

# Prevention and Mitigation of Abuse of Vulnerable Adults

"I tell you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out!" [Luke 19:40]

## ***Introduction***

Dictionaries tell us that vulnerable is defined to mean:

- capable of being physically or emotionally wounded
- open to attack or damage, assailable [*vulnerable* to criticism]

So standing here before you merely presenting this very discourse puts me in a very vulnerable position. Have mercy on this humble messenger. I could be an angel whom you might emotionally wound.

We are all, therefore, through the ordinary actions of our comings and goings and our commitments each day, by definition—vulnerable. All of us, Children of God, loved, made good and on the path to perfection of God's love through the opening up of ourselves to God's will and desire for us, we place ourselves in a most vulnerable position, all the while trusting in others to assist us, guide us, and nurture us.

It is a delicate balance we seek where we are open to God's will and confident in our chosen path, and determined in our Faith all at the same time. The Saints give us concrete examples of this, showing us clearly both the joys and sufferings of putting one's self in a vulnerable position. Jesus, himself, became vulnerable for love of us.

Through His example we strive to be creatures that live in the sureness of Faith, while finding our way through vulnerable times, places, and circumstances in our lives.

If we strive for the opposite of vulnerable, we meet invulnerable which is defined as invincible. We would find ourselves as persons living in a world that is bulletproof, impassable, impenetrable, impregnable, indestructible, powerful, secure, strong, unbeatable, and untouchable.

While at first glance these words evoke positions of power and privilege, and places that might offer peace of mind and heart, we see that they are words that do not in any way demonstrate the qualities of a good Christian minister.

The Synonyms for the word vulnerable are accessible, assailable, defenseless, exposed, naked, on the line, on the spot, out on a limb, ready, sensitive, susceptible, tender, thin-skinned, unguarded, unprotected, unsafe, weak, wide open. And the Antonyms are closed, guarded, protected, safe, and secure.

We see much power in words, if even only adding a prefix of a couple of letters that can change everything. So too can a title, position, or circumstance in life make all the difference in the way we perceive vulnerability—embrace and accept it. For those with much, embracing the posture of vulnerability can mean either a great leap into the unknown or a small step toward it. It all depends upon the circumstances of support and resources available. For those with fewer resources, the movement toward vulnerability may be shorter in distance, but much more severe in cost to the person emotionally.

The measure cannot be quantified nor qualified for neither. Thus, we can never effectively compare the lives of those persons living with or without disabilities. How often are God's gifts overwhelming blessings to many, but become challenges to others?

### ***The Paradox of Vulnerability***

All of these introductory words, perhaps somewhat confusing, lead us to the great paradox of vulnerability. Vulnerability is most often associated with being helpless and weak. But we find that being vulnerable affords us the opportunity to accept the kindness of others in ways that we never expected. Jesus' example of the man born blind in John 9:3 is a perfect example of our Christian call to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Jesus answers the disciple's queries of why the man was born blind by stating: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him."

Being vulnerable also makes one open to being hurt. Similar to when the disciples were asking Jesus about the origins of the man born blind's blindness and equating it to the common theological thought then that it was due to sin. When individuals use the vulnerabilities of others to label or take control of them, act out their frustrations or anger upon them, or exploit them, we are dealing with the most grave of sins. Hurting others who are defenseless is reprehensible.

This problem has been cycled down through the ages in various forms presenting it in many ugly ways. Unfortunately, we seem to see the ugliness as something or someone far away from our reach and come to the rescue all too late. Most unfortunate is the fact that we have not eradicated it from our ways altogether.

Carmelite Saint Teresa Benedicta (Edith Stein) having lived through the torments of the concentration camps summed up well our appropriate Christian response to these tragedies: "The burden of the cross that Christ assumed is that of corrupted human nature, with all its consequences in sin and suffering to which fallen humanity is subject. The meaning of the way of the cross is to carry this burden out of the world. Suffering brings us face to face with ourselves and each other in ways that are impossible to avoid. Pain gets our attention, and forces us to figure out what we stand for, which is what life and death are all about. The answers are not completely satisfying at the intellectual level. Thus, we find ourselves, reluctantly at first, on a pilgrimage with God through the worst of what humankind is capable of perpetrating. We are on a journey with God through the crushing realities the spring up right in the middle of our lives; sickness, death and the loss of fortune or friends, opportunities and dreams. What good answers could these possibly have?"<sup>1</sup>

Saint Theresa Benedicta hearkens back to the age old question the Disciples asked Jesus: "Why is there suffering?" Jesus' response is clear—making the works of God visible—which is our duty, carrying the burdens of the cross out of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Volume IV of the Collected Works of St. Edith Stein. The hidden life: hagiographic essays, meditations, spiritual texts. Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Discalced Carmelite Edited by Dr. L. Gelber and Michael Linssen, O.C.D.

We again see the great paradox—“Being vulnerable isn’t about being weak; it’s about harnessing the necessary strength to be open and authentic.”<sup>2</sup> Being true to our call as Christians is to seek God’s power and grace working through us to give voice to every vulnerable person we encounter. To further the paradox, we must find the various ways we can become vulnerable ourselves so that we are open to healing and binding the wounds of others. Embracing the opportunities we see before us by taking on the posture of Jesus’ great mandatum is as unique as each of us has been specially created. There is no prescription, no formula or specific way to carry the burdens out of the world. Simply put, we should be encouraged by paying close attention to our own interior life and be propelled from these graces to move forward in reaching out to give voice and to extend a hand to vulnerable others. Focusing on being better at what we individually do best will create communities of care and concern for all—where each voice, most especially vulnerable unheard voices—will be listened to and heard clearly. As leaders in our blessed Church, the opportunity to seek out the vulnerable, listen to them and provide a plan for their safety and wellbeing.

Our salvation history has proven over time that God keeps His promises to us. He would never leave us to sufferings without Hope. His grace working through all of us, from the weakest to the mightiest, empowers us to call forth the voices of those who have been silenced. Our call is to protect them, and to raise them up as loved, cherished, and viable members of the community whose gifts are affirmed and encouraged.

While each of us can be vulnerable in any given situation or set of circumstances, we will look at four basic types of vulnerable persons hearing from them in their own voice about their own experiences of abuse. As I have discussed, vulnerable adults can apply to people with physical, mental, or emotional conditions or an illness that renders them unable to defend themselves, protect themselves, or get help for themselves when injured or emotionally abused. The term applies as well to the elderly whose various circumstances make them vulnerable to those who might cause them harm.

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<sup>2</sup> On Being Naked: The Great Paradox of Vulnerability: Katie, November 4, 2010. Health for the Whole Self, A Journey for Balance for Body, Mind Spirit. Taken from the Internet 9/26/11.

## ***Grooming Behavior***

Sexual abuse of vulnerable adults is as complex to understand as it is for us to comprehend the molestation of children. Among vulnerable adults, the abuser's patterns are similar to the behavioral patterns of those who abuse children. In particular, there are those who seek out and "groom" vulnerable adults and those who take advantage of particular situations and give into the pressures of those events by abusing others. Those abusers, most unfortunately, are primarily found among the family members, caregivers, and others who are known and trusted by the vulnerable adult.

Grooming behavior is employed by predators who identify and engage their victims. It is a means for an offender to gain control of a vulnerable adult and therefore their cooperation. The predator carefully and patiently grooms a vulnerable adult for the type of relationship they seek. They gain the vulnerable person's trust, break down their defenses, and manipulate them into performing or permitting the desired sex act or behavior they seek. If necessary, the predator will gain access to the vulnerable adult by employing the same techniques with their parents or caretakers. The process is called grooming. It increases the predator's access to his victim and decreases the likelihood of discovery. Grooming happens in three basic forms:

1. Physical
2. Psychological
3. Community

Physical grooming involves touch. The perpetrator may initially touch the vulnerable adult in completely acceptable ways and as the victim becomes more familiar with them he or she then increases the level of sexual contact by gradually conditioning the vulnerable adult. Eventually this will lead to sexual touch. These acts over time are so subtle that the vulnerable adult does not realize what is happening.

Psychological grooming is equally subtle and similarly progressive. The predator may begin by showing careful and special attention to the vulnerable adult, being friendly, empathetic, and overly understanding. They create a sense of dependence in the vulnerable

adult by developing a special relationship with them. The perpetrator eventually convinces the vulnerable adult that they have caused the behavior the perpetrator inflicts. In many ways it is a psychological brainwashing of the vulnerable adult. Physical threats of injury to the vulnerable adult or their family may take place. All of these techniques leave the vulnerable adult conflicted, confused, helpless, and dependent.

Community grooming provides the perpetrator with the environment they need to do their manipulations. They project an image of a wonderful person to the families, employers, and to others in the community. They mimic the behavior of good caregivers so as to get access to their victims. They do good things to accomplish a very evil act. When anyone makes a comment about the integrity of the perpetrator, the community acts with outrage, not at the perpetrator, but at the accuser because the acts seem inconceivable from this individual.

### ***Mitigation***

Statistics tell us that the abuse of vulnerable adults is more emotional, physical, and financial as opposed to sexual abuse that has been reported to be one percent of the cases of abuse. In the United States, approximately 500,000 allegations of abuse of vulnerable adults are reported to Adult Protective Services each year, but it is thought that a very small percentage of cases are ever reported. Studies indicate that as many as 10 percent of the vulnerable adult population is subject to abuse and that only one in six will ever be reported.

While bias against vulnerable adults is a major contributing factor to the low reporting and prosecution rates, the same factors that have an impact on the prosecution of child sexual abuse also play a major role when the victim is a vulnerable adult. An important aspect of this problem is the fact that these are adults and they have the right to consent or to refuse to participate in the report, investigation, or prosecution of the matter. Many are very fearful to do so.

When the victim is an adult with developmental disabilities, the offender is often a caregiver. However, when the victim is an elderly person, the most likely perpetrator is a family member. Forensic evidence is hard to find and it is a major challenge for prosecutors to find a way to convince a jury that an adult child would deliberately harm a parent or elderly family member.

Some of the warning signs of an inappropriate relationship with a vulnerable adult are the same as those that indicate someone is a potential risk to harm a child. Warning signs are:

1. Always wants to be alone with the person.
2. Discourages others from being around and arranges to be the target person in areas where they cannot be monitored.
3. Thinks the rules do not apply to them.
4. Uses bad language or tells dirty jokes around the person.

Additional signs that indicate a caregiver is a risk of harm to a vulnerable adult are:

1. The person acts with indifference toward the vulnerable adult in his or her care.
2. The caregiver or family member prevents the adult from speaking to visitors.

Using these warning signs as a guide to screen out possible perpetrators of abuse, we further protect vulnerable adults by controlling access to those who are vulnerable by

1. Using written, standard applications when employing or contracting with a caregiver.
2. Requiring a form of criminal background check, or making sure the facility where the vulnerable adult lives enforces this employment practice.
3. Check the references of people who come forth as caregivers.
4. Have face-to-face interviews with the caregivers and communicate with them often.

Monitoring techniques you should employ include making sure that all family members have access to the programs that the vulnerable adult is involved in. In addition, facilities serving the vulnerable adult population should have policies regarding the use of secluded areas. If it is a home situation, various family members should check in randomly, including bathing/showering times throughout the day.

Most importantly, being aware of the vulnerable persons in our lives is crucial. It is extremely important to talk to, listen to and observe the vulnerable adults in our lives. Listen in-between the lines, and pay careful attention to even the slightest signs of fear in a vulnerable adult. Do not ignore any sign that makes you uncomfortable. Act upon and investigate this as soon as you are able.

Most especially notice the following:

1. Injuries such as cuts, bruises, and other wounds that appear to be uncared for or never seem to heal.
2. Poor skin color, sunken eyes, dehydration or apparent malnutrition.
3. Frequent trips to the hospital.
4. Soiled clothing, apparent pain from touching.
5. Lack of social contact.
6. Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and confusion.
7. Apparent disorientation or confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances.

It is extremely important to remember that one of the key warning signs that a caregiver or family member is abusing a vulnerable adult is that the caregiver or family member isolates the victim from other people. They refuse to allow visitors and keep the vulnerable adult away from anyone who might observe the signs of abuse. In addition, this caregiver passes off any report from the vulnerable adult as a part of their vulnerability, namely, they are confused, unreliable in relating the truth, has dementia or another cognitive dysfunction. They claim that the person is getting back at them for not allowing them to eat a favorite candy, or that they resent the caregiver and are making stories up to hurt them. Here again we note the grooming behaviors.



In addition, there are environmental signs that a vulnerable adult is being abused. Living conditions that are inadequate or consistently unclean is cause for concern. Other environmental clues include room temperatures that are too extreme and foul odors in the home. When the vulnerable adult always appears hungry, has unusual poor hygiene, has financial problems that were not there previously, disappearance of personal items, jewelry, clothing, etc., it is time to act.

The most important thing anyone can do to prevent this from happening is to report any suspicion of abuse of a vulnerable adult to the authorities as soon as possible. Communicating concerns prevents abuse from continuing. Go as far as possible, follow up your concerns until satisfaction and safety is achieved. Each of us has the moral responsibility to report suspect abuse. If we notice that a caregiver or family member is behaving in a way that indicates that they are a risk to the vulnerable adult, communicate your concern to that person or someone who can make a difference with the person as soon as possible.

### ***Another Type of Vulnerability***

Lastly, a vulnerable adult can be anyone who is in a care giving or ministerial relationship with another person where there is a presence of unilateral power. For example, relationships such as those between a teacher and an adult student, a spiritual director and a directee, a psychotherapist and a client, a doctor and their patient all constitute helping relationships where one person has power over the other. Despite the age, consent, and disposition of an adult in this type of relationship, the adult who is ministering is always responsible to uphold professional boundaries. When a professional or person who is ministering or volunteering abuses their position of power with another adult, it is a serious violation of trust, ethics, and morality. Persons approaching others for help are always vulnerable in this regard.

There are those with psychological or character logical disorders who approach others for assistance in ministry. In many cases, these are not known on any surface level until you are well into the care giving

relationship. Careful attention must be paid in all situations, and supervision is always beneficial, if not required when a member of the clergy, religious, or minister/volunteer offers pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, or pastoral advice in any manner.

Many good intentioned priests, deacons, and religious have been lured into pastoral relationships that end up with disastrous results and severe consequences because they were blind to an equally good-intentioned parishioner or student suffering from a personality disorder. Very often the needs of the church require the assistance of volunteer ministers to teach, serve, build, and promote the gospels. The needs we have are great, but often the needs of those who come forth to volunteer are even greater. People come forth to volunteer for many good reasons, and it is our mandate to assist them in any way possible. We must be careful, however, to see things clearly at the beginning of these encounters and relationships—if a person presents themselves as too good to be true, that is exactly what we are dealing with and one should proceed with caution and concern.

One of the most difficult personalities to deal with in ministry is borderline personality disorder, which affects how you feel about yourself, how you relate to others, and how you behave.

When an individual suffers from borderline personality disorder, they often have an insecure sense of who they are. That is, their self-image or sense of self often rapidly changes. They may view themselves as evil or bad, and sometimes may feel that they don't exist at all. An unstable self-image often leads to frequent changes in jobs, friendships, goals, and values.

Their relationships are usually in turmoil, and very often experience a love-hate relationship with others. They may idealize someone one moment and then abruptly and dramatically shift to fury and hate over perceived slights or even minor misunderstandings. This is because people with the disorder often have difficulty accepting gray areas — things seem to be either black or white.

Borderline personality disorder symptoms may include:

- Impulsive and risky behavior, such as risky driving, unsafe sex, gambling sprees or illegal drug use
- Strong emotions that wax and wane frequently
- Intense but short episodes of anxiety or depression
- Inappropriate anger, sometimes escalating into physical confrontations
- Difficulty controlling emotions or impulses
- Suicidal behavior
- Fear of being alone<sup>3</sup>

Whenever you are encountering difficulties in pastoral work or volunteer relationships such as these, it is best to seek counsel from an outside professional.

While the prevention of abuse of vulnerable persons is paramount to the ministry of the Church, it is best practice to pay careful attention to our own lives and the way we operate as leaders in ministry—making our personal boundaries clear, deepening our inner spiritual lives, and providing ourselves with opportunities of growth and education all lead to a solid foundation and effective ministry.

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/borderline-personalitydisorder/DS00442/DSECTION=causes> Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research (MFMER) 2011.