

Sexual Abuse and Violence affecting a Person's Faith Life: Need for Spiritual Integration and Pastoral Accompaniment

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1.1 Introduction

Faith communities can play a key role in helping to prevent, raise awareness about sexual abuse and violence (SAV) and help persons whose faith is affected by the same so as to integrate them back through Pastoral Accompaniment (PA). We know that the faithful are not immune to the effects of SAV. Therefore, faith communities are accountable for the violences and abuses. We also know that some survivors go to their faith communities and religious leaders for support and healing specially for a spiritual integration. Spiritual Integration is possible when there is proper PA which is the journeying of the Church with her unconditional acceptance to integrate the survivors spiritually into faith. Spiritual integration through PA is the need of the hour as the signs of SAV are heartbreaking. We will deal with an effective and powerful PA that will underline strategies for spiritual integration.

1.2 Graces of Hope

Spiritual integration and PA enter into realm of Graces of Hope (GOH). By "graces of hope" we mean: in the context of SAV consequences which are serious and enduring, there are sexually abused persons who return back to the faith communities. Through PA, the victims are helped to understand the meaning of faith, forgiveness, sacrifice and salvation. Thus, trauma is transformed into a symbolic religious narrative that shape their sense of identity founded on the anchor of faith. They are able to restructure core beliefs and to manage their current relationships with God, others and themselves. They describe regaining their faith and spiritual well-being in ways that suggest a form of posttraumatic spiritual growth. In this way, the victims become GOH while the faith communities that help them also become GOH. Thus, the victims become in turn helpers for many victims of SAV and the faith communities become safe abode of hope for any victim.

1.3 Methodology

The need for spiritual integration and PA has a six-stage methodology:

- 1) **Perception:** we perceive the problems respecting the victims as the criterion of judgement.
- 2) **Analysis and interpretation:** We go to the root causes of SAV, which stray the victims from their faith.
- 3) **Critical correlation:** Reinstating the victims as *imago Dei* as SAV involves pain and suffering.
- 4) **Pastoral project:** The victims are helped to make a project of spiritual integration into the faith.
- 5) **Implementation:** Pastoral project has to be carried out with success rate of spiritual integration.
- 6) **Verification:** Implementation is followed by the certainty that project has taken place.

This pastoral methodology passes through: pastoral diagnosis, pastoral discernment, pastoral accompaniment, pastoral prudence, pastoral praxis, with concrete forms of spiritual integration: 1) celebration and proclamation, 2) service, 3) communion, and 4) witnessing.

1.4 Pastoral Accompaniment as Remedy

PA is the certainty of the proximity of God through faith communities in alterity (intersubjectivity) to the persons whose faith is affected. This is a process wherein two subjectivities are in healing relationship: one in need, the other in deed; one in sharing, the

other in caring; one 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, one is vulnerable, the other is defensible. The most important element of PA is: the victim and the helper are human persons; both enter into a therapeutic relationship with a therapeutic alliance which involves a trust in the beneficence of the helper.

PA is oriented towards the person in need and is intended to offer help to people in crises of faith; it is essentially “person-centred.” It is “encounter, interaction, designed time” for spiritual integration. It is “a comprehensive care for the soul of a human being.” It creates pastoral caregivers to be a role model, a representative of the Church, a mystagogue, a comforter, a blessing, a dispenser, an expert in proximity, a healer in healing, an expert for crisis, a liberator, a helper, an expert in solidarity.

PA is outlined as removing the sandals of the care-giver and wearing the sandals of the care-receiver (God asking Moses); it is throwing away of ill-treatment and maltreatment of the victims (Moses throwing away the staff); it is going near to the person violated and abandoned (good Samaritan taking steps to go near); it is an attentive, interested and accompanying participation in the lives of others; it is being “close to people, faith-oriented, and at the cutting edge.”

PA is “the mother tongue of the Church” with 2 tasks: *mater et magistra* (compassionate as mother and defending as father). PA is “approachable, accommodating, and associating with loving gestures, touches, warm tone of voice that cries out for mercy and justice.” PC is God’s entry into victim’s life as *go’el* (relation builder); it is Jesus’ accompanying a second mile (nearness builder); it is Holy Spirit’s hovering over the victim (bridge builder).

1.5 Perception

SAV is a form of violence, dehumanization, domination and control, carried out by physical, emotional, social, economic, cultural, spiritual, political acts that use sex and sexuality as tools of violence and oppression. SAV includes such behaviours as sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation as well as demeaning comment and jokes based on one’s vulnerability. SAV leads to the violation of bodily integrity, ethics of mutuality, psycho-spiritual-sexual integrity. SAV as a whole is the violation of God incarnate in humans.

1.5.1 SAV Continuum

SAV has a continuum that results in the death of faith, whereby the victim experiences the absence of God.

Sexual Abuse and Violence Continuum	
Attitudes and beliefs	• Victims are less valuable, controlled, have to be polite and to be blamed
Invasions of space	• Jokes/catcalls, harassment, obscene phone calls, looks/leers
Unwanted sexual touch	• Molestation, sexual assault
Unwanted physical touch	• Grabbing/touching, brushing against body
Sexism	• Victims are portrayed as sexual objects in the media
Sexual mutilation	• Cutting, burning
Rape	• Forced oral, anal, or vaginal penetration
Death	• Rape, suicide

1.5.2 Some Statistics

- Reported rape cases in India rose from 24,206 in 2011 to 34,661 in 2015 – an increase of over 10,000. There were 32,033 reported rape cases in 2019, with 33,356 in 2018.
- Women under poverty, in rural areas, uneducated, divorced or deserted, and women in SC and ST face SAV (3,486 SC cases of rape, and 1,110 ST cases of rape in 2019).
- The most reliable source, NFHS, states 8.5 percent of women report being victims to SAV at least once in their lifetime. SAV occurs early in a woman's life (from ages 15-19).
- Worldwide, evidence suggests only 1% of victims of SAV report the crime to the police. Though 1% is equal to 8.5%, this modest estimate affects an estimated 27.5 million women.
- Eastern regions in India tend to have the highest incidence of SAV (25%). Among married women, SAV is most commonly perpetrated by the current husband. But among the unmarried, offenses are made by relatives. 95.5% of offenders were known by the women victims.

1.5.3 Manifestations of SAV

SAV is reflection of inequality, abuse of vulnerability, disrespect of dignity. Its arena is:

- **Violence against women in the family** is done by husbands, in-laws and other family members. Women living in patriarchal settings are prone to violence. Violence is also linked to dowry payments, honour crimes and customary practices like daughter aversion and son preference.
- **Violence against women in the community** indicate early and/or forced marriages, domestic violence, violence towards Dalit, Adivasi, SC/ST, violence of women from religious minorities, domestic workers, women with disabilities, women in same-sex and transgender, sex workers, and widows.
- **Violence against women, condoned or perpetrated by the State** is directed to women living in militarized regions who undergo mass rape, acts of enforced disappearance, acts of torture and ill-treatment, restrictions of freedoms of movement, association and peaceful assembly.
- **Violence in the transnational sphere** is directed towards women refugees and asylum seekers. Access to livelihoods is a challenge in urban or semi-urban areas. Language barriers often impede their ability to gain access to healthcare, education and justice. Trafficking of women and girls is widespread.
- **Violence against children** involves child sexual abuse (CS) with a shocking 28.9% of children. A devastating 92,105 calls were being reported during the covid-lockdown with 90% of cases occurred in the family. CSA forces or entices children to take part in sexual activities and child sexual exploitation.

1.6 Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis and interpretation address many impacts of SAV.

1.6.1 General and Particular Impacts of SAV

General impacts: 1) emotional and psychological, 2) distorted self-esteem and self-image, 3) difficulties in intimacy and relationships, 4) physical health, 5) risk of re-victimisation, 6) substance abuse, 7) disordered eating, 8) educational and occupational challenges, criminal behaviour, 9) parenting difficulties, 10) social isolation. **Particular impacts:** 1) disabling victims to form and maintain loving relationships, 2) causing difficulties in forming trusting relationships, 3) damaging relationships with their parents or siblings, 4) damaging their ability to be safe parents or making them feel dangerous to their own children.

1.6.2 Effect on Faith

When considering the effects of SAV, the victims may react by leaving the Church and abandoning faith in God. It affects victims' image of God disrupts their relationship with God, difficulties in praying and considering leaving their faith communities.

The victims commonly report having feelings of disillusionment and alienation, feeling abandoned or punished by a god are also highlighted. Studies show that this is particularly likely when the perpetrator is someone who represents God. A victim and survivor reports: "I think

how much harm it is done to my faith. I also cannot go into Church because I have lost all my faith; I don't even know whether I believe in a god."

Some victims continue to practise their spiritual beliefs to ensure that their children grow up in faith. Others try to use their faith as a way of dealing with the sexual abuse they suffered but can find it challenging and be left feeling disillusioned. I do go to Church and I am asking for the power of religion for help and believe me it is a painstakingly slow process for healing.

Some are unable to come out of the effects of SAV because Bible seems to justify SAV: Some examples are: Dinah (Genesis 34), Tamar (2 Samuel 13), the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11), Vashti (Esther 1), Susannah (Daniel 13).

Christian texts also condone male violence against women and scriptural passages were interpreted to confirm male dominance over women: Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the Church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Either by its silence or its instruction, the Church has often communicated that husbands' efforts to control their wives are justified because women are to be subject in all things to men. They are permitted to discipline their wives and children for the "good of the family."

It is said that we encourage sex role differences which accentuate masculine aggression and feminine passivity. We tend to blame the victim or blame God instead of holding the offender responsible. Until we begin to address these attitudes and practices in our society, we will not see a decrease in SAV.

1.6.3 Symptoms and Spiritual Concerns of Trauma

Symptoms		Concerns		
Psychological		Physical	Social	Spiritual
Helplessness	Afraid	Crying	Fear of discovery	<i>Existence of evil within the Church</i>
Shock	Powerlessness	Poor sleep	Fear of not being believed	<i>Giving up their faith</i>
Overwhelmed	Disappointment	Poor appetite	Loss of reputation	<i>Questioning the strength of their faith</i>
Confusion	Frustration	Tiredness	Fear of being expelled	<i>Doubting their own innocence</i>
Anxiety	Vulnerability	Mental pressure	Threat to their bodily integrity	<i>Questioning on their body as evil</i>
Poor concentration	Feeling trapped	Loss of control of intimacy	Misunderstanding of the abuse	<i>Feeling that God is absent</i>
Shame	Guilt	Protecting themselves/others from abusers	Growth gets stagnant through suffering	<i>Finding no meaning in vicarious suffering of Christ</i>
Self-doubt	Distress	Critical views on abusers in general	Receiving sacraments from abusers	<i>Sacraments are received because of proving oneself to be alright</i>
More aware of human nature and sexuality	Difficulty to forgive their abusers	Protecting their sexuality	Sexuality is misunderstood	<i>Sex is something very bad, so is the sexuality</i>

1.7 Critical Correlation

Where religion and spirituality are seen as something bad for the victims of SAV, the victims are pastorally accompanied to use spirituality as means to integrate into the life of faith.

1.7.1 Pastoral Presence

To bring back a victim whose faith is affected by SAV, the *presence* of religious communities is a must because Christianity is never a solution to the problems but it is a certainty of God's *presence* through the healing pastoral community. Such a *presence* will help the victims:

- To frame moral and ethical framework and to understand faith-crisis;
- To have a wide range of perspectives, ages, and life experiences;
- To use daily living and interactions for their faith life;
- To have a vision for a culture of respect that gives full-stop to sexual violence;
- To form a framework for social justice;
- To have positive change and difference in victim's life;
- To become leader on social issues to end sexual violence;
- To establish partnership for advocacy and networking;
- To be strengthened in coping strategies for healing and reconciliation.

1.7.2 Positive outlook on Human Person

Human person philosophically is an "incarnate spirit" with goodness in him/her. "Incarnate spirit" means: 1) spirit is in the body, 2) spirit animates the body, 3) spirit expresses itself through body. So, whatever is expressed through the body is good because spirit is good. So, human person has received a spirituality that is good and works for the good of the person.

Human person anthropologically is "imago Dei" with beauty in him/her. "Imago Dei" means: 1) human person participates in the beauty of God, 2) he/she abides by the same beauty, 3) he/she communicates the same to the other. Therefore, human person is never considered to be bad and should never be used or misused or abused or overused.

Human person ontologically is an "ontogenesis" with truthfulness in him/her. "Ontogenesis" means: 1) he/she is in continuity with God's image on him/her, 2) he/she in gradual line with God's purpose for him/her, 3) he/she is in coordination with the fulfilment of God's will for him/her. Therefore, human person is an absolute truth of inherent dignity. He/she cannot be manipulated.

So, spirituality is based on human person as *incarnate spirit* as good, as *imago Dei* as beautiful, and as *ontogenetic* as truthful. Human person's spirituality is both vertical and horizontal: vertically he/she relates to God who is the source of dignity and horizontally he/she relates with others who defend dignity. In this sense, spirituality defends the ethical principle: *human person is never a means but an end with the purpose God wills for him/her.*

So, when human person is abused, spirituality should never be considered as something hindering but it is associated with regaining the goodness, beauty and truthfulness. As per the logic of Jesus, spirituality has to be seen as something foundational as rock on which his/her dignity is built so that whatever happens should never shake him/her of his dignity. In this way, the victim works out for healing from loneliness, anger, depression and crisis of faith.

1.7.3 Revisiting the Spirituality

In the context of running away from their faith, for some spirituality are commonly regarded as important coping strategies; it may contribute to greater resilience, attribution of meaning and guidance and providing a spiritual support network.

Jesus teaches: *the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* Since victimization is never God's will, every victim has to be helped to receive fullness of life. Jesus came *to proclaim release to the captives.* He told the story of the Good Samaritan to emphasize our responsibility to stop and care for the victim.

Bible teaches all human beings are created with a spark of the divine: *Then God created the human being in God's image; in the image of the divine, God created it. Male and female God created them.* Not only is human life precious but every individual is significant before God. This teaches us whoever destroys one life is regarded as if he/she has destroyed a whole world and whoever saves one life is as if he/she has saved an entire world.

A person who perpetrates SAV utterly disregards the divine spark in another human being, and treats another human being as means. SAV destroys lives; it diminishes God's presence in our world, and it is a sin.

Scripture speaks about both male and female as creation in God's image. God said: it is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him. So, God cast a deep sleep upon man; and while he slept, God took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And God fashioned the rib that God had taken from man into a woman; and God brought her to the man.

In this text, there is great wisdom. And it is our inheritance. It teaches us of the awesomeness of creation of God's abundant love for humanity – female and male – and of the possibility of liberation. Accordingly, Christian support groups have grown to integrate the victims spiritually through materials targeted to help them to come back to their faith.

1.7.4 Connectedness as Positive Effect of Spirituality

- **Connectedness to God:** a close personal relationship with God may contribute to a sense of belonging, hope, optimism, sense of purpose, and meaning. These factors are related to greater self-esteem, life satisfaction, less depression, and less anxiety.
- **Connectedness to others:** spirituality can connect people to a community of believers, thereby promoting increased social support, social approval, social sense as well as social sanction for risky behaviour. Being connected to others improves resilience, sense of agency, total health and well-being.
- **Connectedness to community:** spirituality is important buffers against the negative impacts of SAV when victims feel part of healing community,
- **Connectedness to religious services:** spirituality enables victims to use religious services to experience graces. By these services, they can regain their strength, courage, meaning for their faith so as to have personal relationship with God who can calm down waves of suffering with healing.

1.7.5 Spirituality for Spiritual Transformation in 8 Stages

Stage 1	Shock and Distress	Existence of evil within the Church: feeling overwhelmed and perplexed; psychological and physical distress
Stage 2	Self-Doubt	Doubting their innocence - Feelings of shame and guilt
Stage 3	Anger and Mistrust	Distress at receiving the sacraments from the priest who abused them; anger at having their first sexual experience in such a traumatic way; distrust in priests and maintaining boundaries
Stage 4	Withdrawal and Meditation	Crying and praying - Holding firmly to their religion vocation; not rebelling against God, trusting him and accepting his will
Stage 5	Secrecy or Disclosure	Fear of not being believed thus jeopardizing their contemplative lives; defending the truth of their accusations
Stage 6	Community Acceptance	Receiving comfort and support from the community; relief at being believed and understood
Stage 7	Spiritual Integration	Transformation of the abuse into a spiritual narrative
Stage 8	Posttraumatic Growth	Forgiveness of their abusers - becoming more aware of human nature

1.7.6 Faith-Coping

Faith-coping is among the most frequent coping strategies in times of adversity and is associated with positive outcomes. For the victims,

- faith comprises a substantial part of their global meaning system, informing how they understand, react to and cope with suffering;
- faith allows the victims to understand a comprehension of the abuse and influences in them the resolution of the trauma, posttraumatic adjustment and long-term recovery;
- in the light of faith, reflecting in depth about a traumatic event tends to promote a search for new purpose and meaning in one's life;
- because of faith, the victims strive to understand the trauma and its meaning;
- faith helps to make sense of threatening and distressing situations, modifying the apparent meaning of a traumatic event by providing more benign interpretations, assisting in finding positive aspects and promoting perceptions of growth;
- even for those who hold more negative views of God, faith poses a greater test as experienced by the Syrophenician woman in the Gospel.

Faith that is tested and recognized by God (Jesus) can transform spiritual discontent – involving anger, doubting, and rebelling against God's will – into spiritual joy – involving calmness, believing and reconciling with God's will.

1.7.7 Spiritual Narrative: Expression of the Experience

Bible is the narration of the creative act of God from chaos to order, of the liberative act of God from slavery to freedom, of the salvific act of God in Jesus from death to eternal life. Likewise, spiritual narration is sharing of the experience of the victim from chaos to order, from bondage to liberation, from loss of faith to gain of faith.

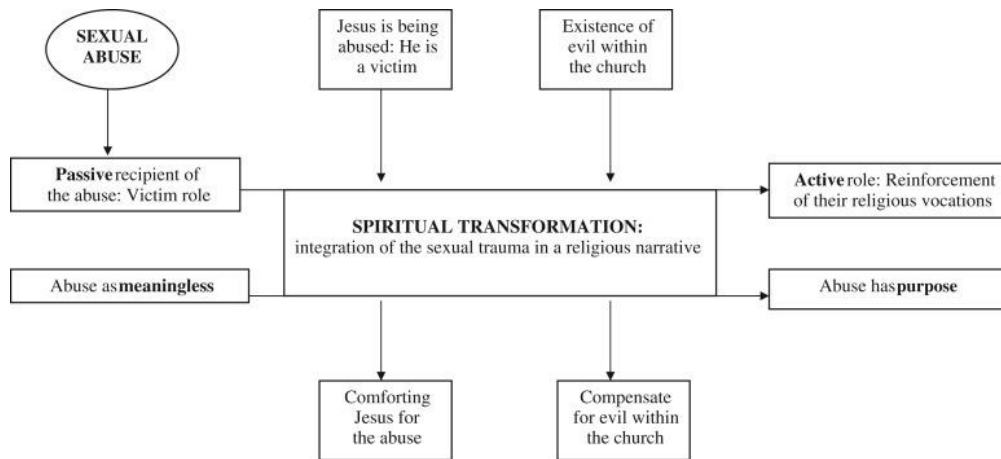
From the sharing of the victims, we see that the traumatic event that provoked pain and anger, and threatened their core beliefs is transformed into meaningful spiritual narrative that is incorporated into their faith life, allowing them to recover a sense of safety and balance.

As per their spiritual narratives, the victims felt 1) Jesus was with them when abused, and he himself was undergoing the abuse; 2) the abuse was seen as a test of the strength of their vocation and their worthiness; and 3) they passed this test successfully as they resisted and rejected the abuse with all their might.

Seeing Jesus suffering made them grow stronger, temporarily forget their own distress, and feel compelled to soothe his pain. The victims saw this rejection as a crucial aspect of "passing the test" that SAV posed.

1.7.8 Spiritual Transformation, following Sexual Trauma

Trauma may impact individual's faith in such a way that the event is perceived as a manifestation of the divine. Once the trauma is transformed into a spiritual narrative, it can trigger positive effects with the potential to resolve existential problems and to become pastoral care helpers in turn.



1.8 Pastoral Project

Pastoral project of helping the victims to integrate themselves to the faith takes into account 4 forms of practical pastoral accompaniment.

1.8.1 Celebration and Proclamation – *Liturgia*

Celebrate the powerful examples of courageous women who are engaged in acts of resistance to male violence and domination in the Bible. The midwives, Shifra and Puah (Exodus 1:15-21), Susannah (Daniel 13), woman caught in adultery (John 8), the persistent widow, all these women help the victims to celebrate their life even if abused.

Proclaim that SAV constitutes sin. As such, it violates the bodily integrity of the victim and shatters the possibility of right relationship between the victim and abuser. Any form of SAV destroys trust in the other person and in the basic security of one's world. To isolate or cut the victim off from the community too is a sin.

1.8.2 Service – *Diakonia*

In the context of helping the victims of SAV, *diakonia* means:

- make the Church a safe place for victims of violence;
- speak from the pulpit because a faith leader can have powerful impact on people's attitudes and beliefs;
- lead by example, that is, volunteer to become a crisis volunteer;
- offer meeting space for educational seminars and weekly support groups;
- partner with existing resources like local sexual assault programmes and community service projects;
- seek out training from experienced trainers on sexual assault, dating violence and stalking;
- do the theological and scriptural homework to better understand and respond to sexual assault;
- encourage training and education for clergy, lay leaders, chaplains, and seminary students to increase their awareness about sexual assault.

1.8.3 Communion – *Koinonia*

- Communion is God entering into the life of the victim as *go'el* (relation builder). Communion is the taking steps forward of Jesus as Good Samaritan (nearness builder). Communion is the hovering over by the Holy Spirit as Advocate (bridge builder).
- Communion is the ascending love of God with the descending love for the victims in order to take up their burden (DCE #7). It is the abode of love where the victims are accepted; it is the meeting space where they are incorporated.
- Communion is the family of faithful who participate in the responsibility of spiritual integration while shaping the discussion of issues concerning SAV.

- Communion articulates a faith that will provide women with resources for strength rather than resources for endurance.
- Communion is the participation, collaboration, coordination. Communion is the synodality that listens to the victims' events with empathetic remedy.
- Communion is the strength for the weak; it is the *placebo* effect against the *nocebo* SAV.

1.8.4 Witnessing – *Martyria*

- **Personal Witnessing:** work with groups for spiritual integration; dynamically work with victims to come back to their faith; be facilitative leader to help the victims in faith; guide groups toward faith convictions; lead the victims through the unfolding of the transformational experience.
- **Institutional Witnessing:** let your institution set goals for the aspect of faith; let your system live with the tension of the crisis events; let it shift resources toward community to bring change in the life of the victims; let the staff members be interested to lead an interfaith stakeholder group.
- **Faith-community Witnessing:** identify community members who care about the faith issue of SAV and welcome an opportunity to address the issues in their community; feel comfortable to be part of the community to embrace development project which will help the victims to come back to their faith.

Witnessing is participation in the process of accountability. It holds us accountable for ethical, legal and spiritual transgressions. It requires taking a stand without being neutral bystanders (*Lev 19:16*). It pursues justice (*Deut 16:20*), holding the perpetrators accountable for their actions. As the perpetration of SAV threatens the welfare of the entire community, witnessing makes us act with commitment to bring back the victims to the faith.

1.6 Verification

The posttraumatic experience through pastoral accompaniment is such that the victims:

- forgive those caused pain and betrayed all that they held dear; remove hatred against their abusers;
- take their faith in Jesus's message of forgiveness and love; pray for the abusers to redeem themselves;
- understand abusers as humans, seeing them in a different light; become aware of people's limitations;
- become more adept at protecting themselves, thus decreasing the risk of further repetitions.

Posttraumatic experience helps to preserve their faith so that they: do not give up their lives as faithful even though they felt like abandoning; feel compelled to stay in the Church and are loyal to her; believe that their faith comes from God, and thus an abuser's actions cannot spoil God's plan.

Posttraumatic experience helps the victims to transform roadblocks into resources so that:

- they begin articulating a faith that provides women with resources for strength, not for endurance;
- they begin articulating a theology of empowerment rather than a theology of passive endurance;
- they deconstruct patriarchal interpretation of faith and reconstruct GO'EL interpretation.

Conclusion

Taking into account the importance of spiritual integration and pastoral accompaniment, the victims are helped to come to terms with the trauma and to unfold it through spiritual narrative. The victims' understanding of the abuse in the light of their religious beliefs enables the trauma to be transformed into a potential catalyst for growth. While the victims battle with the pain and confusion of the event, the attribution of spiritual meaning to the trauma tip the balance away from despair and isolation, and towards meaning and resilience, understanding and accepting, assimilation and integration, healing and wholeness.