

## Chapter 15: Abuse, Cover-Up, and the Need for a Reform of Church and Theology

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In this article, I examine the relationship between the Roman Catholic conviction to possess, proclaim, and administer unchanging and infallible doctrinal interpretations of divine revelation and faith and the corresponding climate of administrative power, system and submission that has helped to facilitate and to cover up abuse of children and vulnerable adults in the church. The fact that the doctrinal self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Magisterium knows of no *systemic* possibility to err, to fail, and to abuse has made church failure a structural “impossibility” (*Catechism*, nos. 888–896). This doctrinal self-understanding and its proclamation by a male clerical hierarchy found its strongest expression in the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Hence, even some genuinely intended ecclesial admissions of failure—beyond merely regretting abuse by individual office holders and church members—have often not been taken seriously. If the church as such cannot err or fail, it cannot meaningfully ask for forgiveness either. Nor can it expect to be able to restore lost trust without transparent channels of critique and self-critique. Individual expressions of shame in view of thousands of atrocious crimes against children and vulnerable adults are not enough to re-establish credibility in the institutional church, in its mission to proclaim the gospel, and in its leadership. The perceived gap between gospel and church has thus widened dramatically.

This systemic inability to err and to fail has made it especially difficult for victims and survivors of abuse to have their experiences reported, listened to, and acknowledged. Their accounts of abuse have pointed to a feature of the institution, in which their experience was considered impossible or possible only with regard to individual perpetrators. Individuals can fail, the church as such cannot. Accordingly, official

reactions to emerging accounts of abuse first displayed a rush to individualize abuse and to protect the institution against any attempt to identify *systemic* dimensions of clerical failure in the church. This eagerness to maintain the image of an unblemished institution further aggravated the situation of the victims and survivors of abuse in the church.

However, the sheer number of abuse cases recorded and publicized over the last twenty years by a series of commissions of inquiry in many countries, including Australia, the United States of America, Canada, Germany, Ireland, France, the United Kingdom, and Poland, has made it impossible not to pursue and discuss potentially *systemic* dimensions of abuse in the church. Acknowledging and discussing *systemic* failure might help to open up new and vital spaces for victims and survivors to seek healing and to relate afresh to the church in the future.<sup>1</sup>

I first attend to the need to hear the voice of victims and survivors in the church and to place their voices at the center of church and theology. Second, I discuss the clergy-laity divide in the church and how overcoming this divide might help in restoring trust in the church and its mission. Finally, I point to the primacy of the Christian praxis of love as the appropriate framework for recognizing the wounds of the victims and survivors of abuse and for responding to God's coming reign.

## **The Voices of Victims and Survivors of Abuse in the Church**

In recent times, theological publications have begun to focus on the *systemic* nature of physical, sexual, spiritual, and administrative abuse in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> In addition, ever more statements by

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<sup>1</sup> Tomáš Halík, "With a sorrowful heart," *The Tablet*, October 2, 2021, 8–11.

<sup>2</sup> Magnus Striet and Rita Werden, eds., "Preface," in *Unheilige Theologie! Analysen angesichts sexueller Gewalt gegen Minderjährige durch Priester* (Freiburg: Herder, 2018), 7–14. See also Hans Zollner, SJ, "Kirchenleitung und Kinderschutz: Theologie im Kontext des Kinderschutzgipfels 2019," in *Nicht ausweichen: Theologie angesichts der Missbrauchskrise*, ed. Matthias Remenyi and Thomas Schärfl (Regensburg: Pustet, 2019), 189–200, 190f; and Klaus Mertes, SJ, "Vorwort," in Doris Wagner, *Spirituellder Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2020), 6.

survivors and victims of abuse have become publicly available.<sup>3</sup> However, an in-depth reflection on the place and role of victims and survivors in any future dispensation of the Roman Catholic Church is still outstanding. Understandably, initial attention in church and society has focused on strategies of preventing abuse and on identifying possible causes and manifestations of abuse. Prevention, of course, is of the utmost urgency. However, the impression persists that the very children, women, and men who have suffered and survived abuse have largely been ignored in ongoing reflections on prevention and related measures of church reform. Yet, it seems to me that we must ask how, without proper regard for the victims and survivors of abuse, any discussion of more appropriate models of church could ever be truthful and just. What kind of a church would it be, in which the victims and survivors of abuse do not receive central attention, urgent recognition, necessary care, restitution, and compensation? Why would anyone wish to bypass the victims and survivors of abuse when planning for church reform? Why this ecclesial amnesia instead of engaging in an appropriate culture of remembrance that would acknowledge and respect the victims and survivors of abuse in the church?

With this in mind, it is worthwhile considering how theology has dealt with other large-scale atrocities. With regard to the Holocaust—a unique and incomparable phenomenon—it has been argued that there is no way forward for society, culture, church, and theology (in and beyond Germany) without the victims.<sup>4</sup> Johann Baptist Metz called for the establishment of an “anamnetic culture” in which all the victims of the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Barbara Haslbeck, Regina Heyder, Ute Leimgruber and Dorothee Sandherr-Klemp, eds., *Erzählen als Widerstand: Berichte über spirituellen und sexuellen Missbrauch an erwachsenen Frauen in der katholischen Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2020). See also the definition of “abuse” by Haslbeck, Heyder and Leimgruber, 15: “Abuse is a complex web of individual and systemic factors, of theological, psychological and traditional-stereotypical ways of reading [*Lesarten*] places, spaces and acting persons.” My translation.

<sup>4</sup> See the respective discussion and references in Werner G. Jeanrond, *Reasons to Hope* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 103–107.

Holocaust and of Nazi murder and oppression receive proper acknowledgement and restoration of their human dignity.<sup>5</sup> In general terms, Metz argued for the need to engage with painful memories when approaching the human future.

People's subjugation begins when their memories are taken away. Every colonization takes its principle here. And every resistance to oppression is nourished by the subversive power of remembered suffering. This memory of suffering is always standing up against the modern cynicism of power politics.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, there is no way forward for church and theology without remembering the victims and survivors of abuse, without listening to their voices and taking their experiences seriously, without inviting them to consider and to comment on the proposals for abuse prevention and for church reform, and without reviewing and readjusting the structure of the church through the lens of their experience.

The various attempts to bypass or silence the victims and survivors of abuse disclose the systemic unease of a church and its leadership that are now facing a group of people that by their very existence challenge any image of and claim to institutional purity, traditional infallibility, mere apostolic continuity, and moral innocence.<sup>7</sup> Initially, those victims and survivors of abuse who, after much suffering, anxiety, pain and shame, eventually found the strength to raise their voices and to reveal the nature of their respective abuse did not encounter a listening, empathetic and loving church. Rather, many church authorities saw them chiefly as

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<sup>5</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie 1967–1997* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1997), 149–155.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. and ed. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 106.

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of different efforts to bypass or silence the voices of victims and survivors of abuse in the church, see, for instance, Doris Reisinger and Christoph Röhl, *Nur die Wahrheit rettet: Der Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche und das System Ratzinger* (Munich: Piper, 2021), esp. 211–221.

troublemakers: after all, these people have been pointing to serious failure and systemic breakdown in the church. Instead of engaging with the victims, church hierarchies rushed to attend to the actual abusers, that is to those office holders who, it was argued, now most seriously require forgiveness for their shameful deeds.<sup>8</sup>

These deeds were identified in terms of a breach of the promise of clerical celibacy rather than in terms of what had been done to the actual victims. In line with this hierarchical assessment, the Holy See formulated sharper rules and regulations in order to restore the sanctity of clerical life and clerical performance of the sacraments, such as the *Moto Proprio Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela* (2001).<sup>9</sup> Action was considered necessary to protect the systemic order of hierarchy, clergy, and laity in the church. The victims and survivors were, at best, witnesses to the need to tighten up and to restore the existing power structure in the church: pope, bishops, and priests, whereas the laity remains a largely passive group to be guided, instructed, and protected by their self-appointed shepherds.<sup>10</sup>

Systemically this makes “sense”: by attending to and forgiving the perpetrators, the church system hoped to maintain its traditional structure and public image, whereas listening to the accounts of the victims and survivors might lead to destabilizing the public image and internal order of the church. Hence, according to this logic the real threat to the prevailing system does not originate with the abusers but with the very victims and survivors of abuse.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the reflections by victims and survivors of abuse, such as Kai Christian Moritz, “Theologie—es geht weder mit ihr noch ohne sie,” in *Nicht ausweichen*, eds. Remenyi and Schärfl (Regensburg: Pustet, 2019), 32–37.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Benedict’s insistence, in the context of reflecting on the sexual abuse of a young woman by her local priest, that “we must do everything to protect the gift of the holy Eucharist against abuse,” gave occasion to many questions. Jan Feddersen and Philipp Gessler, *Phrase unser: Die blutleere Sprache der Kirche* (Munich: Claudius, 2020), 79f. (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> Doris Reisinger, “Religiöse Eigenlogik und ihre Konsequenzen: Eine Analyse der katholischen Mehrdeutigkeit des Missbrauchsbegriffs,” in *Gefährliche Theologien: Wenn theologische Ansätze Machtmissbrauch legitimieren*, ed. Doris Reisinger (Regensburg: Pustet, 2021), 58–76.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that, in the first instance, not the abusers but their victims and survivors as well as their respective families and support groups have lost trust in the church, in its authorities, in its structures, and in its proclamation of eternal truths. Moreover, the mission of the church in the world has been deeply compromised for many others in and beyond the ecclesial community. The trust of the victims, of the survivors of abuse, and of the public can only ever be regained by a radically different way of being church. Hence, it is of vital importance for the church of the future that the victims and survivors of abuse and all affected environments are actively encouraged to participate in the process of reviewing Christian discipleship, in the exercise of power in the church, and in the ensuing reform process. Mere rhetorical strategies of pacifying the victims in particular and the laity in general will no longer do.<sup>11</sup>

Even for theology, the massive abuse of human beings in the church marks a clear shift of epochs. In view of the horrific abuse of children, men, and women in the church, theology simply cannot revert to its old agendas and traditional ways of thinking. Instead, as explicitly called for by some victims and survivors, theology must self-critically reflect on its own seriously delayed involvement in the very church in which sexual, spiritual, physical, and theological abuse has become a widespread reality in direct contradiction to the central demands of Christian discipleship.<sup>12</sup>

A story from my personal experience illustrates the significance of these points. Some time ago, I had occasion to talk to a Roman Catholic priest and convicted child abuser. He had been condemned and punished in a public court of justice for an offense, which, while on night duty at a boarding school, he had committed upon a minor. However, this monastic priest and teacher could not accept that the mere touching of a sleeping child's genitals represented a sexual act in the first place. The theology

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the recent history of rhetorical strategies of pacification, see Norbert Lüdecke, *Die Täuschung: Haben Katholiken die Kirche, die sie verdienen?* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> See Wolfgang Beinert, "Gottesmissbrauch," in *Nicht ausweichen*, eds. Remenyi and Schärfl, 203–215.

which he had been taught considered sexual acts only in terms of intercourse between a man and a woman. Therefore, for this abuser, touching a boarding school boy at night did not amount to a sexual activity at all and, in his judgement, should never have been considered a crime. Thus, this priest failed to grasp the fact that he had violated the human and sexual integrity and right to self-determination of a young person. The priest's conscience, theology, and sexual ethics remained largely intact in spite of the boy's complaint, the ensuing police action, and the public court's judgement. Clearly, the theology and sexual ethics informing this priest and his thoughts and actions had not provided any protection against his sexual urges. This abuser's story, then, is intimately linked with an obsolete and false sexual morality proclaimed by the Magisterium and taught in Roman Catholic seminaries and faculties.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, when articulate victims of clerical sexual abuse now call for a radical improvement of Roman Catholic theology in general and of moral theology in particular, it is hard to argue otherwise.<sup>14</sup> They demand placing the human being at the center of theological reflection on abuse in the church rather than defending and maintaining the existing ecclesial system and its doctrinal integrity and infallibility. Moreover, victims and survivors summon self-critical theologians to a radical shift away from obsessions with doctrinal purity toward a deeper appreciation of the good news which the gospels portray Jesus Christ to have announced to victims and sufferers alike.<sup>15</sup> Finally, they wonder how trust can ever be restored without a new opening in the church to God's gift of love, which, however, first requires a genuine and truthful confession of guilt.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See also the related reflections by Hans-Joachim Sander, *Anders glauben, nicht trotzdem: Sexueller Missbrauch der katholischen Kirche und die theologischen Folgen* (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2021), 84–86.

<sup>14</sup> Moritz, "Theologie," 35.

<sup>15</sup> Moritz, "Theologie," 36–37.

<sup>16</sup> Moritz, "Theologie," 37. See also Klaus Mertes, *Den Kreislauf des Scheiterns durchbrechen: Damit die Aufarbeitung des Missbrauchs am Ende nicht wieder am Anfang steht* (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2021).

Therefore, theologians and church leaders ought to stop sacrificing the victims and survivors of abuse once more on the altar of ecclesial integrity and purity of a male hierarchy. Instead, they should change the system of patriarchal power in the church by promoting necessary measures of transparency, co-operation, justice, and critique in the spirit of the gospel.<sup>17</sup> Rather than believing in the God-given priestly vocation to structure and organize the church in the world, theologians might wish to concentrate on a praxis of love in response to the demands of the priesthood of all the baptized.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, a critical and self-critical theology would need to remind Christians of their collective hermeneutical responsibility to interpret divine revelation in the church. Any officeholder in the church, clergy and lay, is charged with co-exercising this hermeneutical responsibility in a transparent, cooperative, critical and self-critical spirit. The formation of an absolutist power structure in the church, then, ought not to be justified with reference to a God-given instruction or revelation to a select group of people in the church. Although this is not the place to trace and discuss in any detail the invention of the laity in the church, a few aspects of this development need to be recalled here.<sup>19</sup>

## **Overcoming the Clergy-Laity Divide in the Church**

The term “lay-person” (Greek *laikos*) appears for the first time around 100 AD in Clement of Rome’s letter to the community in Corinth. Here, the term refers to one of the “ordinary faithful” as distinct from a deacon or a

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ute Leimgruber, “Frauen als Missbrauchsbetroffene in der katholischen Kirche? Wie Missbrauch tabuisiert und legitimiert wird,” in *Gefährliche Theologien*, 119–136, esp. 131.

<sup>18</sup> The Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, remains highly ambiguous about the significance and implications of the “priesthood of all believers” (LG 10), and it repeatedly reemphasizes the hierarchical structure in the Church in which the shepherds minister to the laity (LG 37).

<sup>19</sup> For reflections on the emergence of “laity” in the Christian church, see Alexandre Faivre, *Les laïcs aux origines de l’Église* (Paris: Centurion, 1984); and Werner G. Jeanrond, “One Church: Two Classes? The Lesson of History,” in *Pobal: The Laity in Ireland*, ed. Seán MacRéamoinn (Dublin: Columba Press, 1986), 22–34.



presbyter. However, it comes into general usage only in the third century when particular structures of ministry are well established in all the Christian communities. The continuing differentiation of a threefold special ministry—bishop, presbyter, and deacon—during the first four centuries had consequences more implicit than explicit for all those Christians who did not hold any specific office. They constituted the general body of the faithful. That, however, does not mean that they had no function in the ministerial organization of the church. Much, if not most, early missionary work was done by the normal working or traveling Christian.<sup>20</sup> Christian women were responsible for most of the spiritual education of the children, and all baptized Christians had functions in the liturgical life of the church and in its organization, like the election of the community leader, the bishop.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, “laity” came to identify more and more those who had no particular work or service—or were no longer allowed to have one. Thus, the emergence of “laity” is the implicit result of the explicit development of clerical ministry and self-understanding. However, because of the clergy’s and especially the bishop’s election by all the people, the two emerging groups of clergy and laity were in fact not separated from one another. Leadership was an authority given by the Christian community.<sup>22</sup> “Absolute ordinations,” i.e., ordinations outside a community context, remained theologically and ecclesologically unthinkable for a long time. They were first introduced in the Middle Ages.

Christianity did not develop in a vacuum. Therefore, it is not surprising that Jewish and Graeco-Roman images and organizational models influenced the shape of the Christian churches. Thus, the clergy came to adopt the rank and status of civil servants. Their status further increased as they often represented the only educated and influential group left after the upheavals following the demise of the Roman Empire. Under the

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<sup>20</sup> Norbert Brox, *Kirchengeschichte des Altertums*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1986), 38.

<sup>21</sup> Brox, *Kirchengeschichte des Altertums*, 96f.

<sup>22</sup> Brox, *Kirchengeschichte des Altertums*, 100.

influence of philosophy in late antiquity, ontological distinctions were used to separate the clergy not only in terms of their *function* but also in terms of their ordained *being* from the rest of God's people. The notion of a cultic priesthood further added to this separation between the two groups in the church, not least in the light of the spiritualities created by the emerging monastic movements. The legal imagination of the medieval world completed the development of a church ordered according to hierarchical lines with the pope and bishops on top and the masses of uneducated men and women at the bottom.<sup>23</sup>

The changing understanding of the Eucharist from a community worship towards the ritual activity undertaken by an individual priest went hand in hand with the development of the community leadership to a ritualistic priestly office. It is no longer the Christian community that celebrates, but the priest alone with a community now reduced to the status of spectators. While in the Early Church ministry was a function of the people of God, the people have now become a function of the ministry. While in the earlier communities all gifts arose from the same Spirit, now only the clergy are believed to possess the Spirit in fullness.<sup>24</sup>

The point here is not to claim that the prevailing clergy-laity-structure in the church was merely the result of ever-increasing clerical ambition, suitably supported by sophisticated theological arguments. Rather, I wish to emphasize the complexity of a development in which administrative and liturgical practice and gendered theological imagination slowly merged, helped further by the dynamic pressures of an uneven educational system, of political developments, and of a cultic self-understanding. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to observe how some of the most original theological and social insights and initiatives from early Christianity got lost in the church and how, ironically, many of the legal and cultic absolutes challenged by Jesus had slowly resurfaced and displayed a hitherto unknown degree of

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<sup>23</sup> See also Jürgen Werbeck, "Laie," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed., vol. 6 (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 2009), 589–594.

<sup>24</sup> Werbeck, "Laie," 591f.

absolute power. The uncritical alliance and symbiosis between church and state from the fourth century onwards further supported this development of Christian clerical self-understanding. Moreover, when the interpretation of the texts of the Bible shifted from a community exercise to the special task and responsibility of the clergy, the basic Christian inspiration for theological, spiritual, and social transformation became a closed book for most Christians until the time of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>25</sup> The hierarchy's rejection of most modern movements of emancipation, in particular the women's movement, in tandem with the definition of papal infallibility in 1870, further increased the sentiment that the Roman Catholic Church represented a divinely willed form of an absolutist monarchy. The exercise of power in the church was beyond the concern and wider control of the faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

This picture has changed somewhat since the Second Vatican Council. The biblical texts now entered Catholic homes and Catholic imagination. Theological education has become more widely available to men and women. Clerical triumphalism and clericalism more generally have been challenged in some parts of the church, most spectacularly by Pope Francis himself who said "One of the strongest and most serious dangers in the Church today is clericalism."<sup>26</sup> However, the principal ontological division and ecclesial separation between clergy and laity has not been altered by the Council. Moreover, the entire provision of male clerical power and its problematic theological support structure have largely remained intact. New openings by the Council to restore trust in an inclusive church have not been richly taken up in the post-conciliar church.<sup>27</sup> In spite of the

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<sup>25</sup> Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 159–182.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Clerics Regular of Somasca," Transcript of speech delivered at Consistory Hall, March 30, 2017, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170330\\_capitolo-chierici-somaschi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/march/documents/papa-francesco_20170330_capitolo-chierici-somaschi.html).

<sup>27</sup> Knut Wenzel, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Eine Einführung* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 2014), 190.

Council's encouraging affirmation of the common apostolate of all Christians, the deeply rooted medieval male hierarchical structure continues to exist. Educated lay people are often mistrusted, particularly now that lay people have access to the same level of theological education as clergy. Sometimes lay Christians, notably women, are even better educated than the clergy, and this fact further widens the gap and increases mistrust between both groups.

It is a privilege to be alive today when Christian women, hitherto ontologically deemed to remain the eternal laity in the church, are challenging the theological positions of a patriarchal hierarchy and are claiming full participation in all matters of Christian discipleship and church organization. However, rather than "completing" the existing form of male hierarchy now by adding the hitherto lacking female participation, it would seem to me to be more desirable to allow the feminist critique to help unmask the overall inadequacy of the system of ministry that still operates in the church today and that has provided the framework for spiritual, administrative, physical, and sexual abuse and cover-up.<sup>28</sup> For the relationship between lay people (literally: "people-people") and clergy ultimately remains an issue about the right understanding of the vocation of the church in today's globalizing world.

In view of the largely discredited distribution of power and responsibility in the church and the systemic inability to acknowledge the connection between a system of power and the cover-up of misuse of minors and vulnerable adults, the church today faces a dramatic credibility issue. "Sexual abuse always takes place in systems and their complex causal chains, especially in those whose relationships of trust in combination with asymmetries of power are foundational for the very system. And every society needs such systems."<sup>29</sup> The misuse of power constitutes a "misuse"

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<sup>28</sup> See the attempt to overcome these ecclesial patterns by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia," in *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era*, ed. Patrick Gnanapragasam and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 59–76.

<sup>29</sup> Mertens, *Den Kreislauf des Scheiterns durchbrechen*, 67.

and as such does not yet point to a failure of a system but presupposes a right use of power. However, the Roman Catholic system of exercising power is built on monarchic and paternalistic foundations. Today, a *right* use of such power can no longer be imagined or justified, most certainly not with reference to Jesus Christ and his proclamation of God's praxis of love. Rather, absolute power can lead to absolute corruption.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, a new way of ordering power in the church is urgently needed.

How can trust be restored in a church traumatized by its failure, yet still largely unprepared to listen to the victims of abuse and to attend to their experiences and concerns?<sup>31</sup> How can the church organize itself anew in order to promote relationships of trust between a leadership that by and large has ignored the victims of abuse and, instead, defended its own "divinely granted" authority in matters of faith and morality? "Critical trust implies the ability for critical judgement, which in turn presupposes conditions that allow the exercise of critical judgement. Wherever the nature of particular institutions systemically blocks the exercise of critical judgement, there cannot and should not emerge trust."<sup>32</sup> With regard to church reform, the need for a new climate in the church that supports the exercise of critical judgement by all of its members is obvious. The attention of the church must shift from concern about its own situation to those *others*, the victims and survivors of abuse and their need for justice and restitution.<sup>33</sup>

## **The Primacy of the Praxis of Love**

We Christians are involved in a fourfold network of interdependent and dynamic love relationships: to our neighbors, to God, to the universe as

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<sup>30</sup> Mertes, *Den Kreislauf des Scheiterns durchbrechen*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> Dieter Steinman, "Diskussion über Missbrauch ohne die Opfer," *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, May 19, 2022, [www.saarbruecker-zeitung.de/saarland/saarbruecken/saarbruecken/diskussion-ueber-missbrauch-in-katholischer-kirche-ohne-die-opfer\\_aid-69919763](http://www.saarbruecker-zeitung.de/saarland/saarbruecken/saarbruecken/diskussion-ueber-missbrauch-in-katholischer-kirche-ohne-die-opfer_aid-69919763).

<sup>32</sup> Martin Hartmann, *Vertrauen: Die unsichtbare Macht* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2020), 135. My translation.

<sup>33</sup> Mertes, *Den Kreislauf des Scheiterns durchbrechen*, 26, 39.

God's creation, and to our own emerging selves. Spiritual, physical and sexual abuse in the church damages this network of love relationships. Any form of abuse is a sin against the divine gift of love and disturbs the transformative dynamics of divine and human love. Abuse interferes with the processes of human participation in God's own eternity. Rather than trying to restore respect for any supposedly infallible aspect of church order, what seems most urgently required is a healing of relationships that would allow for processes of participation by children and adults whose subjectivity and agency have been severely compromised and damaged.<sup>34</sup> In other words, what is needed in a church marked by abuse is a restoration of the praxis of love out of which new trust might emerge rather than a re-establishment of a totalizing hierarchical order of power.

Claims by a male and celibate hierarchy to rule the church have proved unable to inspire the necessary process of healing the wounds of victims and survivors. Organizing abuse prevention programs, while bypassing the victims and survivors of abuse and their painful experiences of church power, would merely instrumentalize and victimize the victims once again.<sup>35</sup> It would neither promote justice and restitution nor lead to a new climate of trust; it would not liberate the potential of love; it would not detoxify the church environment in which abuse was allowed to occur and largely go unpunished; it would not support processes of physical and spiritual healing. The praxis of love in the church can only be promoted through actual acts of love, supported by an appropriate theology. This would include: first and foremost, attention to the victims and survivors; second, the theological reevaluation of all offices, functions and services in Christian communities; and third, a new corporate vision of Christian discipleship in the church.

The traditional order of faith first, supported by hope and love, needs to be reversed: the praxis of love must come first. Love can inspire hope

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<sup>34</sup> Mertes, *Den Kreislauf des Scheiterns durchbrechen*, 41, stresses that working with abuse victims means working with relationships ("*Aufarbeitung ist Beziehungsarbeit*").

<sup>35</sup> Reisinger, *Spirituellder Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*, 183.

and lead to trust and faith.<sup>36</sup> Thus, any search for more authentic forms of Christian discipleship will require ongoing conversion and the transformation of all members of the church—not only of the clergy. All must be willing and encouraged to participate more fully in the shared Christian praxis of love. Processes of continuing education of God's gift of love are required that attend to the biblical foundations of love, to the historical developments of love, to its theological potential, ambiguities and distortions, to its agencies, to its intimate connection with justice and truth, and to its concrete expressions in shifting contexts and horizons.<sup>37</sup> Christians do not believe in love, but they engage in the praxis of love. They do not believe in healing, but they participate critically and self-critically in processes of healing and detoxification in the church.

Making the church depend on a historically grown model of clerical service that has proven both unable and often unfit to minister to today's Christians and that has become the occasion for so much abuse amounts to blasphemy.<sup>38</sup> New forms of male and female ministries in the church need to be developed in accordance with the actual needs of service in Christian communities in the different cultures and contexts of the global church. The shared praxis of love can restore trust in the church and in its expressions of hope and faith. It can help in imagining new and better ways of priestly service in the church.

Love, however, must not be confused with mere emotion nor with aspiring to some sort of romantic feeling of blissful harmony. Rather, love is the praxis of dealing with human difference and with God's radical difference. Love is hard work, yet work inspired by the promise of God's transformative presence in our lives. Thus, love is the genuine connecting point with God and God's otherness. The praxis of human love will always remain unfinished, precisely because it negotiates otherness and

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<sup>36</sup> For an argument on the priority of love over hope and faith, see Jeanrond, *Reasons to Hope*, 179–194.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the complex notion of a Christian praxis of love, see Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. also Beinert, "Gottesmissbrauch," 213.

difference—in each other, in God, in God’s emerging universe, and in our own developing selves.<sup>39</sup> God’s gift of love “remains” (1 Corinthians 13:13), but our responses to this divine gift are weak and often vague, misled, and confused. Hence, we Christians are in need of an accompaniment of love that enables and encourages our loving agency to develop and to cooperate with God, with each other, and most urgently with the victims of abuse in our own Christian community.

However, a Christian culture of mutual accompaniment also requires structures of transparency, accountability, and justice. Do we assist each other in developing our respective agency of love? Do we seek power in such accompaniment, or do we seek to empower the persons we accompany? How best can we organize structures that help us to accompany each other in support of the mutually transformative praxis of love in our communities? How can we adequately educate and prepare each other for such a praxis of love and the related work of accompaniment? Which spiritual and theological resources do we have at our disposal in order to strengthen the Christian praxis of love? How can we learn from Christian disciples in other churches? How might we be able to engage in an “inter-love-dialogue” with people from other religious and non-religious traditions?

No genuine praxis of love can ever produce some sort of unity of love, since by nature love encounters, experiences and acknowledges difference and otherness. However, as Christians, we operate with the promise of Jesus Christ’s uniting Spirit—not to be confused with some love-restricting spirit of imposed harmony, unity or unification. God’s gift of love remains dynamic and transformative. It instils in each of us a desire and longing for others and for human and divine otherness. It motivates forms of community in which difference and otherness are welcome and in which all members acknowledge the particular agency to contribute both to their own respective development and to the development of the Christian community within God’s overall project of creation and

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Jeanron, *A Theology of Love*, 1–23.



reconciliation. In such a project, there is no space for “laity” in the sense of people who are subjected, alienated, detached, or not involved. There is no room for spectators that merely look on as the reign of God unfolds. Rather, the Christian praxis of love is an inclusive praxis, its boundaries are porous, and its divine center wishes to attract all people of good will without subjecting them to doctrines of absolute unity, spiritual purity, and total conformity. This praxis does not ground in doctrinal claims to assent, adhere, and submit to some timeless collection of truthful propositions and respective agents. Again, the power of the praxis of love lies in its potential attractiveness to invite people to come and see how we Christians love each other and especially how we treat the victims and survivors of abuse in our very midst.

The Christian praxis of love calls for appropriate structures, functions, offices, and services. Hence, the institutional needs and shapes of a church committed to a praxis of love in response to God’s invitation in Jesus Christ and the Spirit will necessarily differ from the needs and shapes of a church constructed on a catechism bedrock radiating power without change.<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusion: Love of the Victims and Church Reform**

“[T]he Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 8). This clear commitment to the poor and afflicted expressed by the Second Vatican Council could guide the necessary church reform in the aftermath of the abuse crisis, most certainly with regard to those persons whose abuse in and by the church has caused their very affliction and wounds. “The survivors and victims of abuse must be at the center of our concern.”<sup>41</sup> The healing of the wounds of these victims and survivors of abuse will remain the chief

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of institutions of love, see Jeanron, *A Theology of Love*, 173–204.

<sup>41</sup> Halík, “With a sorrowful heart,” *The Tablet*, October 2, 2021, 8.

criterion for judging whether the Roman Catholic Church is on its way to genuine renewal and reform in response to God's call in Christ to embark on a journey of love, hope, and faith.



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