

The Restoration of Hope and Dignity in the Context of the Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Church

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Abstract: This article looks at the sexual abuse crises that have hit churches around the world, especially the Roman Catholic Church, and asks if it is possible to talk of hope in such circumstances. It asks whether theology has a role to play or a responsibility for the crisis, and what sort of church is called for in the light of it. The article ends by suggesting possible places of hope that do not seek to impose on the survivors.

Keywords: Theology; sexual abuse; ecclesiology; hope; synodality

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This article is based on a presentation at a conference entitled ‘Anthropology of Hope’. In light of the terrible reality of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church it can be wondered whether “anthropology” and “hope” are not better discussed separately. The abuse crisis immediately turns our attention to the *anthropos*, the human person, and in the first instance the survivor who has been treated in an inhuman way. As Massimo Faggioli wrote in an opinion paper for the *National Catholic Reporter*: “Abuse of any type – sexual, spiritual, abuse of power and/or authority – blatantly contradicts the fundamental dignity of every human being.”¹ Paying attention to the survivors of sexual abuse should be the first priority of the Catholic Church and of all Christian churches today. In Faggioli’s opinion the abuse crisis should be “the center of the pope’s ongoing synodal process” and not “one among other equally important issues.”²

1 Massimo Faggioli and Hans Zollner, “The abuse crisis should be the center of the pope’s ongoing synodal process,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 15 November 2022, <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/abuse-crisis-should-be-center-popes-ongoing-synodal-process> (accessed 5. 2. 2024).

2 Ibid.

1. Can it still be legitimate to speak about hope in the context of the abuse crisis? Comments on three recent reactions to the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church

The synodal path in Germany was launched in response to the 2018 MHG report on clerical sexual abuse³ and therefore the opening line of its preamble makes it absolutely clear: “As a Synodal Assembly, we are walking a path of repentance and renewal. We face the criticism and the justified accusation of those affected by sexualised violence, abuse of power and its cover-up in the Church.”⁴ Inspired by the opening line of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* and by the Würzburg synod and its famous statement *Unsere Hoffnung*, the opening line of the preamble does not forget to speak of hope either: “As Synod members, we stand with our guilt and need, with our hope and our faith in the midst of a world that is itself shaken by serious crises.” This is even true for the sexual abuse crisis: “We also see encouraging signs of hope in this grave crisis: the decisive commitment of those affected and of survivors to clarification, reappraisal and change testifies to a trust in the liberating God whom no power in the world can silence for good and who is also able to make His word effective anew in crisis situations of the Church through prophetic voices.”⁵

Following a recommendation of the 2017 final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference ordered a national review of its governance and management structures that led to the 2020 report: *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*. The introduction is a quotation from the opening line of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*: “The joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys

3 Cf. *Sexueller Missbrauch an Minderjährigen durch katholische Priester, Diakone und männliche Ordensangehörige im Bereich der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz*, https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/MHG-Studie-gesamt.pdf (accessed 5. 2. 2024).

4 Der synodale Weg, “Preamble Text: Listen, learn, taking new ways: The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany,” § 1. The documents of this process can be consulted in English here: <https://www.synodalerweg.de/english/documents> (accessed 5. 2. 2024).

5 Ibid., §§ 5–6.

and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ.”⁶ One wonders though whether the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference in its response to this document should not rather first have accepted the ‘Call to reform’ of the Review instead of starting with three rather self-centred ‘Causes for hope’: “Despite shame at the past behaviour of some fellow clergy and religious, the vast majority of priests, nuns and brothers have been faithful to their vocations and continue to pour themselves out in servant leadership today.” The bishops also see reasons of hope in the fruits which “a right understanding of ‘co-responsibility’ in leadership” may bring forth and in “the willingness of the wider community to give the Church ‘a second chance.’”⁷

For Pope Francis, in his May 2023 address to the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Protection of Minors, hope is not immediately given but the ultimate result of God’s healing work and of the development of a “spirituality of reparation”: “Where harm was done to people’s lives, we are called to keep in mind God’s creative power to make hope emerge from despair and life from death.” [...] “Where life is broken, then, I ask you to help put pieces back together, in the hope that what is broken can be repaired.”⁸

2. Renewing theological anthropology in light of the sexual abuse crisis

The respected and much-missed Catholic theologian Rick Gaillardetz⁹ was surely right when he claimed “an integrated social analysis” of the sexual abuse crisis is needed. Instead of looking for a monocausal explanation, several causes – which relate to “personal agency, social structure, and culture” – need

6 Implementation Advisory Group and the Governance Review Project Team, *The Light from the Southern Cross: Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia. A Report and Recommendations on the Governance and Management of Dioceses and Parishes in the Catholic Church in Australia*, 1 May 2020, 2.

7 *Response of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to ‘The Light from the Southern Cross: Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia’*, 24–27 November 2020, 3.

8 See <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2023/05/pope-tells-safeguarding-body-not-to-be-discouraged-amid-setbacks> (accessed 5. 2. 2024).

9 Gaillardetz, a professor at Boston College, died of cancer in November 2023, aged only 65.

to be investigated: “the moral failings of individual clerics,” “priestly celibacy,” “a defective understanding of human sexuality” and “a problematic theology of the priesthood.”¹⁰ For Massimo Faggioli the sexual abuse crisis is “also a theological failure”¹¹ in which different theological disciplines are involved. Among those mentioned in his article are ecclesiology, the theology of priestly ordination, the relationship between the clergy and the laity, the role of women in the church, soteriology, moral theology and the teaching on sexuality. Church history, theology of childhood and liturgy are treated in greater detail in his article.¹² For feminist theologian Susan A. Ross it is especially necessary to revise “the dominant image of the powerful male God,” clericalism and “magisterial teaching that sees all sexual relationships according to the norm of procreation.”¹³

In what follows, I will pay particular attention to a chapter which the Spanish theologian Lluís Oviedo published in the 2020 collective volume *The Abuse of Minors in the Catholic Church: Dismantling the Culture of Cover Ups*. The chapter is entitled: “Does faulty theology play a role in the abuse crisis?”¹⁴ In this chapter Oviedo identifies beliefs and views that may have triggered and even justified sexual abuse by clergy, even if he is aware that it is not always easy “to isolate external cultural ideas and the internal organizational culture.”¹⁵ He is also aware that for some the pre-Vatican II culture of clericalism and for others Vatican II and its turn to the world will have triggered

10 Richard Gaillardetz, “Loving and Reforming a Holy yet Broken Church. My ‘Last Lecture,’” *Theological Studies* 97 (2023), 62–81, 69. Cf. Gaillardetz, “A Church in Crisis: How Did We Get Here? How Do We Move Forward?,” *Worship* 93 (2019), 202–24 and “Ecclesial Belonging in This Time of Scandal,” *Worship* 94 (2020), 196–204.

11 Massimo Faggioli, “The Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis as a Theological Crisis: Emerging Issues,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019), 572–89, 589.

12 *Ibid.*, 580.

13 Susan A. Ross, “Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019), 632–52, esp. 650–52.

14 Lluís Oviedo, “Does Faulty Theology Play a Role in the Abuse Crisis?,” in ed. Anthony J. Blasi and Lluís Oviedo (eds.), *The Abuse of Minors in the Catholic Church: Dismantling the Culture of Cover Ups* (London – New York: Routledge, 2020), 69–98. Oviedo teaches theological anthropology at the Antonianum in Rome and fundamental theology at the Theological Institute of Murcia.

15 *Ibid.*, 69. His theoretical framework, which he explains in the first section, is influenced by literature on “social imaginaries” (Cornelius Castoriadis), by the mature Niklas Luhmann, who discovered that it was not sufficient to study social systems but also dominant ideas, and by the field of cultural evolution. *Ibid.*, 70–73.

the abuse crisis. Since both positions need a lot of nuance, Oviedo prefers to only look at the responsibility of theology and in his opinion “theology has sinned more by omission and less by actively exerting any influence.”¹⁶ In his analysis he pays attention to both theological method and to “suspicious contents.”¹⁷

As to the former, for decades theology “has been predominantly a speculative and aprioristic discourse” based on Scripture and Tradition. The study of empirical data was not considered a *locus theologicus* and when the Council asked to pay attention to the “signs of the times” theologians did not identify the abuse crisis to be one of these signs.¹⁸ Oviedo discusses “inculturation and its challenges” as a second formal issue. However, while some blame the Catholic Church for having too easily embraced “a sexually relaxed dominant culture,” others like Charles Taylor criticise it for not developing enough sensitivity to culture. Hence there is not enough ground for Oviedo to maintain this issue as a potential root cause of the abuse crisis.¹⁹

Oviedo knows that the great Christian traditions in their theological anthropology offer variations of a “relational program between the human person and God” which consists of three components: “created in the image of God, sinners, and redeemed by grace.”²⁰ Compared to Lutheran theology the Catholic Church has developed a more optimistic anthropology in its conviction that sin never destroys God’s good creation and that in the sacrament of reconciliation the sinner encounters God’s healing offer of grace. In the light of the sexual abuse crisis it can according to Oviedo not be deduced that Catholic anthropology was wrong, but “its fault was rather overgeneralization, or the inability to spot exceptions and cases in which pathologies and other defects can even create a big question regarding the central claim about human likeness to God.”²¹

Assisted by recent developments in the behavioural sciences, theology should develop a more realistic theological anthropology. “It needs to come

16 Ibid., 77.

17 Ibid., 81.

18 Ibid., 77–79.

19 Ibid., 79–80.

20 Ibid., 81.

21 Ibid., 82. Also for Hans Zollner S.J., “The Child at the Center: What Can Theology Say in the Face of the Scandals of Abuse?,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019), 692–710, the warnings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer against “a *cheap grace* or a *cheap forgiveness*” remain valid today. Ibid., 700.

to terms with the wide plurality of forms that human behaviour assumes, and needs to make place for its worst cases and manifestations.”²² Oviedo concretely shows how perpetrators, Church authorities but even the survivors, influenced by “a too idealistic anthropology,”²³ were guilty of “self-deception” of different kinds, analogous to what Catholic tradition terms “original sin.”

Self-deception was surely involved in human sinfulness or negativity already at the level of perpetrators, who could convince themselves that such an abusive behavior was not a sin, or was not a serious sin, or was a sin that could be easily remedied or forgiven in sacramental praxis. I am convinced by many testimonies that in many cases this kind of self-deception was present and was even being projected onto the victims, who were convinced about the good and beneficial nature of such abuses. The self-deception was surely present at the level of Church authorities who dealt with the problem, too. Again many testimonies point to an attitude that reveals how far these authorities were wrongly self-convinced that abusive clergy could not be that bad or so perverse; that they could overcome the problem in quite an easy way, through simple measures and the help of sacramental grace; or that they would not relapse when being allowed to. To some extent, many in the Catholic hierarchy were convinced in those years about the impossibility that such bad behaviours could even happen.²⁴

In some contexts self-deception goes hand in hand with a culture of shame.²⁵ Oviedo offers three suggestions for theological anthropology. First, in light of “the psychopathologies associated with abuse,” “theology should make more place for a hard-to-tame negativity and recognize its limits when trying to relate human nature to a divine plan.” Second, theology should become more modest in its reflections about human nature. To quote Oviedo again: “The only theological certainty is the divine will to save humans; but when human nature is under examination, things become too fuzzy and a theory trying to fix every aspect or to determine how good or how bad it is, is destined to fail.”²⁶ Theology should thirdly “assume a decidedly systemic, integral, or holistic approach” and accept the help of disciplines such as psychology, social sciences, therapeutic studies and law.

22 Oviedo, “Faulty Theology,” 82.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 83.

25 Cf. Jaisy A. Joseph, “Responding to Shame with Solidarity: Sex Abuse Crisis in the Indian Catholic Church,” *Asian Horizons* 14 (2020), 381–92 and Shaji George Kochuthara, “The Sexual Abuse Scandal and a New Ethical Horizon: A Perspective from India,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019), 931–49.

26 Oviedo, “Faulty Theology,” 85.

3. Rethinking ecclesiology in light of the sexual abuse crisis

As an ecclesologist I also want to touch briefly on ecclesiological views which the literature on sexual abuse believes to have been conducive to potential misbehaviour by clerics. When reviewing the ecclesiological theories and models of the past Oviedo actually appreciates recent evolutions in the Church's magisterial teaching on holiness and sin in the Church.²⁷ For him the essential holiness of the Church can be defended even today, as long as one recognizes that sin happens in the Church.²⁸ Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have even gone one step further and have insisted that the Church must do penance for the abuse committed by its members. The contours of a healthy doctrine of the holiness of the Church, therefore, are clear: "Holiness, after these scandals, depends on the capacity to recognize limits and mistakes, to acknowledge the damage caused, and on the will to compensate the victims."²⁹

Oviedo knows that the dominant image of the Church as a *societas perfecta* has, after the Council, been replaced by the so-called "communion ecclesiology." This ecclesiology gives ample attention to the sacramental dimension of the Church and insists on the communion of the believers with the Holy Trinity. This important theological contribution should not

27 Oviedo situates the start of this debate "at the end of the 1990s" (ibid., 87) but the debate is already much older with important articles by Congar and Rahner written in the 1940s. Cf. Peter De Mey, "Church Renewal and Reform in the Documents of Vatican II: History, Theology, Terminology," *The Jurist* 71 (2011), 369–400.

28 See for another opinion Faggioli, "Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis," 583: "No less in need of reexamination is the ecclesiological notion that the church as such does not sin, only the individual members do." Richard Gaillardetz, "Loving and Reforming a Holy yet Broken Church," 64, notes that, "for many of us today, in the face of endless scandal, it is the church's sinfulness, not its holiness, that requires little defense. [...] If the church is holy, it is only because Christ has not abandoned it and his promised Spirit remains, in spite of the impediments we have placed before it." For Cristina Lledo Gomez, "The 'Conducive Situation' in the Context of Abuse and the Catholic Church: Exploring Integral Theories of Sexual Violence and Ecclesiologies Supporting Sexual Abuse," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 41 (2021), 127–47, the idea that the Church is "only holy, never unholy, and therefore above reproach by moral or civil laws" is one of four problematic ecclesiological views which she discusses. The others are "the priest alone as Christ himself, ontologically changed through ordination which makes him morally and spiritually above lay persons; the Church as God's kingdom which makes its laws divine and superior to civil laws; the Church's main concern is the spiritual development of persons." Ibid., 135–42.

29 Oviedo, "Faulty Theology," 89.

completely be dismissed but be brought in balance with the somewhat neglected institutional dimension of the Church, as long as the Church as an institution promotes “a culture of accountability and transparency.”³⁰

In light of the abuse crisis it is for Oviedo also important that the Church accepts the “worldly assistance” of, for example, “the civil power’s police and judiciary.”³¹ It has become difficult to defend privileges such as the appeal to the seal of confession to a secular court or government commission.³² Faggioli also briefly discusses another point, namely “the Trent-to-Vatican II assumption of a certain territoriality of the Catholic Church based on the diocesan and parish structure.”³³ The link with the sexual abuse crisis is clear: “The territoriality of the diocesan presbyterium was one of the roots of a misplaced sense of solidarity between priests and their bishops in the cover-up of crimes; territoriality was also a misused ‘asset’ in the pattern of transfer of abusive priests to another parish or another diocese instead of their removal from ministry.”³⁴

The French Catholic moral theologian Marie-Jo Thiel is aware that the literature on synodality calls for a circular relationship between one, some and everyone, but it often occurs that “one takes the decisions and has the final

30 Ibid., 90. Oviedo does not seem to be aware of or does not take into account the fact that the ecclesiology of communion has especially been defended in the Catholic Church since the special assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1985, which twenty years after the end of the Council had become more critical of the ecclesiology of the people of God. The rediscovery of the notion of the people of God in the current pontificate is an important act of reception of the Second Vatican Council. See also the special issue on ‘Accountability in a Synodal Church’ which the Peter and Paul Seminar, a group of Roman Catholic ecclesialogists and canonists has published in *Studia Canonica* 56:2 (2022), 369–708. One of the first pleas for an accountable Church is found in Stephen Pope, “Accountability and Sexual Abuse in the United States: Lessons for the Universal Church,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 69 (2004), 73–88. According to Pope, “insufficient accountability has undermined the health of the Church” and “more adequate structures of accountability would help to strengthen the genuine authority of the Church.” Ibid., 88.

31 Oviedo, “Faulty Theology,” 94.

32 Neil Ormerod, “Sexual Abuse, a Royal Commission, and the Australian Church,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019), 950–66, 956–58.

33 Faggioli, “Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis,” 584.

34 Ibid. Richard Lennan, “Beyond Scandal and Shame? Ecclesiology and the Longing for a Transformed Church,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019), 590–610 distinguishes three tasks “for an ecclesiology able to be both realistic and hopeful in the current circumstances”: “facing the church’s brokenness; understanding the church in terms of grace and human freedom; and facilitating the participation of all the church’s members.” Ibid., 590.

word.”³⁵ The sexual abuse crisis in the Church requires in her opinion that the pleas for a synodal Church also promote a culture of mutual accountability. She even asks that this be inscribed in the Code of Canon Law.³⁶ The French ecclesiologist Hervé Legrand is also convinced that there is a connection between the dissociation of laity and ordained in Catholic ecclesiology – which even persisted long after the Second Vatican Council – and the abuse crisis.³⁷ The current pleas for a synodal Church can be seen as a response to the sexual abuse crisis.³⁸ In the meantime the Synodal Path in Germany has approved a number of concrete implementation texts to prevent sexual abuse in the future. They deal among others with ‘Prevention of sexualized violence, intervention and dealing with perpetrators in the Catholic Church’ and ‘Measures against abuse of women in the Church’.³⁹

4. To conclude: narratives of hope

In the conclusion of the chapter which has played a central role in this paper, Lluís Oviedo answers his own question: “Does faulty theology play a role in the abuse crisis?” In his opinion “theology could probably play some role, but her fault is rather associated with passivity or absence.”⁴⁰ His final word is, therefore one of hope:

35 Marie-Jo Thiel, *L'Église catholique face aux abus sexuels sur mineurs* (Paris: Bayard, 2019), 616.

36 *Ibid.*, 612: “ Pour prévenir les abus sexuels, il importe d’encadrer le pouvoir des clercs, prêtres, religieux, mais aussi des évêques et des cardinaux, de les obliger à se situer dans la transparence et à rendre des comptes sur la manière dont ils font usage de leur autorité.”

37 Hervé Legrand, “Les dimensions systémiques de la crise des abus dans l’Église catholique et la réforme de l’ecclésiologie courante,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 104 (2020), 551–87, esp. 559–67 (l. ‘La scission actuelle entre clercs et laïcs a favorisé les abus’).

38 One of the first examples was the organization of a Lay National Self-Convended Synod in Chile in January 2019. Cf. Sandra Arenas, “The Awakening of Chile: Demands for Participation and the Synodal Church,” *Louvain Studies* 45 (2022), 97–111. At the end of her article she writes: “The church has to be a teacher of inclusion and of generating spaces of freedom for its members. The rest is something else, but not the church of Christ.” *Ibid.*, 111.

39 See <https://www.synodalerweg.de/english/documents> (accessed 5. 2. 2024).

40 Oviedo, “Faulty Theology,” 96. Cf. also Faggioli, “Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis,” 586: “There is no imaginable exit from the Catholic abuse crisis without the intervention of the civil or secular authorities, at least of the judicial power.”

As already stated, theology cannot remain the same and work the same way after the abuse crisis, and I just hope we can learn the lesson to avoid repeating the same mistakes, the same delusions. The lesson to be learned clearly includes changes in method and approach, and surely a new style and awareness regarding its responsibility in ecclesial dynamics. The invited engagement entails a message of hope and reparation.⁴¹

One of the goals of the conference at which the paper on which this article was based was given was “to investigate how narratives of hope were framed and successfully shared in past crises.” Béatrice Guillon, who teaches theology at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris, wrote an article, in which she showed how traditional understandings of the evangelical counsels could easily lead to abuse, with a message of hope that focuses on the paschal mystery.⁴² Experiencing sexual abuse, she testifies, “is an experience of authentic death.”⁴³ When after a long and difficult process an abused person is able to throw away all unnecessary feelings of guilt and freely accepts their status of survivor, it may happen that this person, “who has freely entered into death, can now let herself be led by Christ, receive from Him the white garment washed in his blood (Ap 7:14) and live the life of the Risen One.”⁴⁴ In the case of the sexual abuse crisis narratives of hope probably are only possible on the condition which immediately follows the words of Guillon: “Only someone who has lived through this tragedy and travelled this road can say such things.”⁴⁵

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41 Oviedo, “Faulty Theology,” 97.

42 Béatrice Guillon, “Victimes d’abus dans l’Eglise : Pour une théologie de la vulnérabilité, de la responsabilité et de la guérison,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 144 (2022), 24–37. She criticizes the fact that in some religious communities it is impossible for its members to live their vows in a spirit of “interior freedom.” For a few examples cf. *ibid.*, 29: “La radicalité du message évangélique peut devenir le lieu des plus odieuses perversions lorsqu’elle devient l’instrument d’un abus de pouvoir, lorsque le supérieur exhorte une communauté à vivre l’obéissance pour asseoir son pouvoir et en abuser sur les personnes. [...] Le conseil évangélique de la pauvreté place la personne consacrée dans une situation de dépendance qui devient facteur de vulnérabilité dans les situations de déviance. Le fait de ne disposer d’aucun bien personnel ne donne pas la liberté de partir facilement. [...] La résignation devient la seule réponse possible aux situations d’abus de pouvoir.”

43 *Ibid.*, 36.

44 *Ibid.*, 37.

45 *Ibid.*