



I22 Shared Religious Psychotic Disorder in Three: Living With the Corpses of Two Dead Sisters

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an understanding of some of the psychological impairment aspects of an elderly woman living with the corpses of her sisters for a two-year period. The goal of this presentation is to shed light on the often under-reported and rarely encountered phenomenon of "shared psychotic disorder" and their associated contributing factors in this case of ritualism, segregation, and family traditions.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by offering an extraordinary story of a woman who lived in such a situation as a result of being in a state of religious paranoid delusion.

On August 10, 2007, police entered an isolated villa in the open countryside of Apulia, Italy, a few kilometers from the town center, where a 70-year-old woman was discovered. She was found to be in a state of confusion and poor hygienic condition. The mummified cadavers of her two dead sisters were found, along with the carcasses of five cats and three dogs. The three sisters, who had never married, lived in the small house for many years where they held prayer groups and remained in isolation for eight years prior to the death of the first sister.

A farmer periodically provided for their general needs (food and supplies) which he placed at their door, without ever going inside the house. The results of the medico-legal investigations completed showed that the deaths had occurred 18 and 15 months before the crime scene investigation. The cause of death for one of the sisters (73-year-old) was the result of a left femoral fracture which had not received necessary medical attention. In the case of the other sister, who was 78-year-old at the time of death, no signs of traumatic lesions or toxicological evidence was found.

The survivor, who was in a state of malnutrition, underwent psychiatric evaluation which excluded any detectable psychological pathology. After reading the diaries found at the investigation scene, and hearing information furnished by the surviving woman, it was possible to reconstruct the entire story. Immersed in an intensely religious life, and looking for signs from God, the sisters' extreme isolation triggered a collective delusion of a religious nature, replete with daily "divine confirmations." The deaths of the sisters were experienced with a sense of disbelief, but the surviving sister had not given up hope. She imagined that God "would do something", and therefore, continued to pray for hours on end, waiting for "divine" signs.

Living in this way with the cadavers of her sisters, and over time, neglecting to feed the dogs and cats, they eventually died of starvation. The woman prayed in a makeshift chapel which was nothing more than an old garage, where in the past the sisters had also held prayer groups. It seemed that there was also an altar in the "chapel" which had been consecrated by a local priest.

After careful analysis of the entire chain of events in question, the diagnosis of "folia condivisa a tre" (madness shared by 3) was made.

Shared psychotic disorder was first described in 1877 as *folie à deux*. It is a rare disorder shared by two or more people with close emotional ties. Cases involving three or more people are very uncommon. Information regarding the incidence and prevalence of shared psychotic disorder is lacking, as the literature consists entirely of case reports. Among siblings, the disorder is more common in sisters than in brothers. Almost all cases involve members of a single family.

Religious Paranoid Delirium, Neglect, Death Investigation