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Abuses in the Church

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Discipline, Obedience and Abuse in the Sodalitium

ROCÍO FIGUEROA ALVEAR AND DAVID TOMBS

This article offers testimonies of spiritual and sexual abuse committed in the Sodalitium. It describes the conservative ethos which characterises the foundation of the Sodalitium in Peru, and places a severe emphasis on obedience and discipline which Luis Fernando Figari promoted so strongly within the Sodalitium and in the communities of consecrated women associated with it. This study argues that the sexual abuses perpetrated by German Doig, Luis Fernando Figari and other leaders, and the damaging impact of this abuses on the survivors, should be understood as part of a broader culture of spiritual abuse.

1. Introduction

The *Sodalitium Christianae Vitae* or Sodalitium of Christian Life (SCV) was founded in 1971 by Luis Fernando Figari and a group of conservative Catholics in Peru. Its members were principally lay ministers who lived together in communities[1]. For the majority of its existence, the Sodalitium appeared to be a successful example of how strong personal discipline and conservative Catholic values could offer a positive model for traditionalism within the Catholic Church. The Sodalitium founded schools, universities, retirement and youth centres, and had communities in Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Italy and the United States. However, after 2006 investigations into the Sodalitium began to bring grave failings in the leadership of the movement to light, and implicated were Figari, his closest collaborator German Doig, as well as others.

This article describes the conservative ethos which characterised the vision of Figari from the beginning of the Sodalitium, and which served as a base for a culture of abuse. It reveals the testimonies of the victims who suffered so much spiritual and sexual abuse in the care of the Sodalitium[2]. In 2006, five years after the death of Doig (2001) Rocío Figueroa began to investigate Doig's activities[3]. In 2010 Figueroa and others voiced concerns – not just about Doig – but about Figari as well. When Figari renounced his leadership in December 2010, it was only after a public crisis provoked by the book about the Sodalitium written by Pedro Salinas and Paulo Ugaz *Half Monks, Half Soldiers* (2015), in which the magnitude of the abuses was made evident, and after measures were taken against Figari by the Sodalitium and the Vatican[4].

2. Luis Fernando Figari

Luis Fernando Figari was born into a comfortable family in Lima in 1947. He studied at the Santa Maria College of the congregation of Marianist Brothers of Lima and enrolled in the Catholic Pontifical University of Peru (PUCP) to study law and humanities. Later he studied law at the San Marcos of Lima University but did not complete his studies. Not much is known about Figari's life before 1971, however his interest in the links between politics and conservative Catholicism took shape during his years of study.

In 1971, Gerald Heby S.M. was named the superior of the Society of Mary (Marianist Brothers). Haby invited various old alumni to form an apostolic group based on the principles of Father Chaminade, founder of the Society of Maria. A small group, which included Gerald Haby S.M., Luis Fernando Figari, Sergio Tapia and Gonzalo Villegas, were converted into founder members of the Sodalitium. In the beginning, they directed small groups and organised retreats and camps to attract young people. In 1976, Sergio Tapia retired from the Sodalitium and Gerald Haby was transferred to the United States. This left Figari as the principal leader of the Sodalitium after 1976. In 1985, Figari founded the Movement of Christian Life (MVC), which grouped different associations under the leadership of German Doig Klinge (1957-2001). The Peruvian Episcopal Conference recognised the MVC as a loyal association in 1990, and it rapidly expanded into other Latin American nations. In 1997, Pope John Paul II recognised the Sodalitium as a Society of Apostolic Life of Pontifical Law.

The ethos of the Sodalitium was centralised on male members. The creation of a feminine counterpart of the Sodalitium had to wait until 1991, when Figari accepted the creation of the Marianist Fraternity of Reconciliation (FMR). The women of the FMR were consecrated and known as 'fraternas'. The fraternas worked on the same apostolic projects as the sodaltes. In 1998, Figari founded a second group of consecrated women, the Servants of God's Plan (SPD). A difference between the members of the FMR and the SPD was the requirement to wear a traditional religious habit, and to dedicate oneself to caring for the sick.

3. Sodalite Spirituality: Discipline and Obedience

During the first decade after the foundation of the SCV, Figari wrote an annual report in which he described some of the influences which moulded his thinking. In 'The Memory of 1976' he discussed Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera (1903-1936) and the ideal which he articulated in his characteristic phrase 'Half Monk, Half Soldier':

> I don't want to advance without highlighting the influence of a Spanish thinker, who led an exemplary life, who have to posterity a phrase which, in my understanding, illustrates very well the ideal which many sodalites have made their own; half monk, half soldier[5].

Primo de Rivera was the founder of the Spanish Falange (1933), a fascist and nationalist political movement with roots in conservative Catholicism. Sodalism drew its militant ethos from this Falangist inheritance. This is reflected in the military style of their training and the emphasis on iron discipline, the physical exercise and the ascetic life, and the requirement of obedience. For Figari, obedience was the spine of faith and a central axis of the spirituality of the Sodalitium. The saying 'he who is obedient, is never wrong' appeared frequently on posters displayed in many of the communities[6]. The obedience demanded was radical and blind; the superiors controlled all the activities of their members. One ex-Sodalite confirmed 'we didn't have the freedom to read a book unless the superior had given authorisation '.[7] The superiors gave absurd orders that the members had to obey. One ex-servant of God's Plan recalled: 'if we were asked to do things without thought, like picking bamboo leaves, or dismantling then reassembling six beds without a good reason for doing so, there were many

days of fasting and all this was in the name of obedience'.[8]
One ex-servant of God's Plan said:

> They taught me not to question authority […] The authorities were simply above any opinion we might have had of them. I became accustomed to the idea that they had my life in their hands. Authority was converted into a type of confessor who always knew more than me. I lived like this in obedience so that the ultimate submission of my being was not something new or different.[9]

The role of discipline and obedience was converted into one of continual spiritual abuse for the members[1], as described in the testimony of Roberto (Pseudonym):[10]

> I believe that the abuse created an extremely strong dependence on authority within me. If my superior praised me, I felt it deeply. If he censured me I felt like the worst failure in the world […] Until the year 2010, despite being in my forties, I depended on my superiors. I felt like a child[11].

In addition to the existence of blind obedience, Figari cited Matthew 10 as biblical support to justify the demand that the adepts of the Sodalitium distance themselves from their families. Whoever became an adherent to the Sodalitium was converted into an enemy of the 'world' and, subject to criticism of parents, friends of society in general, who did not understand the way of spiritual cleanliness[12]. In 2001, in one of the first journalistic articles about the Sodalitium, Fernandez Stoll interviewed an ex-Sodalite who declared: 'you get to the point where you don't feel part of your family because you have come to believe that you have deeper ties with the Sodalitium than with your family'[13]. From the beginning of the Sodalitium, the verse 'you will be hated by everyone because of my name' (Matthew 10:22) was utilised to separate children from their families. One ex-servant of God's Plan related:

> My trainers and superiors were very insistent about this. I could tell my family absolutely nothing of what was happening to me. A few times my teacher listened to my conversations with my family. They asked me to put the call on loudspeaker. On one occasion they told me family that I was ill, and then my superior told me that there had been no contact from my family.[14]

Martin Scheuch, an ex-Sodalite, recalled how the everyday life of a Sodalite was subject to a strict schedule and spiritual life was regulated by rules which had to be strictly followed in order to achieve holiness[15]. One of the ex-servants of God's Plan revealed that they did not have spiritual freedom either, or control over their own relationship with God:

> They made us pray, but they gave us specific texts of gospel which they wanted us to meditate on, and they also gave us specific commentaries on the gospels. We never prayed in the way, or read anything, which we wanted ourselves. We never prayed to other saints: for example Mother Teresa of Calcutta was prohibited[16].

Spiritual obedience extended to physical life as well. The Sodalites in training had a strict regime of exhausting physical exercises, obligatory fasts and little time to sleep[17]. The stringent demands created real dangers to their health. To impose control, Figari utilised public humiliation, shouting, mockery and physical punishment as part of the daily routine of the communities. On this subject one ex-Sodalite wrote:

> I can tell you how the following week they made me sleep almost a month on a marble staircase, how they made me fast and a priest taunted me with food, how they made me push my neck against a Swiss army knife, how they taught us to mock the work of our companions until they cried in desperation, how they made me wash a toilet and, before flushing it, they made me wash my face with that water[18].

After Figari and the other perpetrators had won the trust of their members through full obedience, little by little they diminished the free-will and the consciousness of their disciples.

4. Sexual Abuse in the Sodalitium

As confirmed by the investigations, together with the spiritual abuses, some of the leaders of the Sodalitium were also responsible for sexual abuses[19]. Salinas offered a series of testimonies like that of Santiago which shows how spiritual abuse let to the permission of sexual abuse. For example, meditation sessions could give rise to physical contact under the guise of spiritual discipline, and lead to grave abuses. Salinas relates the in San Bartolo, Figari instructed [Santiago] and one of his friends to

sit in the lotus flower position, unclothed and with a candle between them. After some minutes of meditation, Figari asked us touch ourselves. we touched our faces, our chests, but Figari shouted 'the testicles have not been touched, the penis. I said touch everything[20]!'

These activities also laid the groundwork for new sexual aggressions and for new spiritual abuses:

> When Figari allegedly attempted to sodomize Santiago for the first time, he had difficulties penetrating. In this moment, with the coldness of a surgeon, he stopped, went to his bedside table, opened a box and took from it a tin of Vaseline to continue his poisoned ritual. 'The strangest thing of all is that while he was penetrating me, he asked me to masturbate'. And stranger yet, he asked me to join him to mass[21].

Studies demonstrate grave consequences on the physical and mental health of the survivors which they attribute to the sexual abuse. What a person is unable to come to terms with the abuse, they can experience depression, anxiety, a deterioration of personal relationships, difficulties in raising children, eating disorders and/or the abuse of drugs and alcohol as a mechanism for dealing with intense feelings[22]. The testimonies of the victims of the Sodalitium discussed the long-term effects on their self-esteem. From a strong sense of guilt[23]: 'I deleted the abusive event, I overcame it. But I believe that there is a very strong subconscious current of guilt', on low self-esteem Roberto commented: 'I have carried a very depressed self-esteem for years[24].'

Emotional relationships are also profoundly affected by abuse. Tomas (Pseudonym) said:

> The abuse has had a very strong impact on my relationships. Maintaining effective relationships has always been a problem. I have never allowed anyone to terminate a relationship. I attribute this, with good reason, to abandonment. It is a type of reproach to life[25].

Santiago considers the crux of the abuse is the loss of trust in people: 'I believe that this is the most traumatic central point: I don't believe in anyone[26].' Another survivor confirmed this common experience: 'The Sodalitium destroyed my faith in humanity. Even to this day. I always expect the worst from everyone[27]'.

Without doubt, when abuse is committed in ecclesiastical contexts it has a devastating effect on the faith of the survivors. Jose Enrique said: 'they have stolen faith with a clerical penis. They have stolen the whole project of your life, your essence. And this is the worst violence which can exist[28].'

5. Accusations against the leaders of the Sodalitium

German Doig was the right-hand man of Figari and the Vicar of the Sodalitium. When Doig died in 2001, Figari pressed for his beatification. In 2002 he asked Figueroa to support this effort. In the follow years, Figueroa increasingly began to question Doig's actions. After 2006 and with the help of other members of the FMR, Cecilia Collazos and Liliana Casuso, he began to actively investigate his suspicions about Doig's activities[29].

In 2008, Figueroa informed Figari of his concerns about the abuses of Doig. Figari dismissed them, insisted that it was all untrue, and that she was enacting a plot against the Sodalitium, Figari continued to advocate for the beatification of Doig. In 2010, Figueroa met with Eduardo Regal, Lead Vicar of the SCV. He denounced Doig's abuses, demanded the expulsion of Figari from his position of superior, and requested a full investigation into Figari's leadership. Although Figari resigned his position as superior in December of that year, the Sodalitium was not willing to start a proper investigation. In December 2010 Figueroa and the journalist Pedro Salinas agreed to investigate further[30].

In 2011, ex-members of the Sodalitium revealed privately to Salinas and Figueroa that Figari sexually abused them when they were youths. The victims presented their accusations to the Peruvian Ecclesiastical Tribunal and to the Vatican. The authorities of the Sodalitium announced that Doig's candidature for beatification had been cancelled. German Doig was accused of sexual abuse, however the Sodalitium did not offer any other public response to the accusations at that time.

In October 2015, Salinas presented his investigation in the book *Half Monks, Half Soldiers*, written with the collaboration of his colleague Paola Ugaz, and containing the testimonies of thirty victims of alleged physical, psychological, and sexual abuse by the directors of the Sodalitium. The book created an awareness of the magnitude of the problem to a wider

audience and made it impossible for the Sodalitium to remain silent. On the 19 October, it released a statement in which it recognised that the testimonies were credible and asked for forgiveness from the victims.

In November 2015, the Sodalitium announced that it would commission a group of Peruvian citizens, of good public standing, to form an Ethical Commission for Justice and Reconciliation, with the aim of receiving and listening to the victims of the SCV. After conducting interviews and collecting data, the commission published its Final Report on the 16 April 2016. It presented substantial testimonies about sexual, psychological and physical abuses committed by the leaders of the Sodalitium. The report revealed modern slavery and a culture of abuse at the Sodalitium[31].

Despite formally accepting the report, the Sodalitium did not implement the Commission's recommendations. Instead, they decided to start a new commission, one which they funded themselves[32]. They asked a group of experts, led by Kathleen McChesney and Ian Elliot, to examine what had happened inside the institute, and write reports of the abuses. They interviewed 245 people, but the investigation focused on individual abusers rather than systematic problems.

On the 30 January 2017, the Congregation for the Institution of Consecrated Life and the Apostolic Societies of the Vatican prohibited Figari from having any contact with other members of the society after discovering that he had sexually and psychologically abused members, and committed abuses of power. The founder of the Sodalitium was prohibited from contact with any member of the community.

6. Conclusion

The systematic problems within the Sodalitium – and the abuses of Doig, Figari and other leaders – offers a clear example of the abuse of power and religious authority. It is important to highlight the spiritual abuse which took place, and to recognize that this was the ground in which physical and sexual abuse took root. Ironically, it was Figari's efforts to promote the beatification of Doig after his death in 2001 as a model of spirituality which brought his abuses to light. Figueroa's investigation into Doig began in 2006. The abuses of Doig and also of Figari then began to be uncovered. Figari was obligated to retire in 2010, but very little was made public. In 2015, the book *Half Monk, Half Soldier* by Salinas offered a

devastating account of the abuses at the Sodalitium. The book obliged the organisation to recognise the problem and provoked measures against Figari from the Vatican.

The experience of the Sodalitium is a worrying example of the slowness with which the religious and ecclesiastic authorities react to abuses. It also offers a case study of how sexual abuses on ecclesial setting are often facilitated by a culture of spiritual abuse. Because of this, spiritual abuse needs to be considered in every investigation into sexual abuse in ecclesial setting.

Notes

1. While the majority of the Sodalitium's members are lay people, some are priests.
2. The testimonies can be found in previous studies by Rocío Figueroa y David Tombs, "Escuchando a sobrevivientes masculinos de abusos sexuales en la Iglesia. El caso Sodalicio", in *Centro de Teología y Asuntos Públicos*, Universidad de Otago, 2016. http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7053. Cf. Rocío Figueroa y David Tombs, "El abusoespiritual de las religiosas. Estudio de caso: Las Siervas del Plan de Dios", *Teología y Vida* 63, 3 (2022) 399-424. In this article we use the same pseudonyms.
3. Rocío Figueroa Alvear, one of the authors of this article, has first-hand knowledge of the Sodalitium from his time as a director of the Marianist Fraternity of Reconciliation; see Pedro Salinas, Sin Noticias de Dios (Lima: Edición del autor, 2022), 349.Pedro Salinas, *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados: el Sodalitium Christianae Vitae por dentro* (Lima: Planeta, 2015).
4. Pedro Salinas, *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados: el Sodalitium Christianae Vitae por dentro* (Lima: Planeta, 2015).
5. Luis Fernando Figari, *Memoria 1976*, cited in Martín Scheuch, "Mitad Monje, Mitad Soldado", in *Las Líneas Torcidas*, 11 November 2012, in https://laslineastorcidas.wordpress.com/2012/11/
6. Cf. Pedro Salinas, *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados*, 69.
7. Pedro Salinas, *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados*, 70.
8. Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs, *El Abuso espiritual de religiosas*, 414.
9. Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs, *El Abuso espiritual de religiosas*, 413.
10. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2019).
11. Cf. Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs, *Escuchando a sobrevivientes masculinos*, 18.
12. Alfredo Silleta, *Shopping Espiritual. Las Sectas al desnudo* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2007), 180.
13. Diego Fernández Stoll, "Los misterios del Sodalicio," *Agencia Perú,* November 2001, in https://web.archive.org/web/20020225233512/http://www.agenciaperu.com/sociedad/2001/nov/sodas.html
14. Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs *El Abuso Espiritual de Religiosas*, 418.
15. Martín Scheuch, "La espiritualidad tóxica del Sodalicio", *Las Líneas Torcidas*, 2 April 2022 in https://laslineastorcidas.wordpress.com/tag/devotio-moderna/

16. Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs *El Abuso Espiritual de Religiosas*, 412.
17. For example, the sodalites had to participate in obligatory swimming exercises which were very demanding. Cf. Camila Bustamante, *Siervas. El historial de abuso de las monjas sodalicias* (Santiago de Chile: Planeta, 2022), 28.
18. José Enrique Escardó, "Los abusos de los curas", *El quinto pie*, February 2011, in http://elquintopie.blogspot.com/2011/02/el-sodalicio-de-verdad-parte-i.html
19. Cf. Pedro Salinas, *Mitad Monjes, mitad soldados,* 164.
20. Pedro Salinas, *Mitad Monjes, mitad soldados,* 165.
21. Pedro Salinas, *Mitad Monjes, mitad soldados,* 166.
22. Cf. Lisa Spriggens, "Understanding and supporting survivors of sexual harm", in Emily Colgan and Caroline Blyth (ed.), *Accompanying Survivors of Sexual Harm. A Toolkit for Churches,* The Shiloh Project, 2022, 24, in https://doi.org/10.48785/100/127
23. Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs, *Escuchando a sobrevivientes masculinos*, 21.
24. ibid, 18.
25. ibid, 22.
26. ibid, 26
27. ibid. 27
28. ibid, 28.
29. Cf. Pedro Salinas, *Sin Noticias de Dios,* 349.
30. Cf. Martin Scheuch, "Sodalicio: las tres versiones de la caía de Figari". *Las Líneas torcidas*, 8 January 2022, in https://laslineastorcidas.wordpress.com/2022/01/08/sodalicio-tres-versiones-de-la-caida-de-figari/
31. Cf. Pedro Salinas, *Sin Noticias de Dios,* 126.
32. Cf. Pedro Salinas, *Sin Noticias de Dios*, 424.