

Chapter 8: Clergy Sexual Abuse as Moral Injury: Confronting a Wounded and Wounding Church

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Moral injury describes the harm caused by betraying a moral code, encompassing psychological trauma, emotional and embodied distress, disorientation to God and the good, diminished identity and agency, as well as damage to relationships and communities. The subject of a growing field of study, moral injury has been predominantly applied to the wounds inflicted on soldiers in combat. Today, it is increasingly being used to explore dimensions of moral anguish endured in a number of professions including law enforcement, health care, and education. Moral injury reaches beyond the harm caused by trauma or sin because it involves psychological, emotional, spiritual, religious, moral, and relational violation as experienced by perpetrators, victim-survivors, as well as bystanders and other implicated subjects.

The central argument of this chapter is that moral injury serves as a crucial interpretive framework for understanding the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal moral anguish caused by clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up. After explaining five key features of moral injury and how it applies to clergy sexual abuse and its concealment by church officials, this chapter considers how the entire church is impacted by moral injury before concluding with several strategies to promote healing.

Clergy Sexual Abuse Inflicts Moral Injury

Conceptions of moral injury vary by specialization and situation. In the experience of soldiers returning from combat, it has been described as a “sacred wound” that is related to but is distinct from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹ While much has been written about trauma—a word

¹ Edward Tick, *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005), 5.

that comes from the Greek word for “wound”—in reference to the mental and emotional impact stemming from a dangerous experience, the term “moral injury” indicates a violation against a person’s dignity, a profound moral betrayal that results in a loss of trust in the goodness of oneself and others.² Moral injury describes a condition of intense moral suffering by tormented souls who do not know “how to recover a shredded moral identity” after perpetuating or bearing witness to cruel or wicked acts.³ In military settings, moral injury has been defined as betrayal by a “person in legitimate authority” in “a high stakes situation” that diminishes character, undermines trust in an honor code or the chain of command, and “elevates despair, suicidality, and interpersonal violence.”⁴ Given the “unique phenomenology” of war and the false equivalence between combat and other experiences of violence, some resist extending the category of moral injury beyond soldiers and veterans.⁵ Nonetheless, moral injury is a valuable interpretive lens for the ripple effects caused by betrayal, in particular for the distortions of self-image, moral deliberation, agency, relationships, and responsibility.

The category of moral injury can be applied to clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up as a moral catastrophe caused by the abuse of sacred trust placed in clergy and the church hierarchy. Moral injury helps us understand the various dimensions of psychological trauma, emotional and embodied pain, religious and moral confusion, diminished identity and efficacy, and shattered relationships. Moral injury caused by clergy sexual abuse and its coverup can be detected in five dimensions of the

² Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, “Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706.

³ Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 42.

⁴ Jonathan Shay, “Moral Injury,” *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31, no. 2 (2014): 182–183.

⁵ Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 8–9.

moral life: identity, reasoning, agency, relationships, and institutional credibility.

First, moral injury affects a person's self-image. In response to a traumatic event, perpetrators, victims, and witnesses struggle to make sense of why this happened and constantly second-guess how they responded. Moral injury applies to victim-survivors whose vulnerability was violated in the high stakes context of spiritual and sexual abuse by someone they trusted, a "legitimate authority" who represents the church or God. For people of faith, identity is often understood in relationship with God and the church, raising disorienting theological and ecclesial questions like: Where is God and how could God allow this to happen? Does God still love me and the others who have been affected? Why didn't the church protect me or come to my defense? Why do so many church members seem unfazed by the scale of abuse by some of its members against other members? Self-image is diminished by a sense of alienation from or abandonment by God. Since clergy serve as representatives for God or God's church, when clergy are perpetrators of spiritual and sexual abuse, some survivors feel like God is complicit in or responsible for their experience of violation. Insofar as priests are viewed by others as holy, respected leaders, as well as religious and moral authorities, survivors can internalize disrespect for themselves, a kind of self-suppression that can become a self-sabotage.⁶ This spiritual wound—for some, a spiritually mortal wound—leads to experiencing life in terms of loss: for some, life has been taken from them, while for others, their soul has been shattered and they feel like they have been left with nothing. Survivors describe their abuse as like the rape or murder of their soul.⁷ When they try to speak the truth of their experience and their abuse is minimized or rejected, it only compounds feelings of shame or rage, isolation or abandonment. Some

⁶ J.D. Jinkerson, "Defining and Assessing Moral Injury: A Syndrome Perspective," *Traumatology* 22, no. 2 (2016): 126.

⁷ Leslie Lothstein, "Neuropsychological Findings in Clergy Who Sexually Abuse," in *Bless Me Father for I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests*, ed. Thomas Plante (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999), 59–85.

perpetrators of clergy sexual abuse wrestle with regret, guilt, shame, and anger. Others turn to the Sacrament of Reconciliation to confess their sins and complete their penance and then demonstrate a stunning lack of remorse or desire to atone for the harm they have caused, citing a “clear conscience.”⁸ Witnesses and others who become aware of abuse also experience moral injury, even if it is less acute than the experience of perpetrators or survivors. Moral injury is enduring, like a permanent scar or lifelong impediment, a radical break that changes the cognitive, affective, and volitional dimensions of the person. It fundamentally alters how people see themselves and others, putting a question mark on previous beliefs, assumptions, and values. In worst case scenarios, moral injury convinces people they are unlovable, incapable of being healed, and beyond redemption.

Second, moral injury casts confusion on moral perception and reasoning. Experiencing such an unexpected abuse of trust shatters trust in how one views and interprets oneself, others, and God: How could I do this? How could I let this happen to me—or someone else? How could God allow such evil? This undercuts confidence in one’s moral compass and judgment in the past, present, and future. Moral injury is experienced as cognitive distortion and moral dissonance, a persistent questioning of one’s ability to know, choose, and do what is right, true, good, and just. Feeling fragmented and disoriented is alienating and “can be debilitating, leading to a chronic moral disease of self-doubt and moral stasis.”⁹ The morally injured are often subject to intrusive and obsessive thinking, painful memories, persistent sadness, exhaustion, agitation, and anxiety. Moral injury is detected in those haunted by an enduring feeling of blameworthiness or the sense they have been severed from themselves,

⁸ As reported to the author by survivors of clergy sexual abuse during a research project from 2020 to 2022, “Creating a Tool for Measuring and Responding to Moral Injury Caused by Clergy Sexual Abuse,” funded by Fordham University’s Taking Responsibility Initiative, takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu/measuring-moral-injury/.

⁹ Larry Kent Graham, *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 87.

others, and God. Living in a state of such moral ambiguity makes it hard to rely on one's perception of self and others, how to healthfully reflect on life and glean moral wisdom, reason through moral dilemmas, and weigh what is owed to self, others, and God.

A faulty capacity for moral reflection and discernment connects with a third dimension of moral injury: diminished agency. In light of what the morally injured person has done, had done to them, or observed, it is difficult to avoid feeling numb, despondent, or a pervasive sense of futility. Struggling to cope with the violation, the resulting pain, and feeling constrained often leads to unreliable self-regulation and an "unraveling of agency."¹⁰ Feeling out of control or a loss of power can produce a variety of effects, although it frequently results in self-medication and substance abuse. For some, it can lead to reckless behavior and compulsive sexual activity while for others the capacity for romantic intimacy and sexual pleasure may be rendered impossible. Defective agency makes it much harder to deliver self-care, as shame and disgust eclipse the compassion and fortitude necessary for healing. Moral injury can lead some to believe they are deserving of a lifetime of punishment, while others might find it unthinkable to experience joy and undertake the necessary steps toward healing. Futility and despair can be a toxic combination, leading to suicide ideation and attempts; some estimates indicate that suicide rates among survivors of clergy sexual abuse are fifty times higher than the general population.¹¹ Moral injury leads people to believe they are stuck and that the scope and scale of the wounds stretch beyond the ability to redress and prevent harm.

A fourth key dimension of moral injury is the damage done to relationships. After sacred trust has been broken, it is exceedingly difficult

¹⁰ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 17–18.

¹¹ G.R. Pafumi, "Suicide Rates Among Victims of Clergy Sex Abuse Exceed 50 Times the General Population," *EIN Presswire*, November 13, 2018, www.einpresswire.com/article/467186245/victimsspeakdb-org-data-infers-suicide-rates-among-victims-of-clergy-sex-abuse-exceed-50-times-the-general-population.

to feel safe and trust others again. Broken loyalty is intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional. The morally injured have to re-learn how to trust themselves and others. Survivors of abuse are more prone to family breakdowns because this violation takes away a sense of security and confidence in others.¹² Abuse also ravages parish communities as secrecy, shame, and blame undermine respect and responsibility for one another.¹³ In secular settings, moral injury spurs distrust for institutions, which presents even more challenges to churches, which are meant to be sacred and safe spaces. When church spaces—including rectories, sacristies, and even confessionals—are settings of spiritual and sexual abuse, this desecration can lead to profound and long-lasting psychological, emotional, spiritual, religious, moral, and social deterioration. While these consequences can be acutely felt by survivors, moral injury also extends to the pain experienced by friends and family of survivors who witness the effects of this betrayal of sacred trust firsthand. Of course, this sense of betrayal extends to all who become aware of the abuse and are outraged by it, perhaps especially by church employees who feel implicated by working for and representing the church. Moral injury reveals the extent to which clergy sexual abuse and its concealment has ripped the church's moral fabric.

This torn moral fabric affects not just the social bonds among church members, but also undermines the moral credibility of the church, a fifth key dimension to moral injury caused by clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up. Revelations of clergy sexual abuse have caused millions of people to leave the church—or feel like the church left them—not wanting to be associated with the grotesque behavior of these predators and their

¹² Leslie Wind, James Sullivan, and Daniel J. Levins, "Survivors' Perspectives on the Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse on Families of Origin," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17, no. 3 (2008): 238–254.

¹³ Paul M. Kline, Robert McMackin, and Edna Lezotte, "The Impact of Clergy Abuse Scandal on Parish Communities," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17, no. 3 (2008): 290–300.

enablers.¹⁴ Those who remain in the church report much lower levels of confidence in church leaders, with fewer turning to the hierarchy for guidance on moral matters.¹⁵ Less than a third of U.S. Catholics believe that priests are ethical, according to one study.¹⁶ The widespread sense of betrayal among the lay faithful has caused moral disorientation and disconnection. Not only does it mean that fewer Catholics trust the church to help inform their conscience, but it also means that fewer Catholics are sharing in the sacramental life of the church. Church officials often invoked fear of scandal as rationale for adopting habits of secrecy and protection, but the failure to confront and reveal the truth in the pursuit of justice—giving to people what is due to them—remains a scandal that stains the church.¹⁷ The moral catastrophe of clergy sexual abuse and its concealment can be considered an “abuse of conscience” by the church.¹⁸ With the loss of moral credibility among church leaders, the authority of the church to evangelize—witness the Gospel, teach dogma, serve human needs, and build inclusive and robust community—continues to erode. Moral injury is a symptom of poor moral health in the church as an institution, as a community, and as a culture.

A Morally Injured Church

Although moral injury is often used to describe psychological, emotional, or spiritual distress, its effects on the intentions, actions, and circumstances

¹⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Many US Catholics Question Their Membership Amid Scandal,” *Gallup*, March 13, 2019, www.news.gallup.com/poll/247571/catholics-question-membership-amid-scandal.aspx.

¹⁵ Michele Dillon, “What Do We Know about How Catholics Inform their Consciences?” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 18, 2018, www.ncronline.org/news/people/what-do-we-know-about-how-catholics-inform-their-consciences.

¹⁶ Megan Brenan, “US Catholics’ Faith in Clergy is Shaken,” *Gallup*, January 11, 2019, www.news.gallup.com/poll/245858/catholics-faith-clergy-shaken.aspx.

¹⁷ Angela Senander, *Scandal: The Catholic Church and Public Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Daniel J. Fleming, “Beyond the Abuse of Power and the Abuse of Conscience: Creating a Course for Theological Ethics in Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Australian Catholic Church,” *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 2 (2020): 333–346.

of moral agents remains unclear. While moral injury has been rightly associated with the moral status of the soul, it has only loosely been connected to moral conscience. Many unresolved questions remain in relation to conscience, moral reasoning, and responsibility. For example, how do we define a category for moral harm meant to encompass both perpetrators and victims, to say nothing of bystanders and other implicated subjects? How do we assess moral duty and culpability for a morally injured individual while being sure to avoid blaming the victim? How do we determine moral capacity and constraint for a morally injured individual with respect to the harm they may contribute to self and others in response to the harm done to them? As the moral center of the human person, conscience is home not only to the capacity for moral reasoning but also discernment of one's vocation as a calling from and response to God. The Catholic Church teaches that conscience is the "sanctuary" to hear the voice of God and the "Vicar of Christ."¹⁹ It is an innate capacity, ongoing activity, and life-long task of formation to interpret, order, discern, and do what is right, true, good, and just in consultation with Scripture, Tradition, reason, and experience. Insofar as the word "conscience" means "to know together," conscience may be personal but never private; just as the work of informing one's conscience is a dialogical process between the individual and the wider community of the church, so also the work of being more attentive and responsive to the effects of moral injury on the conscience is both personal and communal. In light of the moral injury present in the Catholic Church caused by clergy sexual abuse and its concealment by church leaders, as well as the church's robust teaching on moral conscience, Catholic ethicists are both duty-bound and well-positioned to help address and resolve these questions surrounding moral injury in and beyond the church.

By virtue of the sacrament of Baptism, all church members are incorporated into the Body of Christ, which means that Christian faith and discipleship comprise an essentially communal dimension. As

¹⁹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1776, 1778.

explained above, moral injury can be detected in perpetrators, survivors, bystanders or witnesses, as well as other implicated subjects. Moreover, the corporeal nature of the church means that harm to one part of the body affects the whole body, so moral injury necessarily extends from the individual to the interpersonal and the institutional levels of being church together. Paul asserts, “If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). Thomas Merton builds on this imagery to describe the Body of Christ as a “Body of broken bones.”²⁰ Merton argues that violence, hatred, and “torture of the bodies and souls” of people all constitute ways that “Christ suffers dismemberment ... Christ is massacred in His members, torn limb from limb; God is murdered.”²¹ Clergy sexual abuse and its coverup by church leaders is a harrowing example of the desecration and dismemberment of the Body of Christ in the past, present, and future.

Although clergy sexual abuse is usually presented as anomalous by church leaders, efforts by journalists, attorneys, as well as survivors, their advocates, and support networks have revealed a much fuller picture of the truth. Across the globe, thousands of priests have abused hundreds of thousands of children and adults. In all likelihood, the reported cases of abuse represent only a fraction of the actual abuse, as many victims never feel safe enough to tell the truth of what they endured. The fact that the abused typically delay reporting their abuse for decades indicates an ecclesial and civic culture that often imposes silence, stigma, and shame on survivors of clergy sexual abuse.²² Secrecy often keeps survivors from being recognized, a disrespect that perpetuates their sense of diminished value as a form of “social death.”²³ It also keeps other affected persons—and the wider communion of the Body of Christ as a whole—from knowing the

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 72.

²¹ Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 71.

²² For example, the Office of Assistance Ministry to survivors of clergy sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Chicago reports that, on average, survivors wait twenty-five years before reporting their abuse to church or civic officials.

²³ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 135.

depth and breadth of the wounds caused by clergy sexual abuse. In far too many cases, the church has protected and enabled perpetrators of abuse; reports from several countries verify that church officials ignored, dismissed, or minimized allegations, failed to take adequate action to ensure safety against sexual predators, and “obsessively” concealed abuse for decades.²⁴ Consistently church leaders moved perpetrators around to avoid accountability—often in missionary settings, to communities of color, and among Indigenous peoples—to inflict harm on socially and economically marginalized communities.²⁵ This pattern reveals willful failures in fidelity that span the personal to the systemic, symptomatic of indifference if not contempt for the wounds caused by clergy sexual abuse and the layers of moral injury caused by these acts of violation and concealment. To deprive people of the truth is to deaden moral conscience. If people do not know the scope of the problem in the church or the impact clergy sexual abuse has had on its members, they cannot make accurate moral judgments about what can and should be done to bring about the necessary transparency, accountability, healing, and prevention. People who blame survivors for harming the reputation of clergy or the church, who cast doubt on survivors’ narratives, or who are

²⁴ See, for example, Dublin Minister for Justice and Equality, “Report of the Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin,” November 29, 2009, www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504; Australia’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, “Final Report,” December 15, 2017, www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/religious-institutions; Child Rights International Network, “The Third Wave: Justice for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse within the Catholic Church in Latin America,” November 25, 2019, www.home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/2020/5/19/justice-for-survivors-of-child-sexual-abuse-within-the-catholic-church-in-latin-america.

²⁵ See, for example, Alessandra Rizzo and Bradley Brooks, “Predator Priests Shuffled Around Globe,” *NBC News*, April 14, 2010, www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna36523444; Tia Noelle Pratt, “Black Catholics, Racism, and the Sex Abuse Crisis,” *The Revealer*, March 2, 2020, www.therevealer.org/black-catholics-racism-and-the-sex-abuse-crisis-a-personal-reflection/; Allie Ferguson and Bill Radke, “Abusive Priests on Indian Reservations Leave ‘Profound Wound,’” *KUOW*, January 28, 2016, www.kuow.org/stories/abusive-priests-indian-reservations-leave-profound-wound.

unmoved by the suffering of survivors all evince malformed conscience due to individual, communal, and institutional failures. It also makes a number of church members responsible for secondary victimization of those harmed by clergy sexual abuse. The lack of compassion for survivors and commitment to deliver personal and structural restoration indicate that consciences have been formed without appropriate sensitivity to the demands of human dignity, our equal rights to safety and well-being, and our shared responsibilities to prevent abuse of power in religious settings.

Recalling the story of the Good Samaritan, too many members of the church are like the priest and Levite who ignore survivors, represented by the person beaten, robbed, and left for dead on the side of the road; too many of us in the church are unwilling to go out of our way and into the ditch to offer whatever assistance we can manage (Luke 10:25–37). That the robbers in this story are clergy—and other clergy aided and abetted the victimizers—raises urgent and grave concerns about how the church can be a credible moral teacher or witness to the Good News of Jesus’s teaching and healing ministry. To put unquestioning trust in an institution that inadequately forms clergy and has been slow to adopt a “zero tolerance” policy to remove predators from ministry and hold them accountable for the harm they have caused indicates a broken moral compass, one unable to feel righteous anger for the injustices of spiritual and sexual abuse. The church is infected by a sick and sinful culture that prioritizes silence and protection to shield predators rather than do everything possible to ensure a sense of safety and welcome for all, especially the most vulnerable among us. A morally injured church makes it difficult for more people to follow the example of the Samaritan: to “go and do likewise” as Jesus instructs (Luke 10:37).

A few details from this story inform a more faithful response. Since the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously unsafe, Jesus’s audience would likely have been busy judging with scorn the man who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead since this was an expected outcome for traveling such a dangerous path alone. Moreover, Jesus’s audience would have been scandalized that a Samaritan—the most despised outcast they could

fathom—is the one to show mercy to the robbers’ victim. The biblical text tells us that the Samaritan’s heart was “melting” at the sight of this person in need and this visceral human connection moves the Samaritan out of his way and into the ditch where he himself could have been ambushed. It took striking courage for the Samaritan to enter the ditch, deep compassion to alleviate the victim’s suffering, remarkable generosity to heal his wounds and pay for his convalescence at the inn, and boundary-breaking solidarity to blast through the categories of “us and them” that divided Jews and Samaritans. With this story, Jesus reveals that the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” is the wrong question to ask since it implies there is a non-neighbor, someone beyond one’s moral concern. Jesus returns the question to the lawyer, “Who was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” that suggests the better question is: What kind of neighbor am I—and to whom? This Gospel passage illustrates how much more work remains before the church can be confident in its religious and moral formation in preparing people to “go and do likewise” today. A further challenge is added by the fact that the church is not only failing to adequately heal the wounded but is the cause of the wounding. Venerable Bede interprets this text as “the first story of our redemption, told by Christ” where the Samaritan represents Christ and the inn represents the church²⁶, but when the church is endangering psychological, emotional, spiritual, religious, moral, and relational wellbeing, it cannot be considered a safe place for all to experience restoration. There is ample evidence of moral injury in a church responsible for souls in anguish and a dearth of courage, compassion, generosity, and solidarity for and with survivors and all those wounded by clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up.

Clergy sexual abuse arises from an ecclesial culture marked by clericalism, hierarchicalism, and hegemonic masculinity that leave women

²⁶ James F. Keenan, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2008), 3.

and children especially unsafe.²⁷ The church is responsible for this sinful culture as a center of malformation inasmuch as it manipulates information or encourages ignorance, fosters attitudes that revere clergy and discredit survivors and their advocates, and endorses conduct and rules that consolidate power in the hands of clergy while stripping laity of authentic equality and meaningful collaboration. This sinful ecclesial culture is intertwined with all the knowledge, dispositions, actions, relationships, and policies that shape how the church “expresses the meaning of society, the value of the patterned ways of social interaction humans construct, and the significance of the ways in which we live and order our communities.”²⁸ Moral injury pervades the entire institution; this psychological, emotional, spiritual, religious, moral, and relational harm swells *ad intra* and *ad extra*. In light of the many people who no longer identify as practicing Catholics, who feel ambiguous about their relationship with the church, or who do not feel welcome or safe to return to church spaces, this presents a number of challenges for moving toward healing in and beyond the church.

Love Resets a Body of Broken Bones

In his reflection on a divided and wounded church, Thomas Merton proposes that love is the only path to reset the “Body of broken bones” that comprise the Body of Christ. Love implies “acceptance of the pain of reunion” and “begins to heal all wounds.”²⁹ Merton recommends the practice of contemplation to experience God’s mercy as liberation from any doubt of unworthiness (whether one’s own or that of others) and expand compassion in seeking to understand, share in, and alleviate the suffering others bear. Merton explains, “If I do this, I obey God. If I refuse

²⁷ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Sexual Violence against Women and Children: How is Another World Possible?,” paper presented at Catholic Theological Society of America Annual Convention, June 7, 2019, summarized, *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 74 (2019): 160, ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/download/11499/9659/.

²⁸ Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 16.

²⁹ Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 76.

to do it, I disobey Him. It is not therefore a matter left open to subjective caprice.”³⁰ Invoking any number of virtues—whether courage, compassion, or solidarity—will not be enough to bring individual, interpersonal, and institutional healing to the morally injured. When embraced as an individual and collective exercise of love, the church can begin to accept the “pain of reunion” by taking on “the sacrifice and sorrow that are the price of this resetting of bones.”³¹ While we cannot adequately articulate a comprehensive collection of strategies to bring about personal, relational, and structural healing in these pages, we need a more holistic approach to doing theology, developing ecclesiology, and advancing pastoral care in response to these sacred wounds and to restore the dignity, agency, and relationships of the morally injured. This is important because too often the healing process is expected to be done in private, at one’s own expense (if finances allow), confined to a patient-therapist relationship, or a support group. But as bell hooks observes, “Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion.”³² To confront moral injury in the church means to provide a moral witness that all members of the Body of Christ deserve—and will have available to them—pathways to heal together.

Given the loss of safety and trust as well as the abundance of shame, guilt, and anger experienced by so many in the church, it will be far from easy to create the conditions for personal, relational, and communal healing. Experts in healing moral injury describe the long-term work necessary for creating “a culture of safe struggle” that includes “equal emphasis” on both safety and struggle.³³ To heal a morally injured church will require adopting trauma-informed practices for spiritual care, post-traumatic growth, and moral injury reconciliation. The church will have to prioritize attending to the spiritual and moral wounds left by the layers

³⁰ Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 77.

³¹ Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 72.

³² bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 215.

³³ Shay, “Moral Injury,” 190 (emphasis removed).

of betrayal that “is ungluing the glue” previously bonding people to the church and to one another.³⁴ This glue will lack all bonding power as long as people do not feel safe, respected, cared for, welcome, and willing to trust individuals and communities that represent the church. This does not mean it is their responsibility to overcome these anxious and uncomfortable feelings; on the contrary, the church needs to invest in the words, actions, shared rituals, and policy changes that signify sacrifice and sorrow as love shouldering the pain caused by their waves of betrayal. Until the church feels like a place for all to feel safe and welcome, it will need to find other partners to help advance the healing work on the local, regional, and international scales.

Sacrifice and sorrow should include ongoing efforts to lament, repent, and atone for the many crimes and countless sins committed by clergy abusers and their enablers. Lament should communicate honestly about the moral evil done to individuals and their loved ones. This means the morally injured should have ample opportunity to “make truthful assessments and give candid expression of things they’ve done, witnessed, or by which they’ve been affected” to express “personal grief and protest against unjust systems, circumstances, and betrayals” so this can be witnessed both individually and communally.³⁵ This involves centering the voices of survivors to share to the extent they feel comfortable, a radical change for a church that has often muzzled survivors with non-disclosure agreements or other ways of manipulating confidentiality to prevent people from knowing the scope of harm caused by clergy abusers and their enablers.³⁶ Too often, church officials have rushed to calling for forgiveness and reconciliation, imposing the “cheap grace” that skips over

³⁴ Avishai Margalit, *On Betrayal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 83.

³⁵ Brad E. Kelle, *The Bible and Moral Injury: Reading Scripture Alongside War’s Unseen Wounds* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 130.

³⁶ This means empowering survivors to give voice to what they require for their own healing, since financial settlements do not consistently result in sufficient compensation for ongoing treatment or complete communication of pertinent information about the abuser and his risk to others. See Theo Gavrielides, “Clergy Child Sexual Abuse and the Restorative Justice Dialogue,” *Journal of Church and State* 55, no. 4 (2008): 617–639.

remorse, repentance, and the challenging, long-term work of restorative justice.³⁷ One possibility is to initiate shared community practices of a “healing circle,” that would give space to survivors, their loved ones, and representatives from other involved parties like journalists, attorneys, and church employees.³⁸ Every effort should be made to ensure such encounters and interactions are not rendered into hollow symbols or token gestures that “check a box” but fail to garner traction toward authentic transparency, accountability, and healing.

In and beyond the church, healing moral injury will have to take place through relationships marked by mutual respect, compassion, and co-responsibility. In the face of so much silence, stigma, and shame around human sexuality and abuse at the hands of clergy, recovering a degraded self-image and re-asserting one’s own agency can feel too daunting to attempt. Peer support communities have been essential to confer recognition to survivors and organize collective action to initiate life-long steps toward recovery and healing.³⁹ Recovery and resilience are galvanized through relationships and shared rituals. These shared practices integrate the body’s autonomic functions, emotions, and perception and focus attention and thinking in a liminal space and time. Rituals also offer a different value system from clinical treatment, which handles moral injury as a psychological condition that inhibits social adjustment. This approach usually brackets the theological questions of a shattered meaning system and loss of good character. Without social support for the reconstruction of a moral identity within a meaningful system, the underlying isolation of moral injury will remain unaddressed.⁴⁰

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, tr. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 44.

³⁸ Stephen Pope and Janine Geske, “Anger, Forgiveness, and Restorative Justice in Light of Clerical Sexual Abuse and its Cover-up,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019): 611–631.

³⁹ Iim Halimatusa’diyah, “Moral Injury and the Struggle for Recognition of Women Living with HIV/AIDS in Indonesia,” *International Sociology* 34, no. 6 (2019): 711.

⁴⁰ Rita Nakashima Brock, “Moral Conscience, Moral Injury, and Rituals for Recovery,” in *Moral Injury and Beyond: Understanding Human Anguish and Healing Traumatic Wounds*, ed. Renos K. Papadopoulos (New York: Routledge, 2020), 45–46.

Integrating shared practices and fostering inclusive relationships helps dissolve isolation and can model safe bonds worthy of trust. Rituals can be cathartic for strong emotions like anger, guilt, and shame. By participating in symbolic words and actions, the morally injured can experience meaning and purpose in a new and life-giving fashion. As healthy relationships form, “the present can be experienced with equanimity, appreciation, and love; and the future becomes a horizon of possibility for adventure and hope. This flexible connection to and freedom from memory and suffering is the key to what we might call self-forgiveness, a capacity for empathy for self and an expansion of it to wider and wider worlds.”⁴¹ As more people join these efforts, the moral “knowing together” of conscience formation can empower personal and social transformation.

Institutionally, the church is still so far from the transparency, accountability, healing, and prevention required to establish a safe and welcoming church for all. In the view of some, this work requires more than reform; it needs a “refounding” in the beliefs and practices that affirm the equal dignity, mutual respect, and co-responsibility of each member of the church.⁴² This will have to include changing policies and procedures, as Pope Francis initiated with *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* in 2019. But many more steps need to be taken to end the practice of shielding perpetrators from ecclesial and civic accountability. For example, lay people do not have much real power in church governance, as parish council and financial committees are “consultative,” with the pastor presiding over them; their votes are not binding.⁴³ Clericalism, hierarchicalism, and hegemonic masculinity will continue to shape church culture unless and until canon law is changed to reflect genuine equality and co-responsibility between the ordained and laity. Pedagogically, the church must confront its failure to properly form consciences. Spanning the local and universal levels of the

⁴¹ Brock, “Moral Conscience, Moral Injury,” 49–50.

⁴² Gerald Arbuckle, *Abuse and Cover-Up: Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

⁴³ Canon law no. 536 reads, “A pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop.”

church, we need to inform, form, and transform consciences to be more attentive and responsive to oppressive exercise of power, spiritual and sexual abuse, and deception and secrecy that protect perpetrators and rob people of the truth. Consciences have to be empowered to habituate courage, compassion, generosity, and boundary-breaking solidarity to ensure our commitment to restorative justice and doing everything possible to prevent future victims. The moral demands of discipleship—especially to “Go and do likewise” in the face of so many people left in the ditch by clergy abusers and their enablers—require nothing less. When we share in these efforts together, we can begin to turn the tide against the betrayal and anger, shame and confusion, isolation and futility so pervasive in our morally injured church.



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