



## Seeing His Innocence, I See My Innocence<sup>1</sup>

*Vendo Sua Inocência, Eu Vejo Minha Inocência*

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**Abstract:** This article presents findings from qualitative interviews (undertaken during 2019) with a small group (n = 5) of adult women survivors of sexual abuse from Argentina, France, Germany, Peru, and the Philippines. The women are all either nuns (n = 1) or former nuns (n = 4), who experienced abuse during their time in religious orders (n = 3), or when they were minors (n = 2). In advance of the interview, they were asked to read Tombs, 'Crucificação e abuso sexual' (2019). The interview then explored their responses to the naming of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse, with particular attention to (1) whether they had previously viewed their suffering in relation to Christ's suffering; (2) whether the reading in the article was new to them, and whether they found it persuasive; (3) what it might mean for them as survivors; and (4) what importance they saw it as having for the wider church. Most participants felt that Jesus' experience could have positive value for survivors, and they all believed it was important for the wider church. The innocence of Jesus was identified as an important counter to self-blame or victim-blaming by others. As one participant said, 'Seeing His innocence, I see innocence'.

**Keywords:** Sexual abuse; Nuns; Crucifixion.

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta descobertas de entrevistas qualitativas (realizadas em 2019) com um pequeno grupo (n = 5) de mulheres adultas sobreviventes de abuso sexual da Argentina, França, Alemanha, Peru e Filipinas. As mulheres são, em sua maioria, freiras (n = 1) ou ex-freiras (n = 4), que sofreram abusos durante o tempo em que estiveram em ordens religiosas (n = 3) ou quando eram menores de idade (n = 2). Antes da entrevista, foi solicitado que lessem o artigo de Tombs, 'Crucificação e abuso sexual' (2019). A entrevista explorou suas respostas à identificação de Jesus como vítima de abuso sexual, com atenção especial a: (1) se elas já haviam relacionado previamente seu sofrimento ao sofrimento de Cristo; (2) se a leitura do artigo era nova para elas e se a acharam convincente; (3) o que isso poderia significar para elas como sobreviventes; e (4) que importância viam nisso para a igreja em geral. A maioria das participantes sentiu que a experiência de Jesus poderia ter um valor positivo para os sobreviventes, e todas acreditaram que era importante para a igreja como um todo. A inocência de Jesus foi identificada como um importante contraponto à autoinculpação ou à culpabilização da vítima por parte de outros. Como disse uma participante: "Ao ver Sua inocência, vejo inocência".

**Palavras-chave:** Abuso sexual; Freiras; Crucificação.

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## Exploring responses to Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse

The article ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse’ (1999) drew on Latin American liberationist hermeneutics for a reading of biblical texts with attention to both past context and present context.<sup>4</sup> As a new reading of crucifixion, it focused on presenting textual and contextual evidence for recognizing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. It is not until its final pages that the theological and pastoral implications of this recognition are addressed.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the parable of judgement (Matt. 25:31–46), it affirms the Christological connection between the suffering of the naked Christ and the suffering of those who are tortured and abused. This connection might offer a liberating and healing approach to those who continue to struggle with the stigma and other consequences of sexual abuse.

This article focuses on how this pastoral response might be developed further, in response to survivor suggestions.<sup>6</sup> It offers findings from qualitative interviews undertaken during 2019 to explore responses to naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. The participants are five female survivors of sexual abuse, living in Argentina, France, Germany, Peru, and the Philippines. Four interviewees are former nuns, and the fifth is a current nun.<sup>7</sup> They are referred to here by the pseudonyms Dina (Germany), Franca (France), Lilian (the Philippines), Lucia (Argentina) and Maria (Peru). The participants discuss their responses with particular attention to the difference

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<sup>4</sup> TOMBS, David John. Crucificação e abuso sexual. *Estudos Teológicos*, São Leopoldo, v. 59, n. 1, p. 119-132, 2019. Disponível em: <http://revistas.est.edu.br/index.php/ET/article/view/338/284>. See also: ANJOS, Márvio dos. Corpo, cruz e abuso. *Folha de São Paulo*. 10 abr. 2022. Disponível em: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/04/jesus-sofreu-abuso-sexual-antes-de-ser-crucificado-defende-teologo.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> TOMBS, 2019, p. 130-131.

<sup>6</sup> In 2018 we had interviewed 8 male victims of sexual abuse linked to Sodalicio for a previous similar study; see: TOMBS, David John; ALVEAR, Rocío Figueroa. *Reconociendo a Jesús como víctima de abuso sexual: respuestas de sobrevivientes del Sodalicio en el Perú*. Dunedin: Centro de Teología y Asuntos Públicos; Universidad de Otago, 2019. Disponível em: <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/9222>. See also: TOMBS, David John; ALVEAR, Rocío Figueroa. *Escuchando a sobrevivientes masculinos de abuso sexual en la Iglesia: Voces de sobrevivientes de abusos del Sodalicio en el Perú*. Dunedin: Centro de Teología y Asuntos Públicos; Universidad de Otago, 2016. Disponível em: <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7053>.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, the term ‘nun’ is used for brevity for religious sisters and consecrated women who belong (or formerly belonged) to Roman Catholic orders, congregations, or new religious communities. Technically the term ‘nun’ refers to women belonging to enclosed orders, but we use it slightly more inclusively, extending it to all orders. The common denominator in this more inclusive sense is that all of them made the vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience within a religious community. Unless stated otherwise, we use the term nun for all five of the women.



that seeing Jesus in this way makes to them personally as a survivor, and the difference they believe it might make to the wider Church.

Of course, Jesus' experience of crucifixion should not only be seen in terms of sexual abuse or sexual violence. There was more to crucifixion than that. Recognizing sexually abusive elements in Roman crucifixions, and naming them properly for what they were, is not to limit the understanding of Jesus' crucifixion in any way. Rather, it is to ensure that sexual abuse as an historically important element is included in the overall understanding of the Passion.<sup>8</sup>

In 2019 the sexual abuse of nuns in the Church had attracted global attention, and we wanted to learn more about their experiences.<sup>9</sup> There can no longer be any doubt that a strong pastoral and theological response to sexual abuse and sexual violence in its many different forms is needed. If this response is to be adequate it will need to be courageous and honest. It must be willing to confront difficult issues, stigmas and taboos, and not fall back on platitudes or abstractions. The churches need a clear-sighted sense of the problem and an understanding of how its legacies continue to affect the lives of survivors long after the abuse itself.

The indirect impacts of abuse, as well as the often more obvious direct harms, need to also be considered. The indirect impacts include the victim-blaming and stigma. These are referred to as a 'secondary victimization'.<sup>10</sup> Many survivors report that they are left to carry these additional burdens with little help or support from the churches. In fact, in many cases, churches can reinforce the stigma and victim-blaming attitudes that add to the problems faced by survivors and contribute to isolation and abandonment.

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<sup>8</sup> HEATH, Elaine A. *We Were the Least of These*. Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011; GAFNEY, Wil. Crucifixion and Sexual Violence. *HuffPost*. 28 mar. 2013; TRAINOR, Michael. *The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse*. How the Gospel Passion Narrative Informs a Pastoral Approach. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2014; REAVES, Jayme R.; TOMBS, David. #MeToo Jesus: Naming Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse. *International Journal for Public Theology*, v. 13, n. 4, p. 387-412, 2019. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341588>.

<sup>9</sup> ASSOCIATED PRESS. Pope acknowledges scandal of priests sexually abusing nuns. *The Guardian*. 5 fev. 2019. Disponível em: [www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/05/pope-francis-acknowledges-scandal-of-priests-sexually-abusing-nuns](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/05/pope-francis-acknowledges-scandal-of-priests-sexually-abusing-nuns). See also: LEMBO, Makatamine. *Relations Pastorales Saines et Matures entre Femmes Consacrées et Prêtres*: Un Analyse Qualitative de cas d'abus de femmes consacrées par des prêtres. Rome: Gregorian Pontifical University, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> See: WILLIAMS, Joyce E.; HOLMES, Karen A. *The Second Assault*: Rape and Public Attitudes. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981; WILLIAMS, Joyce E. Secondary Victimization: Confronting Public Attitudes about Rape. *Victimology*, v. 9, p. 66-81, 1984.



We suggest that attention to the innocence of Jesus may challenge the victim-blaming that survivors often face in the wider Church. One of the most striking responses from participants was the significance of Jesus' innocence. In the words of Maria, “[...] the beautiful thing is that Jesus was innocent” because “Seeing his innocence, I see my innocence”. We had not anticipated this particular response, but it shows how survivors might find value in acknowledging Jesus as victim of sexual abuse in creative and even unexpected ways. For some survivors, an identification with Jesus' innocence can help to resist destructive social and psychological pressures to self-judgement or self-blame. For the wider Church, this recognition might offer insight into the prevalence of victim-blaming and negative judgements.<sup>11</sup> The interviews encourage the conviction that the acknowledgement of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse serve a positive role. However, identifying with the suffering of Jesus should not be seen as a simple or straightforward solution. It carries risks of misunderstanding and misappropriation and will need careful expression if it is to make a constructive contribution to the Church's response to sexual abuse.

## Interview findings

After receiving ethics approval, we conducted structured individual interviews with our five participants.<sup>12</sup> The five participants now range in age from 35 to 70 years old but the sexual abuse took place when the participants were young adults or minors. Three of them were abused as young adults during their religious life by priests, and the other two experienced child sexual abuse by relatives. The abuse incidents disclosed ranged from penetrative sexual abuse (four participants) to non-penetrative sexual touching (all participants). We are very grateful to all the participants for their willingness to be interviewed. They were generous in their readiness to reflect on our questions and to share their thoughts with us and with a wider audience.

Prior to the interview, the participants agreed to read about sexual abuse in the crucifixion of Jesus. The reading was an abridged version of the ‘Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse’ article, which had been shortened in 2019 for publication in the Brazilian theological journal *Estudos*

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<sup>11</sup> REAVES; TOMBS, 2019, p. 407–411.

<sup>12</sup> University of Otago Human Ethics Committee, Approval 13 September 2019, Reference 19–112. We are grateful to Dr Tess Patterson, Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Otago as our consultant on the project.



*Teológicos*.<sup>13</sup> The abridged version, titled ‘Crucifixion and Sexual Abuse’, was provided to the participants in English, French, German or Spanish. Participants were asked to prepare for their interview by reading this work, or alternatively by reading a two-page summary, which was provided alongside it.

Each individual interview generally lasted for about 40 minutes. Most were held over Skype but one of the interviews was written.<sup>14</sup> The interviews sought information on the impact of vocation and faith on participants’ response to sexual abuse in general, as well as their more specific responses to seeing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. However, for brevity, it is only the questions relating to Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse which are presented here. The questions on their responses to Jesus as victim were grouped under four headings:

1. Whether the participant had previously viewed their abuse in light of the suffering of Jesus.
2. Whether the reading on crucifixion and sexual abuse was new to them, and whether they felt it was persuasive.
3. The significance (if any) that understanding Jesus as a victim had for them.
4. Their views on the significance of this for the wider Church.

## **Previous identification with Jesus’ suffering**

This area of questions asked about any previous connection participants had made to the suffering of Jesus prior to their participation in our project. Only one participant, Franca, had made no connection between her own suffering and that of Jesus. She said:

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<sup>13</sup> TOMBS, 2019. The abridged version was written in English, then published in Portuguese, and then translated into Spanish, French and German to facilitate the interviews, and published under Creative Commons as: TOMBS, David. *Crucifixion and Sexual Abuse*. Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues; University of Otago, 2019. Disponível em: <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/9834> (English); Disponível em: <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/9843> (Spanish); Disponível em: <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/9846> (French); Disponível em: <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/9924> (German).

<sup>14</sup> The Skype interviews were recorded on a digital audio system. The transcriptions of the interviews were anonymized and the pseudonyms were assigned to maintain the confidentiality of the five participants. The interviews were then translated into English.



During the period of abuse, I made no connection between Jesus' sufferings and my own experiences. And when I started to free myself from my abusers, I went through a long period (15 years) of rejecting the mystery of the Incarnation and the person of Jesus, because I had been abused in Jesus' name.

The other four participants had each made some form of personal connection between their abuse and the suffering of Jesus, but they differed in how they saw this. For two of the participants (Maria and Lillian), the connection to the suffering of Jesus was positive and helpful, for one (Dina) it was mixed, and for one (Lucia) it was negative.

Maria had set her suffering alongside the suffering of Jesus. Her response shows the powerful effect that Jesus' innocence as a victim can have. His innocence had reinforced her own sense of innocence, and had helped her to resist feelings of shame and guilt:

One positive thing that helped me in the process of healing was the Cross of Christ. The idea of an innocent Jesus suffering for us helped me to understand that I was innocent. I felt guilt and shame. I felt powerless. Putting my experience alongside Jesus' experience helped me to assimilate it in my life.

For Lillian, although the image of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse did not provide an answer to the question of why she suffered, nonetheless the sense of Jesus being with her in suffering had brought her great comfort. Like Maria, she saw particular significance in his innocence:

I saw how Jesus was mistreated, being innocent, and what he suffered during his life. Jesus was whipped; they spat at him; they used words that were very abusive and abused him as a person and they insulted him; they humiliated him. Jesus is an innocent person.

I asked the question why me? Why has this happened to me? The answer that came to me was the picture of the crucifixion. God cries for me; God also suffers with me. For me this is a great consolation.

Dina's response was more mixed. She had identified the suffering of Jesus with her own suffering, but she did not find Jesus' response to be helpful. She gave her response as both 'Yes and No'. On the one hand, Jesus' suffering was very present in her community's spirituality. This made it easy to identify her own suffering with the suffering of Jesus. Yet on the other hand, there were differences which created difficulties. Jesus' suffering was seen as heroic, and he was seen as accepting it and suffering in silence. This suggested that Dina should also suffer in silence. She said: "The only feeling that I could allow was to bury it and not complain". Dina also struggled with Matthew 5:39 where Jesus calls on followers to turn the other cheek. While this made sense to her

as a response to a striking on the cheek, did this mean that Jesus expected you to allow someone to rape you again? She said:

He would never say that. So, it made me think: what is the difference between striking on the cheek and sexual abuse? Somehow, I think it is not right to be silent, but I couldn't find any encouragement from Jesus to help me to speak out and defend myself. At least I understood Jesus' suffering, and I also suffered, so in one sense he was close to me, yet his suffering was so different from mine. At the same time my identification with Jesus helped the abusers to keep me silent.

Lucia also identified a connection to the suffering of Jesus, but she did not see it as helpful, at least not at the time:

Each time during my time as a nun when I suffered something painful, or the abuse itself, I thought that Jesus suffered worse than me, and I had to offer my own suffering without complaining so much ... You couldn't complain because we asked God to suffer in this life and live in purgatory so it was good that these things were happening.

Both Lucia and Dina felt that if they suffered as Jesus suffered this meant that they therefore should not complain. They were expected to carry suffering in the same way as Jesus bore his cross. Rather than being helpful, Jesus' suffering worked to silence them as victims and suppress their cries for help.

## Response to the reading

The second area of questioning was their response to the reading, and how plausible they found the suggestion that Jesus was a victim of historical sexual abuse. Their answers to this question shared much in common. It was a new reading to most, with the exception of Franca who had come across it some months earlier. Furthermore, they all found it persuasive, and felt it allowed them to understand Jesus' suffering in a fuller way.

Lucia said: "I believe that it is persuasive [...] I never thought about it and it really touched me". In a similar way, Lilian said it was new and persuasive: "I think that the only type of abuse that I knew was the one I went through and when I thought about Jesus I just thought about the insults and the crucifixion. The idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is quite persuasive".

Maria also said that it was both new and persuasive, and explains: "Sincerely I felt like: 'it makes sense'. At an intellectual level I thought it makes sense because these things happen. Why didn't I think about





it before? When people are humiliated in a crucifixion or in a torture of that type, shame and sexual abuse happen”.

Dina also saw it as convincing. She also commented on the strangeness of nobody having thought about it before: “It is very clear that the stripping of a prisoner before execution was a humiliation and sexuality was involved. My first reaction is that it is a very interesting idea, it somehow makes sense and nobody has thought about it”.

The participant who had previously heard that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse was Franca. A few months before the interview she had heard the idea when listening to a lecture on the internet. Franca explained that in Matthew 27, when Jesus is handed over to the soldiers, it is said that they ‘mocked him’ (verse 29). ‘Mocked’ is the expression used in Judges 19, to refer to the rape of the concubine.

For Matthew, Jesus is delivered to the soldiers and they stripped him of his clothes, even if it is not explicitly stated, there is a kind of rape in the passion of Christ. ... When you throw a person, man or woman, in the middle of an unaccountable gang, who knows what could happen? I think that the passion of Christ echoes many stories of suffering.

For all the participants, the historical evidence and the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse made sense and was clearly persuasive. They did not see sexual abuse as bringing a forced or false external perspective on his experience. Rather, they saw it as helping to recognize and name Jesus’ experience for what it was. Maria registered her surprise that she had not thought of it before. Dina commented on how strange it is that it is not more widely recognized or discussed, and saw it as a result of a victim-blaming culture:

It is so strange that Jesus has not been considered a victim of sexual abuse: I think that it is because we have this whole victim-blaming culture and the idea that victims of sexual abuse have actually done something to provoke it. Picturing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse makes it entirely clear that a victim is innocent.

In terms of their emotional response to the article, Lucia and Franca reported that thinking of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse provoked strong emotions. Lucia said: “I felt the same emotion as when I watched movies about his passion: a feeling of powerlessness, a rage (*bronca*) that Jesus suffered like that”. Franca said: “Jesus lived through the sexual abuse of so many children, so many men, so many women, including those who claim to be his disciples. This is a great comfort for





me, a great consolation”. Dina spoke of her wish to know more: “I also see Jesus and the Gospels as an object of study and research”. Lilian described a shift in her feelings: “First, I had a feeling of resistance. I felt that Jesus’ abuse was different from mine. But then I considered that the feelings were the same: feeling humiliated and people staring at him”.

Maria spoke of her conflicted emotions. On the one hand, she felt it strengthened the bond between her own suffering and that of Christ, and says: “I identified more with Christ”. If Jesus suffered sexual abuse she felt he could better identify with this human experience. On the other hand, however, this was also upsetting. It created a conflict for Maria because she recognized it as a dehumanizing experience:

I didn’t want anybody living through an experience like that. I would not like him going through something like that because it is horrible [she cries]. The abuse deprives you of your own humanity and your own dignity. It is humiliating and it is horrible. Physically it is horrible. It is psychologically and spiritually very painful.

During the interviews Lucia, Maria, Franca, and Lilian had a strong empathy towards Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. They expressed compassionate concern for what had happened to him.<sup>15</sup> Lucia spoke of her rage that Jesus suffered in this way. Franca spoke of Jesus as present in the suffering of others, not just her own suffering: “Jesus lived through the sexual abuse of so many children, so many men, so many women, including those who claim to be his disciples”. Maria said she found it hard to relate to God’s power. By contrast, she felt a closer connection with the suffering of Christ: “But a Christ who has suffered, who has been humiliated makes me feel that He is more connected with me. We have lived the same things. He understands what I have gone through. And I understand a little bit of what he lived”.

Thinking of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse gave her new insight into his suffering and his humanity. “The abuse dehumanizes. Someone steals your humanity and the autonomy that you have over your own body, over yourself [...] Knowing this side of Christ’s suffering was a relief [...] Jesus didn’t give up just his divinity but his own humanity [...]”.

Maria said it was easier for her to have a relationship with Christ when she understands him this way.

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<sup>15</sup> The women were much more explicit in voicing concern for Jesus than the participants in the previous study. This difference may, however, be because the interview questions in the previous study did not focus in the same way on emotional response.



## Assessment of its value for participants

The third area of questioning was around whether participants felt the idea was helpful or unhelpful to them. Three participants (Franca, Lilian and Maria) said that recognizing this aspect of Jesus' experience was helpful for them. Franca explained the positive value she saw in it:

Yes, this thought is a help, a comfort, a source of consolation for me. This in no way devalues my own painful experience, quite the contrary [...]

Knowing that Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, has really been the bearer of all our sufferings and all our diseases, even in the intimate and almost unspeakable area of sexuality, becomes, in my view, a source of comfort for the victims of abuse — especially for those who have been abused by priests and religious people.

Franca also suggested that it “[...] could also, perhaps, help the victims who still suffer in silence, to speak. It can help them realize that they are not culpable”. Lilian also saw it as positive: “I suppose that when you know that someone has gone through the same pain that you had experienced it is a kind of strength that you gain, knowing that Jesus suffered. You have a reason to live. You have a reason to stand up”.

Maria said it helped her to see herself in a new way. At one level, she already knew her own innocence, but there are times when she is troubled by doubts and a temptation to self-blame: “Despite saying to myself ‘You are not guilty’, one part of me, in my innermost part, maintains my guilt and leads me to accuse myself, ‘You could have done something to avoid the abuse’”.

She found that reading the article offered her reassurance on this. She explains:

And then I have the experience and the knowledge that Jesus was innocent. That makes it easier to believe that I am innocent. It has been a beginning. Reading it has been like a relief. It is not just on a theoretical level. There is an emotional level that helps me to go into my heart. I love Jesus. I don't blame him. I don't say to him, ‘You had to do something. You could have avoided it’. Seeing his innocence, I see my innocence.

Although Maria saw it as helpful personally, she acknowledged that other survivors might not find it helpful. Some might not feel that Jesus experienced the same as they experienced, because the abuse was different for them. However, speaking for herself, Maria felt a strong connection:

I have been raped and my reaction is that I feel Jesus' solidarity and I feel solidarity for him, and it feels good. Spiritually, I feel that I know Jesus better, that I understand Jesus more. I feel that he can walk with me more



closely because he knows what I have gone through. Sincerely, I don't care to what extent he was abused because it is enough for me that he lived through some abuse and he can understand. That is how I feel. For someone who has suffered abuse it is a positive and deep way to interpret your own experience.

For Dina the answer was more mixed. She saw it as especially helpful for other nuns, seminarians, or other men that have been abused. And for people that have a strong faith and a strong connection with Jesus. However, when speaking about her own situation, Dina said that at an earlier time it would have helped her to resist guilt or blame, but she no longer struggles with this. "I think that the idea would have been very helpful for me back then. Now I feel that it makes no difference to me. I have realized that it was not my fault and whether or not Jesus was abused doesn't make a difference. It would have made a big difference back then".

Lucia did not see it as helpful, at least not at the present time. She also doubted that it would be helpful for the network of survivors of church abuse to which she belongs. She described the gap between their current faith outlook and what they once believed as "a huge abyss". In view of this, she said: "At this stage I don't think that anyone will be touched, or I don't think that this idea will help them in their process of healing". Instead, she suggests: "We need to re-read and re-interpret our own story".

The different answers to this question reflect the different ways that survivors respond to their experience and what they each find meaningful. To sum up, Franca, Lilian and Maria each said that the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse was helpful for them. Dina said that it would have been very helpful in the past but she has no need of it now. Lucia said she did not find it helpful, and nor did she see it as likely to be helpful to the survivors with whom she worked.

## Significance for the wider Church

The final set of questions was on the significance of this reading to others. The focus of this final area of questions was on whether the participants felt it was helpful to the wider church rather than to other survivors.<sup>16</sup> It is striking that all our participants indicated that viewing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse would be positive for the wider Church. Even Lucia, who did not find the

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<sup>16</sup> We did not want to ask our participants to speak for other survivors, as this would place an unreasonable burden upon them. However, in answer to the previous question about their own experience as survivors, some of them also commented on whether they saw it as helpful or unhelpful to other survivors. These answers were included in the previous section.

idea helpful for herself and doubted its relevance to the network of survivors she knew, said: “For the Church, of course. Because it can be a topic that usually is silenced. It would be like an alert [...] Imagine a prayer saying, ‘Lord, you who were manipulated in your own sexuality, protect us’ [...] I think it would be very helpful”.

Franca said: “It would be good if this idea would be more valued and published in theological education and exegetically”. She suggested that it might prompt a more compassionate response, and help to address misplaced blame.

And it could also, perhaps, convince the members of the hierarchy of the Church that the victims are not blameworthy. Perhaps this idea would also help combat the ever-present tendency of the hierarchy to bury all these abuses in silence? And it would help the ‘good Christian people’, shocked by these revelations likely to harm the image of the Church, to walk towards the truth that alone can liberate us. It might also be an incentive for Church members to take the suffering of victims seriously.

Maria suggested that recognizing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse might actually have even more value for the wider Church than it does for survivors:

I think it would be more useful for those who have not been victims. I think there is a culture within the Church and also throughout society which fails to recognize victims of sexual abuse as victims. I think that if the people of the Church identify Jesus as a victim of abuse, they would be more able to see Jesus in those who are victims and love us more [crying].

She described the additional harm to survivors which comes from the negative attitudes in the Church.

I see such horrible things. That lack of identification with the victims by clergy, priests and bishops is so painful. They identify more with the perpetrators. Many of the perpetrators have been priests and the priests are ‘other Christs’. But if you see Christ in this light, as a victim, it would be easier for them to feel solidarity with the victims, to be more understanding and be on their side.

Dina agreed that it could make a positive difference to the Church. However, she saw some risks in how it might be appropriated by Church leaders:

I do see a danger here. Yes, it could be good if the wider Church owned this idea. But, on the other hand, I see that if the Church leaders (who have been covering abuse for so long now) appropriate the concept that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse and preach about it, the danger is that they could use it as a way of further silencing the victims: for example, like saying Jesus was the perfect victim. Perhaps there is a risk that Church leaders could devalue survivors’ stories with the icon of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. That might happen.



To counter this risk, she suggested that survivors rather than the Church should take the lead in charting the way forward: “I would prefer if the individual survivors appropriate this image of a victim of sexual abuse first, they should own it and then take it to the Church”.

Lilian also agreed that it could help the Church, because “if the Church sees Jesus as a victim people would have sympathy for those who are victims”. However, like Dina, she warned that this also involved dangers and risks. Lilian stressed the need for great care when raising the idea with victims.

To sum up, the first area of questioning asked whether participants had made an identification with the suffering of Jesus at the time of the abuse, or in the aftermath. Four of the participants made some form of connection and one did not. For two of the participants the connection was helpful, for one it was mixed, and for one it was negative. The second area was whether the reading of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse was new to participants, how they saw the evidence, and how they responded to this reading. The idea was new to them, with one exception. The historical evidence appeared persuasive to all of the participants. It provoked a range of emotional response, including empathy for Jesus. The third area was the significance they saw in the idea for themselves as survivors, and whether it was helpful or unhelpful. Three of the participants saw the idea as helpful for them. One replied that it would have been very helpful to her when she was abused, but it made little difference now. One stated that it was not personally helpful to her and nor did she see it as likely to be helpful to the survivors with whom she worked. All of the participants said that it was significant for the Church and offered an opportunity of positive change, albeit with some risks and dangers.

## Discussion

The interviews offer survivor perspectives on how acknowledgement of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse might help the Church to develop its pastoral approach. It is not possible to discuss at length all of the issues that the participants address but focus on how acknowledging Jesus as innocent can help to address victim-blaming.

Lilian and Maria both indicated that the innocence of Jesus was important to them. It reaffirmed and reinforced their own innocence. Likewise, Dina said, “Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse makes it entirely clear that a victim is innocent”. Furthermore, Dina suggested that victim-



blaming may help to explain the widespread silence on Jesus' own experience. She seems to suggest that, in the conventional view, Jesus cannot be named because he cannot be blamed. The consequence of this is that Jesus' sexual abuse has gone unnamed and the narratives have been distorted. Dina's comment suggests there is much more at stake in Jesus' innocence than may first appear. Recognition or denial of Jesus as a victim is connected to deeply embedded cultural assumptions about blame, shame, guilt, innocence, purity, as well as masculinity, power, vulnerability and bodily integrity.<sup>17</sup> Acknowledgement of Jesus as victim of sexual abuse is likely to require a radical rethinking of attitudes rather than just a minor adjustment. This makes the naming of Jesus as a victim all the more important, especially for the wider Church.

A common reaction to the suggestion that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse is to assume that if this were true, then Jesus would inevitably be less worthy and less pure. The implication of this line of thinking is this would conflict with his status as a saviour. It is seen as offensive, even blasphemous, to speak of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. One of the critical conversations that the acknowledgement of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse should therefore open up is around widespread negative attitudes to survivors. These attitudes are close to the surface in many churches but are rarely named or critically examined. On the contrary, they are often denied or disowned if they are considered in the abstract. They therefore remain hidden most of the time. They can usually stay beneath the surface, but they readily emerge as a backlash that dismisses the claim that Jesus was sexually abused as self-evidently offensive.

The experience of Jesus can play a crucial role in exposing these dynamics. Resistance within the churches to seeing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse reflects the confusion that still exists within churches and within wider society on where blame should rest in relation to sexual abuse. A pressing priority for the Church as it seeks to affirm the irreducible dignity of all people.

The innocence of Jesus can thus strengthen survivors when they encounter negative and judgemental responses from others, or experience low self-esteem, or self-blame. Of course, the innocence of victims should be recognized on its own terms without need for anything more to be said. However, within the Church the experience of Jesus can further support this truth. Saying the innocence of Jesus can make a difference is not to suggest that the innocence of survivors can only

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<sup>17</sup> BROWNMILER, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975.



be recognized in light of the innocence of Jesus. The innocence of survivors is something that the Church should already fully embrace, and public statements are often made to this effect. Nonetheless, even though articulating the innocence of survivors should not be new or necessary, connecting the innocence of survivors to the innocence of Jesus can make the innocence of both more meaningful to some in the church. It also offers insight into how victim-blaming can undermine a survivor's sense of self even though the blame is obviously misplaced. A clear and uncontested statement of innocence can be an important support in reinforcing the truth.

## Conclusion

More work needs to be done on how Jesus' experience of abuse might best help survivors, but there are several directions suggested here. The participants all agreed that recognizing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse should be a concern for the whole Church and not just a concern for survivors. Furthermore, the participants warned against a number of risks and dangers that need to be avoided. In particular they warned against the superficial misappropriation of Jesus' experience to turn attention from, or undermine, the lived experience of abuse. Significantly, the innocence of Jesus might offer a resource to resist self-blame and confront victim-blaming by others. It might expose and challenge victim-blaming attitudes in the wider Church that continue to shape the lives of survivors many years after the abuse may have finished.

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