

Chapter 12: Theological (De)Formations? The Sex Abuse Crisis in the Context of Nuptial Ecclesiology and the Theology of Priesthood

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Some reports into the sex abuse crisis recommend investigating how theology contributes to clericalism.¹ I ask if postconciliar nuptial ecclesiology, influenced by Hans Urs von Balthasar's idea of the Marian and Petrine Church and Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body (ToB), invites critical reflection in this context. I argue that the shift in theological symbolics brought about by ToB and its Balthasarian underpinnings constitutes a move from patriarchal to phallic theology. Whereas the exclusive masculinity of the priesthood used to be justified by an appeal to the natural, God-given authority of the male and the subordination of the female for the good ordering of society, household, and Church, now it is defended by an appeal to the symbolic significance of male sexual anatomy.² This has dangerous implications for the Church, mired as it is in the scandal of clerical abuse.

¹ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, vol. 16 (Australia: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report; Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church, *Sexual Violence in the Catholic Church France 1950–2020, Summary of the Final Report*, by Jean-Marc Sauvé (France: CIASE, 2021), www.ciaise.fr/medias/Ciaise-Summary-of-the-Final-Report-5-october-2021.pdf. For the full report, see “*Commission Indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église*,” CIASE, www.ciaise.fr. See also Gerry O'Hanlon, “Learning from the Murphy Report: A Theological Reflection,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 102, no. 408 (2013): 423–433, www.jstor.org/stable/23631196.

² Tina Beattie, “Human Dignity and Rights in the Context of Gender and the Sacramental Priesthood,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6, no. 1 (2020): 140–157, doi.org/10.30965/23642807-00601009; Mary Anne Case, “The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Anathematization of Gender,” *Religion & Gender* 6, no. 2 (2016): 155–172, doi.org/10.18352/rg.10124.

The Postconciliar Church

In an essay first published in 1971, Balthasar laments the loss of the “deep femininity of the Marian character of the Church,” arguing that it “has become more than ever a male Church, if perhaps one should not say a sexless entity, in which woman may gain for herself a place to the extent that she is ready herself to become such an entity.”³ After a postconciliar decline in Marian devotion and ecclesiology, the 1980s saw a resurgence under the papacy of John Paul II, when Balthasar began to displace Karl Rahner as the postconciliar theologian of choice.⁴ This heralded the turning of the tide against many of the Council’s reforms and the emergence of a more gendered and absolutist ethos under the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

While the extent of Balthasar’s influence on John Paul II is debated, it is discernible in the late Pope’s nuptial and Marian theology. Balthasar wrote a commentary on the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*,⁵ and John Paul II drew upon some of Balthasar’s ideas to offer a response to changing attitudes to human sexuality in Western culture and to the challenges posed by women in their growing demands for equal rights in the Church as well as in secular society. He adopted an irenic approach in his interventions on feminism and women’s rights, calling for a “new feminism” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 99) and seeking to affirm the dignity of women (*Mulieris Dignitatem*), but Balthasar gives a clear sense of what was at stake: “The worldwide offensive of ‘feminism,’ which is battling for the equality of women with men, takes effect within the Church as the

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (London: SPCK, 1975), 70.

⁴ John L. Allen Jr., “Debating Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar: Interview with David Schindler,” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 28, 2003, www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/word112803.htm; Robert Barron, “How von Balthasar Changed My Mind,” in *Renewing Our Hope: Essays for the New Evangelization* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 65–84.

⁵ John Paul II, *Mary: God’s Yes to Man: John Paul’s Encyclical Redemptoris Mater* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). See also Brendan Leahy, “John Paul II and Hans Urs von Balthasar” in *The Legacy of John Paul II*, ed. Gerald O’Collins and Michael Hayes (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), 31–50.

women's claim to the ministerial priesthood. As a whole, the battlefield presents a confusing picture, and this in turn affects the ecclesial arena, which in addition has its own special problems."⁶

ToB originated as a Catechesis on the Book of Genesis, delivered in weekly audiences between 1979 and 1984 and subsequently published as *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*.⁷ It offers an innovative approach to sexual difference based on the claim that Genesis 2 reveals the nuptial meaning of the human body, expressed in different but complementary ways in marriage and voluntary continence (celibacy and virginity). Seeking to overcome any soul/body dualism, ToB represents the body as having a sexual language, capable of expressing the truth of the human created for communion in interpersonal relationships of mutual self-giving but vulnerable to the effects of original sin in its capacity for shame and abuse. The procreative sexual love between husband and wife is analogous to the fruitful relationship of Christ the Bridegroom to his Bride the Church. This finds expression in the eschatological hope of those who commit themselves to lifelong virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, so that voluntary continence "*acquired the meaning of an act of spousal love*, that is, of a spousal gift of self with the end of answering in a particular way the Redeemer's spousal love; a gift of self understood as a *renunciation*, but realized above all *out of love*."⁸

ToB is widely disseminated through the Theology of the Body Institute under the leadership of Christopher West, and through bishops' conferences, dioceses, universities, and pastoral and parish programmes.⁹

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Women Priests? A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture," *Communio* 22 (1995): 164, www.communio-icr.com/articles/view/women-priests; Also published as "Women Priests?" in *New Elucidations*, trans. Sr. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).

⁷ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2006).

⁸ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 79.9. Numbers refer to audience and paragraph numbers in the Waldstein translation, and all italics are as given in the text.

⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Theology of the Body Overview," www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/catholic-

It is promoted as a resource for priestly formation,¹⁰ and it enjoys popularity among conservative political groups and media outlets where it is used to challenge progressive ideas around sexuality and gender.¹¹ Contextualizing her research into young Catholic seminarians in the US, Medora W. Barnes writes: “From the 1979–1984 teachings by Pope John Paul II—collectively known as ‘theology of the body’—to within more recent writings, the Catholic Church has responded to feminism, contraception, sexual liberation, and the ongoing changes in beliefs and norms across Western society by coalescing around an ‘anti-gender’

teaching/theology-of-the-body; Theology of the Body Institute, “Providing Answers to Life’s Burning Questions,” tobinstitute.org/; Catholic Diocese of Broken Bay, “Theology of the Body,” www.bbcatholic.org.au/our-faith/evangelisation/life-marriage-and-family/understanding-the-human-person/theology-of-the-body; Pontifex University, “Master of Sacred Arts: The Theology of the Body and the New Evangelization,” www.pontifex.university/page/show/339867; University of Dallas, “Theology of the Body,” udallas.edu/ministry/academics/continuing/tob.php; Franciscan University of Steubenville, “A Foundational Vision: Theology of the Body,” franciscanathome.com/node/2158.

¹⁰ See Theology of the Body Institute, “In the Person of Christ Clergy Enrichment Programme,” tobinstitute.org/programs/in-the-person-of-christ/; Fr Thomas J. Loya, STB, “Catholic Clergy Formation and Theology of the Body,” *Ascension*, April 30, 2019, media.ascensionpress.com/2019/04/30/catholic-clergy-formation-and-theology-of-the-body/; Thomas J. McGovern, “The Spousal Dimension of the Priesthood,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 3, no. 1, (Spring 2003): 95–110, doi.org/10.5840/ncbq20033180.

¹¹ EWTN, “Theology of the Body,” www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/theology-of-the-body-21271; Andrew Cannon, “Pope St. John Paul II and the ‘Theology of the Body,’” *The European Conservative*, November 7, 2021, europeanconservative.com/articles/essay/pope-st-john-paul-ii-and-the-theology-of-the-body/; José Granados, DCJM, “The Theology of the Body in the United States,” *Humanum: Issues in Family, Culture and Science* 3 (2015): humanumreview.com/articles/the-theology-of-the-body-in-the-united-states, published by the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC; Michael Quinlan, “Making Progress: Dehumanizing Humanity,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, April 2, 2016, theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/04/making-progress-dehumanizing-humanity.html; The Family Science Alliance, “Lectori Salutem,” www.csaladtudomany.hu/november-2021/. See also an appeal to ToB in a campaign against the Nebraska Department of Education curriculum by the Nebraska Catholic Conference, Jeremy, “Attacking the Theology of the Body,” *Nebraska Catholic Conference*, March 19, 2021, necatholic.org/news-events/newsroom.html/article/2021/03/19/attacking-the-theology-of-the-body.

position.”¹² ToB has been criticised for its abstraction, its romanticization, its exclusive focus on sexual love without regard for other aspects of bodily expressiveness and activity, its resistance to contraception, and its method of scriptural engagement and interpretation.¹³ Luke Timothy Johnson observes that it reveals “deep disinterest in the ways the experience of married people, and especially women ... might inform theology and the decision-making process of the church.”¹⁴

Pope Francis offers a less idealistic and more pastorally responsive theology of human relationships in his 2016 post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Amoris Laetitia*, though he continues to appeal to the Marian and Petrine Church to justify the exclusion of women from the sacramental priesthood. Responding to Swedish journalist Kristina Kappellin’s question as to why the Church does not ordain women, he said, “In Catholic ecclesiology there are two dimensions to consider: the Petrine dimension, from the apostle Peter, and the apostolic college, which is the pastoral activity of the bishops; and the Marian dimension, which is the feminine dimension of the Church ... and the Church is the spouse of Christ. It is a spousal mystery.”¹⁵ Francis’s attempt to bring about a shift in the ethos of the Church’s pastoral ministry has exposed deep rifts in the Catholic hierarchy and the laity.¹⁶

¹² Medora W. Barnes, “Catholic Seminarians on ‘Real Men,’ Sexuality, and Essential Male Inclusivity,” *Religions* 13 (2022): 352, doi.org/10.3390/rel13040352.

¹³ Charles Curran, “Marriage, Sexuality, Gender, and the Family,” in *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 160–201; Luke Timothy Johnson, “A Disembodied ‘Theology of the Body,’” *Commonweal*, June 4, 2004, www.commonweal magazine.org/disembodied-theology-body; Christina Traina, “Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground,” in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 278–279.

¹⁴ Johnson, “A Disembodied ‘Theology of the Body’”

¹⁵ Holy See Press Office, “The Pope Speaks with Journalists in the Return Flight from Sweden,” February 2, 2016, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/11/02/161102a.pdf.

¹⁶ Msgr. Robert Batule, “*Amoris Laetitia* in Light of Theology of the Body,” *Crisis Magazine*, May 14, 2018, www.crisismagazine.com/2018/affirming-theology-body; Philip Lawler,

The culture wars dividing the Church in the United States and elsewhere are symptomatic of a continuing clash between those who see strict adherence to church teaching on sexual and reproductive ethics as fundamental to Catholic identity and those who welcome Francis's more holistic approach with its emphasis on social, economic, and environmental justice.

A 2021 "Survey of American Catholic Priests" finds a correlation between priests' political views and their approval of Pope Francis, with 68.9 percent of those who describe their politics as "very conservative" disapproving of Francis, while none of those who identified themselves as liberal on politics disapproved of him. The survey also produced "strong empirical confirmation of the nearly ubiquitous perception that younger priests are more orthodox in their beliefs than older priests."¹⁷ In comparison with an earlier survey conducted in 2002, this study finds greater opposition to the ordination of women and married men, and some hardening of attitudes with regard to birth control for married couples and masturbation.¹⁸

One witness quoted in The Australian Royal Commission Report, Dr. G. O'Hanlon, SJ, refers to "a resurgence of clericalism in Australia's seminaries and seminaries worldwide."¹⁹ Another witness, Dr. Thomas Doyle, OP, cites studies that "indicate that the present generation of young priests see themselves as essentially different from the laity and as men set apart by God: 'It appears from this and other indicators that Catholic

"Betraying the Legacy of John Paul II," *First Things*, August 19, 2019, www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/08/betraying-the-legacy-of-john-paul-ii.

¹⁷ Brad Vermurlen, Stephen Cranney, and Mark Regnerus, "Introducing the 2021 Survey of American Priests: Overview and Selected Findings," *SSRN*, October 2021, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3951931.

¹⁸ Vermurlen, Cranney and Regnerus, "Introducing the 2021 Survey." Priests' opposition to abortion remains high across both surveys.

¹⁹ Australian Royal Commission, Transcript of G. O'Hanlon, Case Study 50, February 8, 2017, 24993:28–24994:6, 639.

clericalism is alive, malignant and prospering.”²⁰ With this in mind, I raise some unsettling questions about how the gendered theologies that emerged during the papacy of John Paul II might have contributed to this growth in conservatism and the clericalism associated with it.

Nuptial Theology and Priestly Formation

John Paul II seeks to defend the celibacy and masculinity of the priesthood without denying what he sees as the essentially “spousal meaning of the body.”²¹ In his 1992 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, he explains his theological understanding of the law of celibacy:

The will of the Church finds its ultimate motivation in the link between celibacy and sacred ordination, which configures the priest to Jesus Christ the head and spouse of the Church. The Church, as the spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her. (no. 29)

The vocation to celibacy requires self-discipline and control. Not only does it constitute an exceptional earthly condition in relation to the normativity of marriage,²² it also entails a sustained struggle against the “threefold concupiscence” identified as “concupiscence of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life.”²³ In a section of ToB titled “Sexual Shame,” concupiscence is cited as a particular danger: “Man has shame of the body because of concupiscence. More exactly, he has shame

²⁰ Australian Royal Commission, “Précis—Father Thomas (Tom) Doyle OP,” Case Study 50, Exhibit 50-0003, IND.0650.001.0001_R at 0044_R., 639, www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/IND.0650.001.0001_R.pd.

²¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 13.2.

²² John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 73.4–5.

²³ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 26.1–2. The scriptural reference for this is 2 John 1:6. In some translations, “concupiscence” is translated as “lust.” See Zenit news agency’s interview with translator Michael Waldstein: “Retranslating the Theology of the Body,” archive.secondspring.co.uk/articles/waldstein.htm.

not so much of the body, but more precisely of concupiscence.”²⁴ John Paul II repeatedly refers to the conflict between the purity of the heart and the concupiscence of the flesh, observing that “The ‘heart’ has become a battlefield between love and concupiscence.”²⁵ Male sexuality is undeniably vulnerable to violent and exploitative impulses, as statistics of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and trafficking make clear,²⁶ but this emphasis on the relationship between shame and the sexual appetites has implications for those celibate men who are not sufficiently integrated in their sexual self-understanding to attain to the high ideals of ToB.

The clergy offenders interviewed by Marie Keenan in her research into clerical abuse in the Irish Church offer tragic testimony to the psychological conflicts entailed in the struggle described in ToB, with its deep associations between lust or concupiscence and shame. Keenan concludes that, while her interviewees aspired to “Perfect Celibate Clerical Masculinity,”²⁷ with rigid attitudes towards doctrinal orthodoxy and sexual purity, underlying these were feelings of self-loathing, arrested sexual development, a fear of women and girls and/or repressed homosexuality, and an incapacity for emotional intimacy. She concludes that “Shame-based identities underpin my reflections on the link between the failure to achieve Perfect Celibate Clerical Masculinity and child sexual offending. ... The major thesis of my work is that sexual abuse is inevitable given the meaning system that is taught by the Catholic Church and to which many priests adhere.”²⁸

She relates this “meaning system” to “current ecclesiology [which] suggests a dual model of Church in which the Church of the clergy is superior and more ‘holy’ than the Church of the laity.”²⁹ While this allows

²⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 28.5.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 32.3.

²⁶ UN Women, “Facts and figures: Ending violence against women,” www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures.

²⁷ Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 245.

²⁸ Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 255.

²⁹ Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 237.

the priest abuser to experience “a dominant power position in the public realm,” the interviewees in her research indicated that “personal powerlessness, lack of autonomy, loneliness and frustration in the private sphere were very much part of daily life.”³⁰ The “clerical sexual offender” is, she argues, “someone whose clerical masculine identity and way of ‘doing’ priesthood or religious brotherhood is built on a life that is impossible to live.”³¹ There are undoubtedly many good priests who through God’s grace do achieve the renunciation demanded by celibacy, but many do not. Some are discreetly engaged in sexual relationships, others become abusers.

All reports into the sex abuse crisis draw attention to the exaggerated trappings of power invested in the priesthood. One French woman recalled how she and her sister were abused by a priest as teenagers: “We are in a condition of submission ... in a mental captivity. So, we follow this person who suddenly takes power over us. ... We are caught in a spider web.”³² Sexual abuse as an expression of power means that the subjugated and feminized other is not necessarily female but can be a child or vulnerable adult of either sex or any age. Sexual abuse is about power and not sexual orientation.

The young US seminarians interviewed by Barnes show attitudes to masculinity that are in some respects worryingly similar to those identified by Keenan. On the one hand, Barnes argues, in equating anatomical maleness with masculinity and rejecting social constructivist approaches to gender, the seminarians had a more inclusive understanding of masculinity than their secular counterparts because anatomy, not behaviour or character, is the determinant. On the other hand, they were clearly anxious to avoid being seen as gay. Barnes writes: “Between the general Catholic teachings about sexuality, the specific rules against homosexual priests, and

³⁰ Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 237.

³¹ Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, xv.

³² Mireille, quoted in Sylvie Corbet, “French Report: 330,000 Children Victims of Church Sex Abuse,” *Associated Press*, October 5, 2021, apnews.com/article/europe-france-child-abuse-sexual-abuse-by-clergy-religion-ab5da1ff10f905b1c338a6f3427a1c66.

the context of the sexual abuse scandals, the seminarians felt pressure to project a very traditional heterosexual image, even while arguing for a biological essentialist view that is inclusive of all men regardless of behaviour.”³³ This is the context in which I reflect on the ecclesiology that continues to shape the theology of priesthood in its more conservative forms. Delving beneath the comparatively benign language of John Paul II, I consider the theological bedrock upon which postconciliar nuptial theology was constructed.

Priestly Purity and the Sinning Flesh

The failure of the Catholic hierarchy to deal effectively with sexual abuse is repeatedly attributed to a misplaced desire to protect the reputation of the Church. This is not just a concern for the institution because it relates to the eschatological purity of the Church as Bride of Christ. To what extent must the sins of priests be understood as separate from the transcendent purity of the Church, and how far should senior clergy go to protect this purity from public scandal?

The Australian Royal Commission report includes a section titled “The Catholic Church as a ‘Perfect Society,’” which several witnesses describe as a return to an older, pre-conciliar model of the Church since the 1980s. Giving evidence to the Commission, Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen describes clericalism as “a by-product of the ‘perfect society’ model of the Catholic Church” which operated under John Paul II and Benedict XVI.³⁴ This model can be traced back to the medieval Church or even earlier, but I focus on a theological debate that emerged in the years leading up to Vatican II, on whether or not the Church’s intrinsic purity was affected by the sins of her members.³⁵

³³ Barnes, “Catholic Seminarians,” 8.

³⁴ Australian Royal Commission, Transcript of V Long Van Nguyen, Case Study 50, February 21, 2017, 25779:26–35, 621–622.

³⁵ Stephen D. Lawson, “The Apostasy of the Church and the Cross of Christ: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Mystery of the Church as *Casta Meretrix*,” *Modern Theology* 36, no. 2 (2020): 259–280, doi.org/10.1111/moth.12522.

In 1961, Balthasar published an essay in which he sought to resolve this debate by reclaiming the medieval idea of the Church as *casta meretrix* (“chaste harlot”).³⁶ He drew on the biblical and post-biblical tradition of the *casta meretrix* to lend historical legitimacy to his argument that, paradoxically, the Church is both holy and sinful until the end of time. The spousal union between Christ and the Church is so intimate that they are one flesh, but this entails a continuous struggle between Christ as Bridegroom and sinful humankind as Bride. The Marian Church is the eschatological hope of the Virgin Bride, but this does not transcend the sinful reality of the earthly Church. Stephen D. Lawson explains, “The image of the *casta meretrix* is ultimately an image of the Incarnation of God into utter humiliation and indeed to the full depths of sin and hell. The image points to ‘the extreme humiliating essence of the incarnation of God.’”³⁷

Balthasar quotes extensively from biblical and medieval sources, including Old Testament prophets, “You had a harlot’s forehead; you would not blush” (Jeremiah 3:3), and the words of Isaiah, “Babylon, my beloved, has become an abomination to me” (Isaiah 21:4). He quotes William of Auvergne’s description of this “abomination”: “For God himself she has become an abomination. ... We are no longer dealing with a bride but with a monster of terrible deformity and ferocity.”³⁸ He paraphrases this same author’s condemnation of the clergy, who “prostitute Holy Church, because for squalid gain they invite all and sundry to shame her. And so her nipples are cracked and her breasts torn out, in a word.”³⁹

³⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “*Casta Meretrix*,” trans. John Saward, in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2: *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 196, first published in *Sponsa Verbi (Skizzen zur Theologie II)* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961), 203–305.

³⁷ Lawson, “The Apostasy of the Church and the Cross of Christ,” 269, quoting Hans Urs Von Balthasar, “*Casta Meretrix*,” in *Skizzen zur Theologie*, 250 (Lawson’s translation).

³⁸ Balthasar, “*Casta Meretrix*,” 197–198, referring to H. Riedlinger’s transcription in *Hobeliedkommentare des MA* (1958), 255f.

³⁹ Balthasar, “*Casta Meretrix*,” 196.

Biblical scholar J. Cheryl Exum asks why Old Testament scholars (predominantly male), overlook “the ethical problems raised by passages in which a male deity is pictured as sexually abusing a female victim.”⁴⁰ Challenging Robert Carroll’s argument that women in the prophetic texts are “metaphors, not persons”⁴¹ and that these violent metaphors are addressed to “essentially a male community,”⁴² she writes, “Already inscribed in the metaphors themselves is a whole range of negative views about women and about female behavior and female sexuality, as well as about power in gender relations: men dominate and women submit.”⁴³

Balthasar belonged to an era when theology was written by men, for men.⁴⁴ His metaphors of the Church as a mutilated harlot are directed towards “modern leaders of the Church”⁴⁵ at a time when we now know that clerical sexual abuse was endemic. The report on the French Catholic Church estimates that 3,000 Catholic teachers and leaders, two thirds of whom were priests, had abused at least 330,000 children in the years between 1950 and 2020. The final summary of the report refers to this sexual violence as a “massive phenomenon, long covered by a shroud of silence and difficult to ascertain the size of.”⁴⁶ When Balthasar used violent images of sexual humiliation to describe the sins of the Church’s members, these were more than an ecclesiological metaphor. We now know that they were all too literal descriptions of the behaviour of many priests.

⁴⁰ J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 102.

⁴¹ Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 120, quoting Robert C. Carroll, “Desire Under the Terebinths: On Pornographic Representation in the Prophets—a Response,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Later Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 285.

⁴² Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 120, quoting Carroll, “Desire Under the Terebinths,” 292.

⁴³ Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 120.

⁴⁴ It is outside the scope of this essay to consider Adrienne von Speyr’s influence on Balthasar.

⁴⁵ Balthasar, “*Casta Meretrix*,” 197.

⁴⁶ Sauv  , “Sexual Violence in the Catholic Church,” 7.

Another of Balthasar's texts, *Heart of the World*, first published in 1945 as *Das Herz der Welt*, is a passionate dialogue depicting the relationship between Christ and the Bride as a violent struggle, with Christ battling to defeat and overpower his reluctant Bride. The Bride (speaking in various narrative voices constituting the human condition) is imprisoned in the ego's "bitter pleasure-seeking"⁴⁷: "I lie upon my bed of pleasure and this pleasure disgusts me, and I would like to break loose and stand up."⁴⁸ This sense of entrapment and self-loathing erects a wall of loneliness that separates the believer/Bride from the freedom that Christ offers: "Externally I put on an appearance of careless mirth and experienced resignation; within, however, in the deep cavern of despair, there swarms a putrid rabble that hates the light; wasted opportunities, rejected graces, invincible dejection—the smell of putrefaction."⁴⁹

The chapter titled "Conquest of the Bride" describes how Christ finally breaks down this resistance to purify and redeem the body of his harlot Bride. Christ addresses the Bride: "A slap in your face can elicit nothing from you but an embarrassed smile. Disgrace covers the length of you, all the more poignantly as you try to deny it, pretending nothing is amiss."⁵⁰ Balthasar depicts Christ being locked in mortal battle with "my Body, my Church," having been weakened and "wounded to the death" by yielding to the temptation of "delivering myself up to the obscure chaos of a body, of plunging below the shiny surface of the flesh": "I dared to enter the body of my Church, the deadly body which *you* are ... No wonder you realized your advantage over me and took my nakedness by storm! But I have defeated you through weakness and my Spirit has overpowered my unruly and recalcitrant flesh. (Never has woman made more desperate resistance!)"⁵¹ This is a description of rape.

⁴⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, trans. Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979), 136.

⁴⁸ Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, 135.

⁴⁹ Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, 138.

⁵⁰ Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, 192.

⁵¹ Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, 194–196.

Olivier Savignac was abused as a thirteen-year-old boy. In an interview he said, “I perceived this priest as someone who was good, a caring person who would not harm me. ... But it was when I found myself on that bed half-naked and he was touching me that I realized something was wrong. ... It’s like gangrene inside the victim’s body and the victim’s psyche.”⁵² The good priest and the gangrenous victim—there is a shocking dissonance between what those words mean in Balthasar’s theo-pornographic fantasies of the Bridegroom entering the putrefying body of the Bride and what they mean for the victim of priestly abuse. Keenan makes clear that the abuser hides from himself the suffering of his victim, while also experiencing intense shame. She writes, “I began to wonder if the clerical perpetrators became ‘violent’ and cruel to children (even if not in many cases overtly so), because of the systemic ‘violence’ and cruelty that was done to their bodies and spirits in the course of their lives as young clerical males. I wondered if in being hurt, they had become hurters.”⁵³ The abusive priest is both Bride and Bridegroom, Christ and the Church, trapped in that battleground of shame between love and lust, hurting and being hurt without mercy or relief for himself or his victims.

From Patriarchy to Phallocentrism

In Balthasar’s post-conciliar writings, the rhetoric of rape and conquest is replaced by an appeal to the masculine sexuality of the priestly role. In a reflection on Ephesians 5 in the context of *Humanae Vitae*, he makes repeated references to the analogy between the fertile sexual relationship in marriage and the fruitful relationship of Christ with the Church, including an explicit reference to the kenotic significance of the male orgasm: “Unlike the man in the act of intercourse, Christ does not give away just a little of his substance. No, Christ gives away his entire substance.”⁵⁴ In an essay titled “The Christian and Chastity,” Balthasar

⁵² Oliver Savignac, quoted in Corbet, “French Report: 330,000 Children Victims of Church Sex Abuse.”

⁵³ Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, 243.

⁵⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “A Word On ‘*Humanae Vitae*,’” in *New Elucidations*, 217.

asks, “What else is his eucharist but, at a higher level, an endless act of fruitful outpouring of his whole flesh, such as a man can only achieve for a moment with a limited organ of his body?”⁵⁵ He writes with his customary extravagance about what it means for Christ to give his flesh “prodigally” in the Eucharist, by way of a comparison with sexual intercourse in marriage: “The man, even and specifically in the sexual act, must show perfect, loving self-giving, which at the same time takes up the self-giving of the woman and gives it form; the wife is the one who allows herself to be formed, without setting inner limits on the love which she has received.”⁵⁶ This conjugal love is, claims Balthasar, “taken up” into the “nuptial love” of Christ for the Church: “Human sexuality is precisely created by and for such love.”⁵⁷ Again, I can only ask what might go on in the mind of an abusive priest, if he deceives himself into believing that he is offering spiritual love to his victim, who should set no “inner limits” on how that love is received. Many victims of abuse report how their abusers explained their behaviour as a form of spiritual or mystical love. One woman who described being abused by Jean Vanier said that he told her, “This is not us; this is Mary and Jesus.”⁵⁸

The explicitly sexual aspects of Balthasar’s theological rhetoric are often ignored or denied by those who engage with him.⁵⁹ Some even suggest that he offers a theological resource for tackling sex abuse. In the essay cited above, Lawson acknowledges the issues raised by myself and others in relation to Balthasar’s problematic use of gendered language, but he defends the significance of the *casta meretrix* image in the context of the

⁵⁵ Balthasar, “The Christian and Chastity,” in *Elucidations*, 150.

⁵⁶ Balthasar, *Elucidations*, 149.

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *Elucidations*, 149.

⁵⁸ Quoted in John J. Conley, SJ, “My Conversations with Jean Vanier Raised Many Questions. I Have No Answers,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, March 13, 2020, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/13/my-conversations-jean-vanier-raised-many-questions-i-have-no-answers.

⁵⁹ Elisabeth T. Vasko, “The Difference Gender Makes: Nuptiality, Analogy, and the Limits of Appropriating Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology in the Context of Sexual Violence,” *The Journal of Religion* 94, no. 4 (2014): 504, doi.org/10.1086/677290.

sex abuse crisis. He contends that “the central claim of Balthasar’s essay, that we must find a way to speak about how the church *qua church* sins, is theologically significant. ... The time has come for this essay to be reevaluated and re-received.”⁶⁰ Aristotle Papanikolaou suggests that Balthasar’s idea of *kenosis* could be a healing theological resource for victims of abuse. He argues that “far from being meaningless in situations of abuse, Balthasar’s understanding of *kenotic* personhood is the most adequate way to account for the healing of abused victims.”⁶¹ I am perplexed as to how a theologian can claim that images of the divine *kenosis* as rape or male orgasm could be healing for a person abused by a priest.

Balthasar’s phallic theology of priesthood and *kenosis* finds popular expression in many contemporary interpretations of ToB, in ways that constitute a significant departure from the more restrained language of John Paul II. Christopher West is widely promoted on diocesan and parish websites.⁶² In a video titled “Why Women Cannot Be Priests,”⁶³ West appeals to the capacity of the male body to produce sperm as the justification for restricting priestly ordination to men: “Unless priesthood has something to do intrinsically with the fact that only men produce sperm and only men can be fathers then it is a matter of unjust discrimination to say women can’t be priests.” The “essential act of the priesthood” is, claims West, “the conferring of the Eucharist and, as Saint John Paul II says, the Eucharist is the sacrament of the bridegroom and the

⁶⁰ Lawson, “The Apostasy of the Church and the Cross of Christ,” 276.

⁶¹ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (2003): 42, doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00209.

⁶² There has been debate around what some see as West’s excessive sexualization of John Paul II’s theology. See McLean Cummings, “Theology of the Body: A Vigorous Discussion,” *Faith Magazine*, May–June 2010, www.faith.org.uk/article/may-june-2010-theology-of-the-body-a-vigorous-discussion.

⁶³ Christopher West, “Why Women Cannot Be Priests,” YouTube video, *Theology of the Body Institute*, October 15, 2021, youtube.be/hGUmKDPmg7s. The video is based on Christopher West’s book, *Good News About Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2018), with a Foreword by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput.

bride. You need a bridegroom to give the seed that leads to new life, and you need a bride to receive that seed to conceive the new life.”

Barnes’s interviews with young seminarians suggest that such ideas have a significant impact. One twenty-year-old interviewee responded to her question about what defines masculinity: “I think a lot of what defines us as a male is the fact that we do have certain body parts, certain sexual organs that really make us different from a female. ... I think a lot of it has to do with just our sexual organs and it just makes sense that, we have this natural complement of male and female.”⁶⁴

There is an abundance of material online and in publications which encourages this kind of thinking. It may be a distortion of John Paul II’s theology, but in linking of the priesthood so closely to the married sexual relationship and the essential heterosexuality and spousal meaning inscribed into the human body “in the beginning,” it was perhaps inevitable that this kind of theology would develop, particularly as arguments against women priests are being chiselled away so that only anatomical difference remains.

Conclusion

As long as young men are indoctrinated into a theology that makes anatomical maleness and nuptial love the defining characteristics of their priesthood, we should expect some of them to fail in their aspirations to attain to the kind of “Perfect Celibate Clerical Masculinity” described by Keenan and encountered by Barnes in her research. As Keenan shows, the result of such failure is catastrophic for those who become victims of these priests’ confused and “shaming” desires but also for the priests themselves. A vocation initially understood as a lifetime of obedience to God expressed in loving service to humankind is consumed in a deadly vortex of uncontainable appetites, uncontrollable behaviour, and deep self-loathing.

⁶⁴ Barnes, “Catholic Seminarians,” 6.

Pope Francis has set the Church on a trajectory towards a more life-affirming and liberating ecclesiology. However, unless and until women are full and equal dialogue partners in discussions about the theology and practice of priesthood, including the symbolics of gender that inform it, I fear there will be no end to clericalism. The dysfunctional and often abusive dynamics of masculine clerical power will continue to distort the sacrament of ordination and turn ordinary, good men into frustrated and lonely sexual predators.



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