

Article

Vulnerance of Pastoral Care

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Abstract: Disproving assumptions to the contrary, this article clearly shows how and why adults can become victims of abuse in church contexts. It does this by focusing on the pastoral care context and the interdependent potential risk factors lying within. As previous studies suggest, this context is especially susceptible to perpetrating abuse. Approximately three-quarters of all cases of abuse occur or begin in the context of pastoral care or spiritual counseling. Often, theories of pastoral care do not address this danger and tend to idealize the practice of pastoral care. In contrast, it is necessary to recognize a specific power to victimize due to the theological and structural power differential in pastoral relationships. Therefore, this article proposes a complex understanding of “vulnerability” and “vulnerance” that accounts for the victimization potential inherent in all pastoral care settings and advocates a theory of pastoral care that is not only concerned with the individual but also incorporates reflections on structural and systemic power dynamics.

Keywords: sexual and spiritual violence; abuse of adults; clergy abuse; violence against women in church; pastoral care; vulnerability; vulnerance; professional sexual misconduct (PSM)

1. Introduction

According to the German MHG study¹ on the sexual abuse of minors “three quarters of all victims were in a clerical or a pastoral relationship with the accused” (Dreßing 2018, p. 7). If we broaden our view to first-person documents and the accounts from victims who are adults, this observation is confirmed: when clergy commit sexual abuse (initiation, grooming strategies, and concrete acts), it takes place within the context of pastoral care or pastoral counseling (see, e.g., Haslbeck et al. 2020; Fortune and Poling [1994] 2004; Byrne 2010). Sexual abuse and spiritual abuse go hand in hand—especially in the context of pastoral relationships. The “Meffan” report from the Boston Diocese states: “There are three allegations. They were all young women. The incidents began in the early or late high school years. The allegations include lovemaking, inviting her to undress, inviting her to his bedroom; touching and fondling, everything short of intercourse; bride of Christ, imagine Christ touching, kissing, having intercourse with her, hugging him around waist and kissing of genitals. All under guise of spiritual counseling” (Review Board of the Archdiocese of Boston 1993). To a large extent, the context of pastoral care is a place in which priests encounter adults and can involve them in the dynamics of abuse. This is where perpetrators and victims meet, where relationships of trust are established and where they are often later violated. “Often, it is a recurring pattern of misuse of the ministerial role” (Fortune and Poling [1994] 2004, p. 5). Thus, with respect to adult victims, it is particularly important to take a closer look at the specific aspects of pastoral relationships and the theories of pastoral care and how these situations can enable abuse to occur.

The first part of the article discusses a common understanding of pastoral care in Germany and casts doubt on whether the issue of abuse is sufficiently considered by this understanding. I then it shows why pastoral care theories remain deficient if they do not explicitly discuss the structural power to harm that lies within all pastoral care contexts. In the following section, to grasp these interdependent abuse potentials, the article introduces the term “vulnerance” as a readiness to use violence in connection with “vulnerabilities”. Finally, consequences for pastoral care are drawn. It must be seen more



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clearly that pastoral care in itself harbors the danger of harming help-seeking people. In the future, the awareness of “vulnerance” in pastoral care must play a central role in the theological-scholarly discourses, in the practical training of pastoral care workers, and also in the evaluation and processing of cases of abuse.

2. Theories of Pastoral Care in Relation to Sexual Abuse

The vast majority of all cases of abuse in the Church take place in the setting of pastoral care or spiritual counselling (see [Dreßing 2018](#), p. 7). This is a major reason why it is important to look not only at the perpetrators and the victims, but specifically at the setting of pastoral care.

2.1. Focus on Individual Actors

For centuries the theories of pastoral care were mainly focused on priests as individuals, on the Catholic side often within the framework of a universally conceived provision of pastoral care and the sacraments (see [Hoelzl 2017](#); [Lohausen 2018](#)). This centering on the clergy and universalizing of pastoral care were overturned in the 20th century when theories of pastoral care were founded upon contemporary social sciences. Today, pastoral care is oriented towards the person in need and is intended to offer help to people in crises of faith and life. Additionally, it is clear to all current concepts that not only theological considerations, but also sociological and psychological contexts as well as system theories must be taken into account (see [Karle 2020](#), p. 403). From a historical perspective, this is a progression in the humanization of pastoral care that can hardly be overestimated. In contrast, little has changed in the focus on the individual. The practical theological theories of pastoral care still focus in broad ecumenical agreement on the individuals involved; pastoral care is essentially, according to one of the handbooks on the subject, “person-centered” ([Burbach 2018](#)). Pastoral care is “encounter, interaction, designed time” ([Klessmann 2008](#), p. 15). It is about people accompanying people on the way to a more meaningful life. The guiding perspective is focused on individuals. Authoritative for the theology of pastoral care within German-speaking Roman Catholicism is the foundational work by Doris Nauer. According to Nauer, pastoral care is “a comprehensive care for the soul of a human being” ([Nauer 2014](#), p. 322). Within her concept of multidimensional pastoral care, she describes a complex competence profile for the pastor ([Nauer 2014](#), p. 316) extended by a small-scale profile of their pastoral role. A pastor has to be many things, including for example a spiritual role model, a representative of the church, a mystagogue who brings people deeper into the faith, a comforter, blessing, dispenser of the sacraments, an expert in meditation, a healer, crisis expert, liberator, helper, an expert in solidarity, and much more ([Nauer 2014](#), p. 317). Here, a rather clear positioning of the people involved is described: one person is in crisis, the other is the expert in crises situations; one needs comfort, the other gives comfort; one needs help, the other provides help, and so on. One could also say that on one side there is the needy, hurt, or vulnerable person, and on the other side there is the helpful, strong, individual in a professional position to provide pastoral care.

2.2. Ideals of Pastoral Care

We see that in most present publications an ideal of pastoral care is outlined as “attentive participation in the lives” ([Karle 2020](#), p. 405) of others, as “interested attention and accompaniment” ([Karle 2020](#), p. 405), being “close to people, tradition-oriented, and (...) at the cutting edge” ([Nauer 2014](#), p. 328). Pastoral care is “the mother tongue of the church” ([Bosse-Huber 2005](#), p. 11) and as “simple, elementary, approachable, and often associated with loving gestures, touches, and a warm tone of voice” ([Morgenthaler 2009](#), p. 297; with reference to [Bosse-Huber 2005](#)). From the theological ideals of pastoral care and sacraments, reference is made to a corresponding, almost romanticized practice (see, i.e., [Schneider and Patenge 2004](#)). If one wishes to illustrate or depict pastoral care, it is almost always symbolized by touching. For example: one person puts an arm around the

shoulder of another, one hand is enclosed within another's two hands—always people are physically close to each other. According to Doris Nauer “credible pastoral care aims to enable those who give pastoral care to think and/or say confidently and proudly, ‘It is something precious to be called to pastoral care’” (Nauer 2014, p. 322).

3. The Power to Victimize in Pastoral Care

Despite this ideal, practice is often different. Many adults, especially women, are victimized in pastoral care contexts by their pastors who have a spiritual responsibility for them. Already in 1984, a study provided “some data: 12.67% of clergy surveyed reported that they had had sexual intercourse with a church member” (Fortune and Poling [1994] 2004, p. 5) In 2008, Diana Garland conducted a national research project in the US on the abuse of adults by clergy (Garland 2009). Her study found “3.1% of adult women who attend religious service at least once a month have been the victims of clergy sexual misconduct since turning 18” (Garland 2009). Additionally, the US John Jay Report (Terry et al. 2011) reported that there were more incidents of sexual relationships between clergy and adult women than between a priest and a minor. To date, for the German speaking Catholic context from which I come, no studies or statistics that specifically pertain to Catholic clergy and adult women have been done—this is an important area for continued research. However, the stories of many victims correspond to the insights so far. One example: a woman with the pseudonym Lindsey reports that the priest supposedly “counseled” her empathetically over a long period of time before sexual acts occurred: “Never having had much personal contact with a pastor, I thought this was probably what a pastoral relationship was like. (...) At first our conversations ended with hugs, then with brief kisses that eventually turned in light petting that turned into heavy petting. (...) During the next two years we had occasional sexual intercourse” (Poling 1999, p. 104f). This is only one example of many stories told about sexual behaviors within pastoral relationships, which we can observe in all Christian denominations. Consider the Catholic Church: What does it mean for the theory of pastoral care that at least three quarters of all cases of abuse happen or are initiated in the context of pastoral counseling or sacramental settings? What happens when one looks at the subject of pastoral care with the perspective of those who have been affected and with the sensitivity of the abuse that has occurred?

3.1. The Topic of Abuse in Pastoral Care

In reading the numerous scholarly texts on, and application-oriented depictions of, pastoral care with the hermeneutics of experiences of violence and abuse, one thing stands out: the subject of violence and abuse is not prominent in the majority of publications. Often readers search in vain for the topic of abuse within the context of pastoral care in textbooks on the subject or on diocesan websites. There are only a few practical-theological publications in the German-speaking world which deal with the topic of abuse in pastoral care in its own chapter (e.g., Morgenthaler 2009, p. 372; with reference to Tschan 2005). Some texts mention the dangers, but only in passing. Abuse and violence do not seem to be a generally addressed topic, but are mainly discussed in publications that are already active in this specialized field, such as publications on trauma sensitive pastoral care. Andreas Stahl, a well-known expert in this field, writes: “Neither are church congregations or institutions and Christian families abuse-free places, nor are workers in pastoral care beyond the categories of victim and perpetrator. Pastoral care workers have been victims or perpetrators of violence in the social sphere and potentially will be so in the present and in the future” (Stahl 2021, p. 271). Barbara Haslbeck and Erika Kerstner, who have already done a lot of research on the topic of trauma and abuse, put the matter succinctly: “Pastoral counselings are not a power-free space” (Haslbeck and Kerstner 2016, p. 79). On the other hand, many books with a specific view on abuse lack an analytical view of pastoral care, even if the system as a whole is considered (e.g., Keenan 2013). In other pastoral theology books, the question of power plays a role, albeit a minor one. Doris Nauer points to a position of authority and power that arises in pastoral care: pastors and especially clergy

have, according to Nauer, an “authority and fullness of power” in pastoral care in several respects (Nauer 2014, p. 415), and they can and must behave accordingly and learn to deal with it so as not to harm anyone. In evangelical churches, the issue has been analyzed before. Marie M. Fortune and James N. Poling write: “The role of minister/counselor carries with it authority and power and the attendant responsibility to use this power to benefit the people who call upon the minister/counselor for service.” (Fortune and Poling [1994] 2004, p. 7).

Although this provides constructive direction, it simultaneously may fall short. For in doing so, it could suggest the idea that one can act in pastoral care—if one would only approach it reflectively enough—without assuming a dangerous position of authority and power; the responsibility for this seems to lie with the individual. One could also say that this is a consequence of the fact the theory of pastoral care focuses primarily on the personal competencies of the individual pastoral care workers. According to Nauer, pastoral caregivers need, among other things, relational competence, because “destructive relationship building (...) [can] in extreme cases (...) lead to sexual abuse” (Nauer 2014, p. 298). Unlike Fortune and Poling, in many European theology publications the position of authority and power of pastoral caregivers is often understood in a negative and damaging way (e.g., Bieler 2017; Burbach 2018; Nauer 2014). Canon law also points in this direction, through its provision that clergy and other church people may “violate the sixth commandment by abusing authority” (c. 1395 § 3 CIC).

3.2. Inevitable Structural Power Differential

Power in pastoral relationships may be interpreted as something that can or should be avoided (on the complex contexts around power cf. Anter 2012; Laverack 2019). However, again, this may be a misleading reading. For the asymmetries of power are inscribed in pastoral relationships before any personal action occurs: formally, due to the professional setting between the participants, and materially, because of the fact that already in the common term, which goes back to Gregory the Great, *cura et regimen animarum* contains the concept of ‘leadership’ or ‘rule’ and thus power differential, authority, and not least a capacity to injure, are always present. In other words, pastoral care does not work without an asymmetry of power and authority. The pastor cannot avoid this power differential, nor does it per se lead to abuse. However, it may lead to abuse if it is either denied, made taboo, or exploited for the pastoral caregiver’s own desire for power or pleasure.

The statement in almost all manuals and textbooks, that pastoral care ideally proceeds in a linear way and accompanies people on their path in a progressively healing manner, that “pastoral care [takes place] with people on equal footing” (Nauer 2014, p. 181), is anthropologically, ethically, and historically welcome, and yet from a structural perspective it is somewhat naïve. For such an idealized and strictly person-centered understanding of pastoral care is in danger of overtaxing those involved and becoming undercomplex with respect to relationships involving subtle dynamics of power and underlying patterns of dependency. Every pastoral caregiver has the power to harm others within pastoral care relationships. It is a complex relationship in which pastoral caregivers should know how to act professionally and justifiably, as parts of their professional activity. The asymmetries lie on several levels and cannot be exclusively related back to the respective persons, because every pastoral care relationship contains structural power asymmetries that should be openly reflected.

3.3. Structural Power to Harm, Using Confession as an Example

I would like to illustrate this with the example of the sacrament of confession (see Karl and Weber 2021). Ulrich Engel writes: “in the theological justification of the sacrament of confession as well as in the associated pastoral practices, possible abuse of power is structurally or systematically inherent” (Engel 2021, p. 95). He points out that because of these potentials for abuse, “a critical analysis of the system-immanent dependency relationships and a systematic-theological reassessment of the institute of confession [is] needed.

Thus, it is absolutely necessary that the structural dangers inherent in the sacrament be honestly named" (Engel 2021, p. 126). It is important to note that the manifold experiences of abuse cannot simply be explained by the misdeeds of individuals, neither is "clergy sexual abuse (...) just an issue of confused sexuality" (Fortune and Poling [1994] 2004, p. 39). Sexual abuse in church is always associated with forms of structural violence (Galtung 1988; Hallay-Witte 2020) and pastoral relationships exhibit structural dangers. These include theological concepts such as the "*sacra potestas*" as the priest's authority to absolve, or asymmetries as expressed in language games such as "confessor father" and "confessing child/penitent" or "shepherd" and "flock" (Engel 2021, p. 129; cf. Werner 2019, p. 166f.). Male priests are still the gatekeepers of these sacramental resources. From an evangelical church context James N. Poling asks: "What situations are more dangerous for women than pastoral counseling, pastoral care, spiritual direction, and ministry supervision?" (Fortune and Poling [1994] 2004, p. 58).

Another structural aspect with an inherent high power asymmetry lies in the concrete place of a confessional or a conversation room, which may become secret, unobserved and inaccessible crime scenes. "Locations as power factors [are] important because they make it possible to take hold of people and enable disciplinary subjugations" (Sander 2021, p. 120). Hans-Joachim Sander therefore warns against a "thoughtless naiveté" in dealing with the scenes of sexual abuse, such as confession rooms or sacristies (Sander 2021, p. 120f.). Here, the perpetrators are the "lords of the house," here they are in charge, the place is not suspected of becoming the site of a crime due to its sacred function and to the "presumption of security" inherent in the overall setting. The abuse is a kind of "home field advantage" for many perpetrators. This phenomenon is also described by the victims: "The actions of a priest were not questioned, so he could get away with anything", so Cornelia Berra, who had been abused by a pastor for years (pseudonym; in: Haslbeck et al. 2020, p. 51). Under these circumstances, it is clear that a concrete, often intimate conversational situation between two (professionally, ministerially, theologically, psychologically, etc.) unequal persons can never generate a relationship "on an equal footing". These obvious power differentials prevent true and free consent.

The complex and intertwined asymmetries, the mutual interdependencies between psychological dynamics, "theological constructs, ecclesial practices, and systemic logics" (Sautermeister 2021, p. 73) are structural dangers. These are present in other pastoral activities, analogous to confession, such as retreats, one-on-one meetings, counseling sessions, etc.

4. Vulnerance

Thus, there is an inescapable, structural danger within pastoral care which, however, has hardly been discussed in the theories of pastoral care or within the research on abuse. When we talk about abuse in pastoral care, we have to include the structural as well as the individual active and passive components of injuring and being injured. In order to gain a better grasp of these components in the following, a term introduced into the theological discourse on vulnerability by Hildegund Keul will be helpful: "*Vulneranz*". While "vulnerability" means a possible injury that may or may not happen and that can possibly be averted, "vulnerance" means the special readiness to use violence in connection with vulnerabilities (Keul 2020a, 2020b, 2021a); see www.vulnerabilitätsdiskurs.de; accessed on 15 March 2022). The term "vulnerance" is a neologism in German and actually comes from the field of political science (see Münkler and Wassermann 2012, p. 77). Following Hildegund Keul, I propose using the English translation "vulnerance" (Keul 2021b). This needs to be discussed, especially regarding sexual and spiritual abuse within settings of pastoral care, in relation to a reflected concept of vulnerability.

4.1. Vulnerance and Vulnerability

One reason structural dangers have not been accounted for within the research on abuse to date could be due to an understanding of vulnerability and abuse that focuses

on the victims and ignores other factors, such as the vulnerability of the situation. The concept of “vulnerability” has been the defining factor characterizing potential victims; and as such it plays an important role in processing and preventing abuse. Worldwide and in various Christian denominations, concepts of protection and prevention measures in cases of sexual abuse in the church refer to “children and vulnerable adults”, for example in Australia ([Anglican Communion Office 2017](#)), Ireland ([Cumberlege Commission 2007](#)), and Germany ([Rahmenordnung–Prävention 2019](#)). The Vatican guidelines currently in force also explicitly mention “vulnerable persons”, regardless of age, as potential victims of sexual abuse and within the scope of the relevant norms ([Supreme Pontiff Francis 2019](#), cf. *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* Art. 1 §1 a; § 2 b). The church’s regulations clarify that certain people are vulnerable because of their age and therefore in need of protection, so that any sexual contact with them is prohibited. It is true that minors need special protection because of their vulnerability. Children and adolescents are more vulnerable, that is why they are always and everywhere covered by regulations, simply on account of their age. Accordingly, prevention often starts with the potential victims, for example, by attempting to make them strong and resistant to attempted abuse.

For adult victims, however, the situation is somewhat different. The central category under which adults are placed as victims is that of “vulnerability”. Adults must be “in need of protection and assistance” to fall within the legally described category of abuse (e.g., [Ordnung 2019](#)). However, what is meant by being “in need of protection and assistance” is not uniformly regulated ([Heyder and Leimgruber 2020](#), pp. 118–21).

In the case of minors, it is clear they are vulnerable and therefore need to be protected; in the case of adults, however, there are only a few cases in which a pre-existing “need for protection”/“vulnerability” can be established without any problems, for example, in the case of an intellectual disability. Often it is complicated, for example, when adults are traumatized by previous experiences of abuse. We know of many cases in which perpetrators integrate this previous trauma of the victim within their actions and exploit it for their own advantage or pleasure: “. . . actually, what happened was that he used the first trauma by my brother like a ‘nose ring’ by which he dragged me behind him,” as Edith Schwarzländer describes (pseudonym, in [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 171). Another affected woman with the pseudonym Et Al writes retrospectively about how a priest exploited her psychological instability during pastoral care: “Following my father’s death I was confused, and I turned to Patrick for counsel. Looking back, I see that that’s when he began to exploit my vulnerability” ([Poling 1999](#), p. 25). However, should church proceedings be initiated, this specific vulnerability and “need for protection” according to the sense of the regulations for adults can hardly be proven. So, what about the cases where adults, who do not clearly fall under the “need for protection and assistance” provision narrowly defined in the regulations at the time of the crime, become victims of spiritual and sexual abuse in the Church (see [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#))? According to the current state of the church regulations, they are not considered vulnerable *de lege*, thus they are not covered by the regulations. What happened to them would not be ‘abuse’ *de lege*. It therefore falls short of the mark since the corresponding regulations and pronouncements usually focus on the vulnerability of victims and mention adults in the same breath as children and adolescents as “vulnerable adults”.

A key is to look at the contexts in which the abuse occurred and a correlated understanding of the categories of “vulnerability” and “vulnerance”. As stated earlier, vulnerability as the possible injury that may or may not happen expresses a more passive component. It refers to the vulnerability of individuals, groups, or systems. “Vulnerance” refers to the active ability to wound. Vulnerance concerns the personal-existential (confessor, pastor), but also the institutional, systemic level (church, institution, religious community, family” ([Karl 2021](#), p. 172). Vulnerability and vulnerance are not mutually exclusive polarities but are in a complex and dynamic interdependent relationship.

The German MHG study reveals that the vulnerability of those affected is met to a frightening degree by the perpetrators’ enormous power to inflict injury. It mentions,

for instance, forms of clericalism in a closed, perpetrator-friendly system as dangerous factors (cf. [Dreßing 2018](#)). Furthermore, the study notes that a pastoral situation which favors perpetrators is one with “maximum authority and power” with simultaneously “minimal external control ([Dreßing 2018](#), p. 265). It is, therefore, necessary to broaden the view beyond those individuals involved to include the contexts in which the acts occur. Recent debates increasingly point to the ambiguous situation of pastoral caregivers, who exhibit vulnerability and vulnerability in equal measure: “As a pastor (...) one is not per se harmless and as a pastor (...) one is also not invulnerable” ([Sautermeister 2021](#), p. 92). Nor is it simply the case that the individuals being counseled in pastoral care are generally particularly vulnerable, always weak and “quickly become victims of violence” ([Keul 2021a](#), p. 62): vulnerability is far more complex and can by no means be attributed unilaterally to one of the individuals involved. It becomes clear relatively quickly that the predominant juxtaposition in pastoral care of the vulnerable and needy person being counseled and the reliable, strong pastoral caregiver falls short, as does the focus in the regulations for prevention and regulations related to abuse on the vulnerability of the victims. In both instances, the thinking is too categorical and thus not appropriate to the complexity. As Hildegund Keul notes, the “opposition of vulnerability, weakness, insecurity, passivity on the one hand and security, reliability, resilience, strength on the other hand” ([Keul 2021a](#), p. 64) should be overcome. The ability to be harmed and the ability to harm, vulnerability and vulnerability are not only complex in individual terms, but also in situational-systemic terms.

4.2. A Concept of Vulnerability in a Broader Sense

Here, among others, Judith Butler’s reflections develop this further. Butler, too, does not think of vulnerability and agency as opposites, but brings them together: “We are never simply vulnerable, but always vulnerable to a situation (...) a social structure, something upon which we rely and in relation to which we are exposed. (...) To be dependent implies vulnerability. (...) If that is so, we are not talking here about my vulnerability or yours, but rather a feature of the relation that binds us to one another and to the larger structures and institutions . . . ” ([Butler 2020](#), p. 46). In her view, vulnerability is not a subjective state, but should be considered as a “feature of our shared or interdependent lives” ([Butler 2020](#), p. 46). Judith Butler does not understand vulnerability as something that is added to a person’s constitution after the fact, as if there were a pre-existing untouched integrity. Instead, for Butler vulnerability is a basic component of human existence. Vulnerability is “experienced and lived in a unique and specific way for each person” ([Pistol 2016](#), p. 241), but this also means that it is distributed unequally.

This is of particular importance for pastoral care (see, e.g., [Seibert 2022](#), p. 340). The complexity of vulnerabilities, with their individual and institutional aspects and interdependencies, must absolutely be included in pastoral care. The vulnerability of the persons involved is not simply a characteristic that attaches to someone and is independent of the particular situation in which one finds oneself and the other persons with whom one is dealing. It is not a quality that can be examined after the fact to qualify the sexual act as abusive or not. This would make it too easy and disregard the structural potential for violence.

In the case of pastoral care and its forms of social interaction, the power to harm which facilitates certain forms of spiritual and sexual violence for pastoral caregivers becomes evident. The reflections on the structural vulnerability of sacramental pastoral and pastoral care settings integrate them theologically and institutionally into the discourse and processing of abuse; and it leads to overcoming the simplistic juxtaposition of vulnerable victim on the one hand and violent (individual) perpetrator on the other (cf. [Hallay-Witte 2020](#), 77ff.).

Abuse is not a criminal phenomenon within an otherwise per se “good,” healing, nonviolent pastoral context. However, rather, this context is ambivalent, ambiguous, infused with power and dependencies, and therefore potentially violent. When we talk about the systematic background of abuse related crimes, this is a factor that should

not be underestimated. There is no such thing as an “innocent” pastoral situation, no pastoral relationship takes place “on equal footing”. In other words, it is not simply a matter of identifying the vulnerability of the persons involved and then “protecting” them (paternalistically). As necessary as the protection of particularly vulnerable people is—in terms of pastoral care it is too short-sighted. In my opinion, the mistake lies in separating the situation from the people involved or in seeing the people involved independently of the situation, as if it were in a vacuum.

4.3. Subsequent Vulnerabilization

The particular problem becomes clear again when one looks at a specific aspect of the concept of “vulnerable adults”: that of subsequent vulnerabilization. It is clear that not all adult victims of abuse within the church were from the outset “vulnerable persons” in the narrow sense of the church’s regulations when they encountered the perpetrator; they were not a “person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist the offence” (Supreme Pontiff Francis 2019, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* Art. 1 § 2 b). Often, it is only because of the special relationship with the offender that they are placed in a heightened vulnerable state, usually in the context of pastoral relationships. The cynical thing about this is that it is only because of the abuse that they have been traumatized and psychologically or physically impacted to such an extent that they eventually—even after the actual crime—fall under the narrow definition of “needing protection.” This is one of the specific problems of the existing regulations: If victims do not fall under the narrow bounds of the regulations (“Ordnungen”) as a “person in need of protection,” their case is not recognized as abuse and the perpetrator is not punished—and yet the acts are often a traumatic event for the victims resulting in disorders related to the regulation of stress as well as corresponding long-term consequences (Tschan 2004, p. 182). This leads to the fact that they do not enter the circumstances of the crime as “psychologically and physically impaired” and that the crime is therefore not recognized as abuse, but that they exit as “psychologically and physically impaired” and therefore qualify as one “in need of protection.” While the act does not meet the required conditions (“in need of protection and assistance”) under which it would be prosecuted and punished as abuse, it does produce those conditions. There is another reason why, on the one hand, it is essential to think through the concept of vulnerability of adult victims and, on the other hand, to better define pastoral care. In pastoral care relationships, there are complex power and dependency relationships that need to be considered in both personal and systemic terms. It is imperative to include this complexity within pastoral care contexts and in the theory of pastoral care. It pertains to the roles of the participating parties as well as the power for both individuals and structures to harm (=vulnerance), which is inherent in all pastoral care relationships. For it is not only particularly vulnerable persons who can get caught up in the dangerous maelstrom of abusive relationships and therefore in need of protection, and it is also not only the sexual abuse of these particularly vulnerable individuals that needs to be punished. Due to the vulnerance of pastoral care relationships, a boundary must be drawn here prior to the initiation of the (professional) pastoral care situation, which offers a reliable security for those accompanied by pastoral care.

4.4. Acknowledging Vulnerance in Pastoral Relationships

The recognition of the setting of pastoral care as an independent risk factor can be found in a text by the German Bishops’ Conference, which was already mentioned above—it is a text, where one might not expect it at first glance: in the “Ordnung für den Umgang mit sexuellem Missbrauch Minderjähriger und schutz- oder hilfebedürftiger Erwachsener durch Kleriker und sonstige Beschäftigte im kirchlichen Dienst” (“Regulation for Dealing with Sexual Abuse of Minors and Adults in Need of Protection or Assistance by Clergy and Other Employees in the Church Service” of 18 November 2019). It conceives of the abuse of the particular vulnerability of individual groups of people, similar to Pope Francis’

forementioned Apostolic Exhortation “Vos Estis Lux Mundi.” Let us take a closer look at the German order: In the case of minors, vulnerability is indisputable; in the case of adults, it is defined separately, namely as a need for protection or assistance in accordance with the sense of the German Criminal Code (see § 225 Abs. 1 StGB).

The “need for protection or help” is thus a vulnerability covered by criminal law, but the German order adds to this, with a view to the systemic vulnerability of the setting: “Furthermore, this includes persons who are subject to a special relationship of power and/or dependency. Such a special relationship of power and/or dependence may also exist or arise in the context of pastoral care” (Ordnung 2019, Nr. 3). In other words, the order mentions—almost in passing—the vulnerability of pastoral care relationships. However, it seems as if the order stops halfway thereafter and does not draw any consequences from the statement of vulnerability, because (a) it does not explain what it means by “the special power and/or dependency relationship,” (b) it does not define when a person is “subject to” it, (c) because of the “can” formulation, it does not clarify when which criteria give rise to a “special power and/or dependency relationship” in a pastoral care context (Heyder and Leimgruber 2020, p. 210). In short, while the order acknowledges systemic vulnerability in pastoral care, it does not go so far as to formulate it as an unambiguous and legally effective factor with regard to acts of abuse, but ultimately subordinates it again to the guiding perspective of individually vulnerable victims (which, incidentally, leads to great difficulties in the concrete application of the legal order). Following Marie Keenan, we could diagnose this problem as “organized irresponsibility” (Keenan 2013, p. 154).

5. Consequences for Pastoral Care

Now, what does this mean for a theory and praxis of pastoral care, which is sensitive to this interdependent and structural potential for violence? Apart from the fact that further and deeper research is needed, I would like to briefly formulate some consequences (see Leimgruber 2022).

5.1. Change of Setting

One step for concrete practical actions is to consider to what extent the setting, which in itself is already imbued with vulnerability, can be changed. Parallel to other contexts, for example, therapeutic contexts, the following can also apply here: if a situation is endangering, preventive measures must be taken to change the framing conditions of the situation. This includes, for example, modifying the intimacy and secrecy of inaccessible potential crime scenes, whose vulnerability is especially evident in two-way conversations such as confession (Leimgruber 2022). In quite a few communities, for example, architectural modifications have been made to minimize the potential for danger in one-on-one conversations.

5.2. A Complex Understanding of Vulnerability by All Participants

What is clear is that the “complexity and ambiguity of vulnerability” (Gilson 2021, p. 103) based on interdependencies should also be discussed in the theory of pastoral care. “The realities of experiences and discourses of vulnerability are complex. Our concept of vulnerability should be as well. (...) a simplified use of the concept is a misuse. (...) theories, that maintain that vulnerability calls for ethical response must also be political, critically attuned to existing power dynamics and their histories. Such critical analysis, however, entails at once avowing vulnerability as an ineradicable shared condition and analysing how it materializes in conditions of inequality, violence, and neglect” (Gilson 2021, p. 104).

In pastoral care, it would be an important step to abstract from the polar balance of power between strong and weak, between helping and being helped, and to recognize pastoral care as a space in which vulnerability plays a role as an “indelible common condition” (Gilson 2021, p. 104) and at the same time is dealt with professionally. Pastoral care and other forms of counseling or human leadership is basically ambivalent in the inherent tension between mechanisms of trust, closeness, and distancing (see Seibert 2022,

p. 351). Katharina Karl uses the image of “showing scars” for this: “The image of the pastor must free itself from the claim of invulnerability. (...) It is liberating (...) to know about limits and to be able to articulate them. (...) In order to avoid vulnereance, vulnerability must be taken seriously and must be perceived” (Karl 2021, p. 177). She demands that one must learn to deal professionally with their own scars and from there come to a new understanding of authority. Only in this way, she says, is it possible to formulate an understanding of pastoral care “that responds to basic components that are susceptible to abuse” (Karl 2021, p. 178).

5.3. Professional Treatment of Experiences of Violence and Trauma

However, it is not only a matter of preventing harm, but also of noticing that people request pastoral care who have already experienced violence or are traumatized. In light of the data, pastoral workers have to reckon with the fact that people with experiences of abuse are present throughout the church—for example in their congregations, the liturgies, the associations, etc. Frequently, those affected by abuse tell of new injuries including retraumatization, due to the insensitivity of their pastoral care workers. Thus, there is an urgent need for a higher demand of competence on the part of pastoral care workers, including trauma competence and sensitivity to violence. To recognize the differentiations and—as pastoral caregivers—to integrate them existentially, requires a high degree of consolidated spirituality and professionalism. This raises the question of the quality of pastoral care and the qualification of pastoral care workers, also with the aim of ensuring quality standards (see Tschan 2004, p. 184). Here, there exists a monumental task to train pastoral care workers, where it is simply not enough to talk about the occurrence of Professional Sexual Misconduct (PSM) in pastoral care. There needs to be an intensive and ongoing examination of the vulnereance of pastoral care and the position of chaplains within the systemic potential for violence. It also requires competencies among chaplains for dealing with traumatized persons (e.g., Stahl 2021; Kerstner et al. 2016).

5.4. Sexual Abuse in Pastoral Care as Professional Sexual Misconduct (PSM)

Every pastoral care relationship implies that those involved are at risk simply because of institutional vulnereance. I argue that the setting in which pastoral care takes place should be recognized as a third player, as a power factor in its own right. This would systematically embed the responsibility of the acting individuals in the inevitable and always present asymmetrical pastoral care relationship.

In this sense, a revision of the prevention guidelines and legal provisions is needed. A renewed revised text must clearly define that a pastoral relationship generally contains an imbalance of power and that this cannot be avoided or even resolved by the pastor’s behavior, no matter how competent it might be. However, there can and must be a transparent and responsible way of dealing with it. This would mean that there can be no consensual sexual contact in the pastoral context *à priori*, not even among adults. The concept of a vulnerability focus in the processing of abuse should be modified. Abuse victims should not have to prove that they were “in need of protection and help”. Samuel Fernández writes: “The disciple opens his or her conscience to a master who has an ecclesiastical support and in ‘the face of sacred power, instinctive resistance gives way’ [s. R. Blázquez Pérez]. Therefore, vulnerability is not to be seen as a deficiency of the disciple, but a necessary condition of discipleship, which always implies an asymmetrical relationship. Actually, the assumption that the victims may have been abused because of their psychological deficiencies is rejected by scientific research. Hence, adult victims should not be labelled as ‘vulnerable adults.’” Fernández demands, “the responsibility of the Church as guarantor of the trustworthiness of her representatives” (Fernández 2021, p. 568).

Sexual abuse in pastoral care relationships should fall under the umbrella of Professional Sexual Misconduct (PSM) (Tschan 2004, p. 181). A sexual relationship is abusive even if there is no visible violence, and the act appears to be consensual. The testimonials of many adult victims, especially women, show that they simply did not consent, even if they

did not say “no” out loud, even if it was supposedly nonviolent (see [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#)). Yet, it goes further: within pastoral ministry, professional standards for pastoral care are needed—for reasons of safety for both parties. This means that sexual relationships within the context of pastoral care are a violation of the duty of pastoral care which accompanies professionalism and should be treated as an instance of PSM. Even if an individual who is being cared for within a pastoral relationship initiates a sexual encounter, the pastoral professional must set clear boundaries—for PSM in the context of pastoral care, it is irrelevant who initiates the sexual encounter ([Tschan 2004](#), p. 181). Pastoral care relationships are inherently vulnerable, and pastoral care workers as professionally acting, professionally trained, and professionally supervised agents must have the prerequisites to correctly carry out the tasks assigned to them. Although it is not possible to elaborate here, it would be worthwhile to analyze the guidelines of different Christian denominations in different countries. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, professional guidelines were established as early as 1987. These state, among other things: “Pastors and pastoral counselors are always responsible for emotional, spiritual, and physical protection of persons who come to them for help or over whom they have any kind of authority. Breach of this protective relationship is improper and/or unethical” ([Fortune 1989](#), p. 136f.). It is significant that such rules have not been generally accepted and enforced in the Roman Catholic Church to this day. Two positive examples: (a) In the US, the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. (National Catholic) developed a so called “Virtus Model Code of Pastoral Conduct for Priests, Deacons, Pastoral Ministers, Administrators, Employees, and Volunteers (Code of Pastoral Conduct)” ([Virtus 2010](#)), which could be adopted by dioceses if they so choose (see [Byrne 2010](#), p. 78). These “Pastoral Standards” also focus on the care of adults in certain pastoral situations as follows: “1.4. Pastoral Counselors and Spiritual Directors must never engage in sexual intimacies with the persons they counsel. This includes consensual and nonconsensual contact, forced physical contact, and inappropriate sexual comments. (...) 1.6 Pastoral Counselors and Spiritual Directors assume the full burden of responsibility for establishing and maintaining clear, appropriate boundaries in all counseling and counseling-related relationships. 1.7 Physical contact of any kind (i.e., touching, hugging, holding) between Pastoral Counselors or Spiritual Directors and the persons they counsel can be misconstrued and should be avoided.” It is noteworthy that the “Pastoral Standards” do not speak of “vulnerable adults”, but of “parishioners”: “4.2 Staff and volunteers who provide pastoral counseling or spiritual direction services must avoid developing inappropriately intimate relationships with minors, other staff, or parishioners. Staff and volunteers must behave in a professional manner at all times. 4.3 No clergy, staff, or volunteer may exploit another person for sexual purposes” ([Virtus 2010](#)).

(b) One of the few documents from the Roman Catholic Church in Europe that has clear rules referring to the “self-definition” of pastoral care workers comes from Switzerland in 2002. The Swiss Bishops’ Conference ([Schweizer Bischofskonferenz 2002](#)) points out the “pastoral dependence” (5) and warns against “unprofessional care” (6). It is clear: “He [the pastor] alone bears the responsibility for this. (...) Even if the request for a sexual relationship comes from the other person, this is not a legitimation for entering into such an encounter (...) because this makes the pastoral task impossible and disregards it” (6). Here, a pastoral professional ethos is at play with clear consequences, and it does not consider adults who are affected by abuse exclusively on the basis of vulnerability. “Even in the case of supposed or expressed consent by the victim [to participate in sexual acts with the pastor; U. L.], the requirements needed to qualify as sexual exploitation or harassment are met” (4).

Even if a policy will not solve everything, such clear regulations are needed today for all areas of pastoral care, in all dioceses worldwide. They would not only bring security for those involved in contexts of pastoral care, especially adults ([Byrne 2010](#), p. 79), they would be a legal remedy for victims of abuse, to which they could reliably refer. By making such changes to their own regulations, church authorities could live up to their oft-stated assurances that they are doing all they can to resolve abuse and prevent future acts. More

to the point, I would say that they have specific duties as guarantors with respect to those who are accompanied/counseled. With the German Bishops' letter "Pastoral Care is the Heart of the Church", published in March 2022, a first step has also been taken for Germany (cf. [Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2022](#)). It remains to be seen how it will be implemented in practice and in training of pastoral care workers, both lay and clergy.

6. Conclusions

If vulnereance and vulnerability were taken up as key categories ([Karl 2021](#)) in their complex interrelatedness as relevant in pastoral care, the attitude and role of pastoral care workers would also be modified. This would also have urgently needed consequences for the training and continuing education of pastoral workers, especially priests, and the respective concepts of prevention. Moreover, a comprehensible and verifiable quality of assurance of pastoral care would be desirable—by the way, a genuine task for bishops. Vulnerability has to be thought of as an aspect in the larger structure of pastoral relations and church structures, in which vulnereance is inevitable. The task for praxis in this context is how people and situations that are marked by vulnerability and vulnereance are professionally related in a pastoral manner.

In theological discourse as well as in practical pastoral fields, reflection on the power dynamics and the potential for abuse in pastoral care settings is needed, both in formal and material terms. It is an institutional, ecclesial, and theologically relevant phenomenon (see [Wirth et al. 2022](#)). Pastoral care is the care for human and creaturely life; it realizes the foundational pastoral mission of the church to be with and alongside people, under the condition of strengthening, comforting, liberating, and healing. Many of the people to whom the worst happened in the context of pastoral care later experienced offers of pastoral care as places of healing and reconciliation. The difference was that the persons affected experienced God as a liberating and healing resource, the sacraments as effective signs of this healing, and the pastoral care workers, by whom the persons affected were cared for in a healing manner, knew about their own limitations, their vulnerabilities and the vulnereance of pastoral care situations. They did not abuse them for their own advantage, for their own gain of pleasure, or for the exploitation of the relationship of power and dependence. According to Andreas Stahl, pastoral care is an "action that seeks to support the shaping and mastery of life on the basis of the Christian faith" ([Stahl 2021](#), p. 266). To do this, it is necessary to face one's own vulnereance and the vulnereance of social/pastoral contexts in which one finds oneself. This is one of the basic prerequisites for pastoral care to live up to its liberating dimension and for abuse by adults in pastoral care to be effectively prevented or sanctioned.

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¹ The so called MHG study (see [Dreßing 2018](#); [Dressing et al. 2021](#)) explores the extent of sexual abuse of minors by members of the Catholic Church in Germany. It was the first comprehensive study to examine this extent in a European country.

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