.

43 Cf. Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution On the Church in the Modern World,” §26, December 7, 1965, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

*ence* reinforce this spiritualisation of authority, equating obedience to superiors with obedience to God. By framing authority in these theological terms—using language that equates hierarchical commands with divine will—the underlying power dynamics can be masked. When authority is perceived as divinely sanctioned, it suppresses co-responsibility, discourages genuine discernment, and fosters authoritarian practices.

No person can stand in the place of God for another. The reduction of obedience to unquestioning submission reflects a deeply patriarchal and hierarchical ecclesiology. In such a context, the vow of obedience is weaponised—not as a tool for communal seeking of God’s will—but as a mechanism for preserving institutional stability at the expense of the person’s flourishing. Women religious are subjected to models of authority that stifle their agency and reduce their vocation to a function of control rather than freedom. The right to human dignity and freedom of conscience is a cornerstone of Catholic social teaching.<sup>44</sup> However, the experiences shared by the sisters expose a culture where “blind obedience” is demanded, dissent is equated with sin, and superiors act as unquestionable authorities, even in matters that harm the physical and psychological health of their members.

Blind and spiritualised obedience becomes a powerful instrument of spiritual abuse, violating the conscience and undermining personal dignity. Practices such as public confession, intrusive evaluations, and punitive measures against sisters who assert their voices transform religious women from subjects of a vocation into mere objects of institutional control. As Teresa poignantly observed, these are “barbaric things” masquerading as acts of obedience. At its heart, spiritual abuse through obedience consists of the distortion of sacred teaching to exert domination. It reshapes the Gospel’s liberating message into a framework of fear and submission. As Teresa described, “The consciousness they put in your mind that once you disobey, you are going to hell” encapsulates a theology rooted not in love but in manipulation. This fear-based spirituality blocks authentic growth, as Meg insightfully noted: “When there is this fear, I realised that I’m not growing—even spiritually.”

In the specific context of Africa, these authoritarian dynamics are further compounded by the historical legacy of colonisation and the patriarchal models imposed on women’s religious life by missionary structures. The cultural transmission of “blind obedience” was not merely a spiritual formation but part of a broader system of colonial control. As one sister participant of a workshop poignantly reflected, “The missionaries came and taught us blind obedience. Then they left. They have changed—but we have not changed.” This testimony reveals how patterns of domination, once embedded in colonial and patriarchal systems, continue to shape religious life, perpetuating spiritual abuse under the guise of fidelity and tradition.

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44 Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), §139.

## Human Rights, Obedience and Poverty: A Critical Reflection

The findings of this research reveal that the evangelical vows of obedience and poverty, while intended as free and life-giving commitments, are frequently distorted in practice, becoming tools of coercion, silencing, and systemic abuse. This distortion is not merely a pastoral concern but a human rights issue that demands urgent theological and ecclesial reflection and action.

The testimonies of the sisters reveal how the vow of poverty is often manipulated in ways that violate fundamental human rights. Although the sisters, through their vow of poverty, chose to give their salary to the community for the common good, this decision was made with the implicit understanding that the community would, in turn, care for them. In practice, however, this care is often lacking. Their stories highlight infringements on several articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>45</sup> including: the right to life, freedom, and personal security (Article 3); the right not to be held in slavery or servitude, nor to enslave others (Article 4); and the right to work in just and favourable conditions, with the freedom to choose one's employment (Article 23). Furthermore, the testimonies expose violations of the right to receive a fair wage that ensures a dignified life and allows for the support of one's family, as well as the right to equal pay for equal work (Article 23). In some cases, the sisters do not receive a salary at all, thereby stripping them of the freedom to offer it as a voluntary act in line with their vow of poverty. Their accounts also reflect disregard for the right to reasonable working hours, rest, and regular paid holidays (Article 24).

In many cases, the vow of poverty, intended as a sign of solidarity with the poor and a prophetic witness to detachment from materialism, is frequently distorted into a mechanism of economic exploitation and deprivation of rights. The interviews highlight systemic financial abuse: misuse of external funds, unequal distribution of resources, denial of healthcare and pensions, and non-payment for labour.

When sisters are required to work without remuneration, denied access to basic necessities, or see their project funds diverted by clerical authorities, the vow of poverty is weaponised against them. The findings from this study unveil structural financial abuse that contradicts both the spiritual and canonical ideals of religious life in the Catholic Church. This contravenes not only Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers<sup>46</sup> but also international human rights standards.<sup>47</sup> Religious life, as defined in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Con-*

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45 Cf. United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," December 10, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

46 Cf. Pope John Paul II, "*Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*," §18, September 14, 1981, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html).

47 Cf. United Nations, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," December 16, 1966, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.

*secrata*<sup>48</sup> obliges religious institutes to provide their members with what is necessary for the fulfilment of their vocation, including appropriate compensation, healthcare, and retirement. The withholding of salaries and failure to advocate for sisters' rights within diocesan projects also violates principles of Catholic Social Teaching, particularly the preferential option for the poor and the right to just remuneration.<sup>49</sup> The testimonies given reveal how religious sisters are marginalised and coerced to live in unjust conditions. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasised the need to eradicate clericalism and promote transparency in church structures.<sup>50</sup>

This study reveals how sisters are subjected to financial exploitation, denied salaries, pensions, and basic subsistence, leaving them dependent and voiceless within the institution. Despite the Church's own calls for collaboration and mutual respect between bishops and religious, such as in *Mutuae Relationes*,<sup>51</sup> the narratives expose a hierarchical imbalance that enables clerical misuse of power. These injustices reflect broader systemic failures and constitute a form of structural violence,<sup>52</sup> highlighting deeply entrenched gendered power imbalances within ecclesial institutions.<sup>53</sup> This study urges ecclesiastical authorities and religious congregations to revisit their internal governance practices. Transparency in financial management, inclusion of women religious in decision-making, and adherence to canonically required provisions are essential steps toward justice. External audits, internal grievance mechanisms, and collaboration with lay professionals in finance and law could support reform.

**C**onclusion: A renewed, contextual vision of obedience would move beyond the traditional emphasis on submission to authority and Christ's suffering to engage more deeply with the cultural realities and spiritual values of diverse communities. In many African contexts, for instance, obedience could be reframed as a relational and communal practice rooted in solidarity, mutual accountability, and the well-being of the community, rather than as individual submission to hierarchical authority. Such a vision would emphasise discernment carried. A rethinking of evangelical vows desacralizing human authority,<sup>54</sup> should

48 Cf. Pope John Paul II, "*Vita Consecrata*," §14.

49 Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine*, §302

50 Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

51 Cf. Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes and Sacred Congregation for Bishops, "Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church," April 23, 1978, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsclife\\_doc\\_14051978\\_mutuae-relationes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_14051978_mutuae-relationes_en.html).

52 Cf. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-191, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>.

53 Cf. Catholic Women Speak Network, ed., *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015).

54 Cf. Rocio Figueroa and David Tombs, "Obeying God's Plan? The Spiritual Abuse of Nuns," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, CTEWC Book Series 3 (2023): 151, <https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.72062>.

emphasise relationality, mutual accountability, and synodality. Obedience should be discerned collaboratively, and poverty should express solidarity and justice, not dependency. In discerning it should also ask “for whose sake am I obeying, carrying forward the charism of the congregation or serving the superior’s wish of the superior?”

A rethinking of the vow of poverty must include consideration of how this is lived out in an already impoverished context. If the vow of poverty in a wealthy context means to live a simple life, how is the vow of poverty enacted in a different context? The Magisterial documents risk overlooking how poverty, in many African contexts, is a lived daily struggle rather than a chosen prophetic stance. A more authentic and enculturated approach would need to engage these realities, recognising that the vow of poverty might call not so much for symbolic gestures of renunciation, but for active participation in social transformation, economic justice, and the building of genuinely self-reliant communities.

We are challenged to return to the original intent of the vows. The vows are intended to embody a life of simplicity and service, reflecting the life and mission of Christ. It is imperative to rethink how this might be expressed within the different contexts women religious live and serve today.

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