

Chapter 16: The Need for the Historiographical Approach to Understand and Address the Sex Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church

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The years 2017 and 2018 have inaugurated a new phase in the modern history of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church due to the publication of nationwide and statewide reports (Australia, the USA, and then France in 2021) and the revelations of prominent cases involving bishops and cardinals (in Chile, the USA, and France among others). It is a new phase for four reasons: first, because of the expansion of the concept of “clerical abuse” to abuse of power, spiritual abuse and sexual abuse not only by clergy but also by lay members of the Church; second, because of the revelations in continents other than Europe and North America; third, because of the involvement of the Vatican and allegations against cardinals that led to trials, convictions, and the imprisonment of prelates by the secular justice system; fourth, because of the institutional response by the papacy with the decision to call the February 2019 summit in the Vatican for religious superiors, all the presidents of the bishops’ conferences, and members of the Roman Curia on the theme of the protection of minors.

The sense that the waves of revelations and investigations have opened a new phase emerges from the intensity and frequency of the interventions of various actors in the ecclesial and public debate. There is a new sense of urgency communicated by the media and received by the institutional church. But there are still minimal efforts to understand the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church as a historical problem. This understanding requires a historical and comparative approach. A historical study of the phenomenon of abuse in the Catholic Church from a global perspective would investigate it as a crisis involving the Catholic Church in multiple continents and countries. A comparative approach will draw comparisons between Catholic Churches in different regions, between different

Catholic institutions, between Catholic and non-Catholic institutions, and between different historical periods.

In this essay, I argue for a methodological transformation in the way institutions—secular, independent, and ecclesial—in charge of investigations understand the phenomenon and present it to the members of the Church and the public at large. Such a global and comparative historical study of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church will require a long-term investment of energy and resources by national and international networks of scholars. Therefore, this essay will make an intellectual and ecclesial case for this intensive, essential, and transformative endeavor.¹

The Dominant Approaches to the Abuse Crisis

Two dominant approaches shape the understanding of the abuse crisis—dominant not just in the readership and audience of the mass media and Catholic media but also in the leadership of the institutional church and the intellectual elites both Catholic and secular. The first is *investigative journalism*, which broke the news on the depth and magnitude of the abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. The study of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church in modern times relies heavily on journalism and journalistic sources, which helped to reveal the scandal in a decisive way. This began in the mid-1980s in the USA with independent journalists, namely the articles published by free-lance journalist John Pope in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and Jason Berry in the *National Catholic*

¹ In the United States of America, at the end of 2019, the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame launched the project “Gender, Sex, and Power: Towards a History of Clergy Sex Abuse in the U.S. Catholic Church.” The project is led by Kathleen Cummings (director of the Cushwa Center, Notre Dame) along with Peter Cajka (Notre Dame), Terence McKiernan (BishopAccountability.org), and Robert Orsi (Northwestern University), cushwa.nd.edu/about/gendersexpower/. See also “Taking Responsibility,” a project launched in 2020 to advance research regarding the protection of children, youth, and vulnerable persons in Jesuit institutions of education, led by Bradford Hinze, an interdisciplinary initiative of the Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies and the Department of Theology at Fordham University. See “Taking Responsibility,” Fordham University, July 2, 2022, takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu.

Reporter, after US mainstream news outlets had refused to publish the results of Berry's in-depth investigations.² Not until a second phase did teams of investigative journalists—especially the *Boston Globe*'s "Spotlight team" in 2001-2002—decide to look at the crisis in the Catholic Church. This became a global event and entered the cultural mainstream powerfully with the movie *Spotlight*, which won the Academy Award for best movie in 2015.³

The second is the *courtroom approach*. The church's and the public's perception of the abuse crisis has been largely shaped by media coverage, which in turn has been influenced by the legal framework of tort litigation. The emphasis on tort litigation against the Catholic Church promotes a narrow understanding of clergy sexual abuse as an institutional failure on the part of church officials:

A narrative with clear implications and straightforward moral lessons is considered more newsworthy than a narrative open to many different interpretations. The news media favor stories that are set in frames that are culturally familiar to readers. The familiarity of the frame allows readers to understand and relate to a news story without the need for extensive background information. At the same time, a story that portrays the unexpected or unusual within familiar frames is considered more newsworthy. Events that are surprising attract more attention than

² About this, see Jason Berry, *Lead Us Not into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

³ See the book published by the Boston Globe's investigative team: The Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe, *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002). See also the website created in January 2020 by ProPublica (a nonprofit organization that produces investigative journalism and whose stories are distributed to news partners for publication or broadcast) with a "Nationwide [USA] Database of Priests Deemed Credibly Accused of Abuse," at "Credibly Accused," ProPublica, last modified January 28, 2020, July 2, 2022, projects.propublica.org/credibly-accused/.

those that are routine. And finally, a story about elites or well-known figures is considered more newsworthy.⁴

This nexus of legal framework and the reliance of investigative journalism on litigation documents has presented the crisis to the public and the ecclesial community in a narrative that tends to minimize the historical and social contexts in which these crimes and the cover-up took place. Already in the “Doyle Report,” submitted confidentially to the US bishops in 1985, the authors described prophetically the effects of the legal approach on the abuse crisis, saying, “this is the age of litigation.”⁵ The prevalence of the legal framework and of a law enforcement perspective in the history of the abuse crisis in the USA was also evident in the landmark document the “Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report” released in August 2018.⁶

Underlying these two dominant approaches is a “sociological” conception of Catholicism which sets itself against the Church as “institutional.” The journalistic and legal narratives focus on the (undeniable) institutional failures and responsibilities of Church officials in the scandal—the crimes and the cover-up—but tend to ignore the widespread culture of silence regarding sexual abuse that extends well beyond the confines of ecclesiastical settings and clerical personnel. The

⁴ T.D. Lytton, “Framing Clergy Sexual Abuse as an Institutional Failure: How Tort Litigation Influences Media Coverage,” *William Mitchell Law Review* 36, no. 1 (2009): 175. See also Peter Steinfels, “The Media as a Source for the History of the Catholic Sex Abuse Scandal in the United States,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 105, no. 420 (2016): 427–440.

⁵ F. Ray Mouton, JD, and Thomas P. Doyle, OP, *The Problem of Sexual Molestation by Roman Catholic Clergy: Meeting the Problem in a Comprehensive and Responsible Manner* (1985), 10, www.bishop-accountability.org/reports/1985_06_09_Doyle_Manual/. This is also known as the “Doyle Report.”

⁶ For a critique of the report—Office of Attorney General Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Report I of the 40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury* (Office of Attorney General Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2018), www.attorneygeneral.gov/report/—constructed with the help of law enforcement agencies such as the FBI, revealing the total absence of an historical perspective in it, see Peter Steinfels, “The PA Grand-Jury Report: Not What It Seems,” *Commonweal*, January 9, 2019, www.commonwealmagazine.org/pa-grand-jury-report-not-what-it-seems.

sociological approach assumes itself as a model and speaks on behalf of an idealized civil society, like a new *societas perfecta*, against the corruption of the institutional dimension (both of the institutional church and of political institutions). In an important book published in 2021, Italian church historians Francesco Benigno and Vincenzo Lavenia describe the framing of these crimes as articulated in a moral “polarity” which is arranged “in a single public discourse, that of an idealized civil society.” This moral order opposes “on the one hand qualities (honesty, rationality, openness, independence, cooperation, participation, and equality) and on the other dangers (deception, hysteria, addiction, secrecy, aggression, hierarchy, inequality).”⁷

This counterposition of the social and the institutional, with blame for the abuse crisis placed almost exclusively on institutions, results from the emergence of cultures of ecclesial governance that aim to import managerial and technocratic models into the life of the church. It also represents the flip side of a clerical culture that sees the abuse crisis as the result of moral corruption coming from the outside (secularization, dissent against Catholic doctrine) and that defends the “in-house” approach and the sufficiency of “orthodox” teaching and discipline enforced by the hierarchical leaders of the church as a solution to the crisis.⁸

⁷ Francesco Benigno and Vincenzo Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine: la Chiesa di fronte alla pedofilia* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2021), 244 (translation mine). About this dominance of the model of an idealized society, see Roberto Calasso, *L'innominabile attuale* (Milano: Adelphi, 2017) and Roberto Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 24–31.

⁸ One example of this approach was Benedict XVI's essay “The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse,” *Catholic News Agency*, August 18, 2010, www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvi-the-church-and-the-scandal-of-sexual-abuse-59639. This interpretation of the abuse crisis was praised by some prominent Catholic leaders, for example the then archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap., in his article “Benedict and the Scandal,” *First Things*, April 11, 2019, www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/04/benedict-and-the-scandal.

The Limits of the Journalistic and Legal-Criminal Approach to the Abuse Crisis

There is no question that members of the Catholic Church and ecclesiastical structures within the institutional system protected perpetrators of sexual abuse. Without investigative journalism, without a legal approach, and without a focus on the institutional failures, the Catholic community would have never been able to face the reality of sexual abuse, abuse of power, and spiritual abuse against children, vulnerable adults, and adults in vulnerable situations. The revelations of cases of sexual abuse show that the church needs a free and independent press. These approaches have been necessary and will continue to be necessary for the work of prevention and in the pursuit of truth.

Important questions remain, however. These include clarifying who and what constitutes the Church and what kind of truth must be pursued regarding the legal, moral, and historical responsibilities in the sex abuse crisis. The problem of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church must be dealt with at different levels and with different goals, the most important being justice to victims and survivors and to their families, friends, and communities; prevention of other abuses and of new forms of abuse; and rehabilitation of those who have been accused unjustly. This requires a vast array of different approaches and tools, which will engage the church for generations to come.

The problem of the Church's responsibility in protecting the abusers must include a cultural and theological perspective, one of the most important challenges is in terms of memory and truth. From a methodological point of view, the first issue concerns the kind of truth we need to pursue in order to answer this question: "Did the institution protect perpetrators?" The point of departure is the word and testimony of the victims and survivors, which has for far too long been ignored by church authorities. It has also been long ignored by other authorities—in politics, in the justice system, in the intellectual establishment—and often by other lay members of the church.

The word of the victims and survivors must be given space; it must be received and put to use by others. This is the work of journalists, advocates, judges, historians, and, in the Christian community, of theologians and church leaders. Much more work has been done at the level of journalistic investigations than by the criminal justice system, historians, and theologians. This disproportion between the amount of information made available by journalists on one side and by the work of the justice system and historians and theologians on the other side has to do with constraints on the justice system and the work of historians and theologians. The justice system must abide by the statute of limitations. The work of historians and theologians must operate within the realm of limited possibilities of scholarly work on an issue fraught with ethical and methodological issues especially from the perspective of the need for a comprehensive narrative on the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church.

While the necessity for the Church to take a legal-criminal approach to the crisis remains evident—not only canonically but civilly as well—these last twenty years in the history of the scandal have made clear the limits of the “tribunalization” of the church. The waves of revelations, investigations, and prosecutions against sexual abusers in the church and those who failed to report them can blind us to the many layers and dimensions of this crisis. We all have a duty to seek the truth. But which of the many types of truth do we seek? There is without doubt a judicial truth to be sought. But there is also a moral truth, a historical truth, and a theological truth related to the tragedy of the abuse crisis. The Church must ask the police and the criminal justice system for help in reaching the kind of truth that can be proven in the courtroom. However, we cannot limit ourselves to the judicial truth alone because the truth of the tribunals will always fall tragically short if we want to understand the mechanisms of the protection of abusers in the church. Moreover, investigative journalism is necessary to tackle the phenomenon, but journalistic sources and media influences have become an integral part of the strategy and dynamics of today’s church politics warfare, in which the abuse crisis plays a unique role. I explore this point further in the next section.

The Need for an Historical Approach

For the Catholic Church, the abuse crisis stands, some argue, as the biggest crisis since the Protestant Reformation because, just like the Reformation, it is a multi-leveled, cataclysmic series of events. The first level consists of the systemic violation of norms and of corruption. Further, at the second level, lie theological rifts within the church with different—and sometimes opposing—interpretations of the root causes and solutions to the problem from a theological and magisterial point of view. The third level concerns the consequences of the revelations at the political level domestically regarding effects on the relations between church and state at the institutional and juridical level and internationally regarding tensions between the Holy See and national governments as well as between the papacy and national bishops' conferences.⁹

In the last few years, we have seen signs of growing awareness within the Church of the need for an historical approach to the abuse crisis. For example, the nationwide report published on October 5, 2021, by the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church in France (the CIASE report) demonstrates a fruitful departure from the sole perspective of courtroom litigation that was prevalent in other statewide and nationwide investigations and presents the phenomenon in a framework shaped by a sense of history. This is true despite some methodological inconsistencies in the way the report incorporates the different estimates on the number of abusers and of victims.¹⁰ This could mark the beginning of a methodological turn in the way secular, independent, and ecclesial institutions in charge of investigations understand the phenomenon and present it to the members of the Church and the public at large.

⁹ See Massimo Faggioli, "The Catholic Church's Biggest Crisis Since the Reformation," *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2018, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-10-11/catholic-churchs-biggest-crisis-reformation.

¹⁰ In themselves, the approaches used in the single parts are consistent. The final report and the other documents on the work of the commission are available on the website of the CIASE: "Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église," CIASE, July 2, 2022, www.ciase.fr/.

We must always remember how small the proportion of what is recorded in documents is compared to how many times abuse actually took place and above all how severely the time factor is compressed. This is especially pertinent for the abuse crisis because of the specific ways in which the crimes took place, the modalities of surfacing in the memory of victims and survivors, and the practice of institutions of hiding or destroying the paper trail related to these cases. For example, the policy of destroying Church files concerning these kinds of crimes in the archives of the Congregation of the Holy Office in the Vatican (at least until the early twentieth century) makes it impossible to recover historical records of the institutional handling of those complaints for long periods of time.¹¹ A turn to an appreciation of the historical perspective is, therefore, essential and urgent for five reasons.

The first reason is that the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is not just a series of individuals committing or covering up crimes. It is the history of a *complex institution* dealing with a complicated past. A comparison with the post-World War II period can be useful here. After an initial phase, in the first few years after the end of the war, countries like Italy, France, and Germany dealt with the past through courts of justice and purge processes. Later, the new post-war European democracies moved to a different way of dealing with the past at the institutional and social-cultural level, using a method called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in German. The churches, including but not limited to the Catholic Church, were required to go through what in Germany was called (not without controversy on the interpretation of the expression) “Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit”: “working through the past.” Among the historical and moral questions raised by “working through the past” of the relations between the churches and the authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century, there are the distinction between culpability and responsibility; the differentiation of individual responsibility and collective

¹¹ See Benedetto Fassanelli, *Il corpo nemico. Organizzazione, prassi e potere del Sant’Ufficio nel primo Novecento* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2017), 1–19.

responsibilities; and the risks of a second exploitation of the victims, this time ideological, in the context of a polarized political landscape.

Now, this example may serve as a cautionary tale for the Catholic Church. Post-1945 newly democratic European states and European institutions allowed too easy a rehabilitation for many top members involved with the totalitarian regimes.¹² The transition from the litigation phase to the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* will take place in the Catholic Church as well at some point, and it is crucial that it does not provide the opportunity for more deception or cover-up. At the same time, the historicization of the abuse crisis must consider methodologically—in another parallel with the historiography of totalitarian regimes and of the Shoah—the implications brought about by the passing of “the era of the witness”¹³ and the complications created by the narratives sponsored by public institutions in order to obey the “duty of memory,”¹⁴ often at the expense of more complicated and uncomfortable historical truths. Dealing with a tragic past entails the gradual discovery of numerous collaborators and entails addressing scapegoating and dealing with deep-seated self-exculpatory myths—for political bodies as well as for religious groups.

The second reason for the historical perspective is that understanding the abuse crisis in the Church as an historical problem is key for a *depoliticization of the narratives*. An historical approach to the phenomenon remains faithful to the complex web of responsibilities and rejects the overly simplistic narrative structure of a moralistic tale about right and wrong. This challenges the culturally familiar narrative involving

¹² See, for example, Perry Anderson, “Ever Closer Union,” *London Review of Books* 43, no. 1 (2021), www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n01/perry-anderson/ever-closer-union; Hans Woller, *Die Abrechnung mit dem Faschismus in Italien 1943 bis 1948* (München: Oldenbourg, 2009); Copertina Flessibile, *I conti con il fascismo. L'epurazione in Italia: 1943–1948* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

¹³ See Annette Wieworka, *L'ère du témoin* (Paris: PLURIEL, 2002).

¹⁴ See François Hartog, *Évidence de l'histoire. Ce que voient les historiens* (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2005). On the problem of “presentism” and the unstable role of historiography before major moral traumas, see Diana Napoli, *Michel de Certeau: lo storico “smarrito”* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2014).

elites with a clear moral lesson: the institutional cover-up by high-ranking Church officials of child sexual abuse. The responsibilities of the hierarchical leaders of the Church must be seen in the context of a wider system of denial and of abuse which includes lay Catholics and other agencies and institutions within and outside of the ecclesial community and the clerical system. History is an exercise in hermeneutical humility: it is a way to understand complex problems through taking distance as much as possible from our own prejudices and presuppositions—including social, political, and theological presuppositions—about who did it, how it happened, who let it happen, and who covered it up. A history of the abuse crisis is also crucial to dismantle and correct the political-religious “culture war” narratives according to which abuses occurred as a consequence of the theological *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council. A great number of abuses took place before Vatican II, and many of them occurred in ecclesial groups known for their distance from, if not outright opposition against, the theology of Vatican II.¹⁵

The third reason for taking a historical perspective is that the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church needs a social history *not separated from the institutional dimension*, with attention paid to not only what is relevant in the courtroom but to lived experience. The public religious discourse’s emphasis on the prophetic has created hyper-moralistic narratives that come at the expense of the comprehension of what is paradoxical and ambivalent in the lives of “ordinary” Catholics. This phenomenon is also important to understand from the penal and moral point of view. There must be an effort to understand the abuse crisis in the context of a larger

¹⁵ Both in the Americas and in Europe, allegations of abuse have been raised against leaders of new ecclesial communities and movements created by charismatic figures but also against the Society of St. Pius X created by Msgr. Marcel Lefebvre after Vatican II in rejection of Vatican II. The SSPX itself created its own “independent review board” seen here: Society of Saint Pius X, “Update on SSPX Independent Review Board,” May 18, 2021, sspx.org/en/news-events/news/update-sspx-independent-review-board-66397. About the phenomenon of abuse in the new communities, see Céline Hoyeau, *La trahison des pères* (Paris: Bayard, 2021); Massimo Faggioli, “Ecclesial Lay Movements in 21st-Century Global Catholicism: Open Questions in Light of the Sex Abuse Crisis,” *Japan Mission Journal* 74, no. 2 (2020), 75–86.

crisis of readjustment between Christian morality and the world, where an intra-Catholic crisis of authority is located in a larger moment of transition that has both social-cultural and institutional dimensions.¹⁶ A historiography of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church needs to draw attention to different kinds of silences and failures beyond the church hierarchies and connect different moments from the period of the early Church to today.¹⁷

The fourth reason is the need for a *global and historical approach* in this new phase of globalization of Catholicism in order to understand the abuse crisis as it impacts the Church in different ways in different areas of the world. This global and historical approach to the abuse crisis is key to the de-politicization and de-ideologization of the crisis because historical research imposes complexity, both in its method and in its interpretations. The cynical exploitation of the abuse crisis for political and for church political goals dismantles that complexity, selects a frame or part of a historical process, and wields the crisis as a propaganda weapon, doing damage not only to the ecclesial fabric but also to the intellectual fiber of the theological tradition.

Finally, tradition learns from and elaborates upon major historical traumas. The process of tradition formation requires much more than historical studies: *traditio* is not just *historia*. Yet, this *traditio* can develop only in conjunction with historical studies dedicated to understanding traumas such as the abuse crisis in the Church. The Church needs to learn from the abuse crisis, from the abuse itself, and the failure to act and respond. Global history is essential because being global in the study of the past means learning about the history of other systems of sexual

¹⁶ See, for example, Alana Harris, ed., *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

¹⁷ See for example, Michele Mancino and Giovanni Romeo, *Clero criminale. L'onore della Chiesa e i delitti degli ecclesiastici nell'Italia della Controriforma* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2013); Claude Langlois, *On savait, mais quoi? La pédophilie dans l'Eglise de la Révolution à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2020); Dyan Elliott, *The Corruptor of Boys: Sodomy, Scandal, and the Medieval Clergy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

exploitation and crimes, other systems of silencing victims, and other types of gender discrimination, without the idiosyncratic moralization that is centered on one particular culture or tradition that obfuscates the ability to learn from the past.

The Ecclesiological and Ecclesial Implications of an Historical Approach

The effort to conceive of and study the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church as an historical issue must not be confused with the wrong and dangerous idea that the crisis is only in the past and that the problem has been solved. On the contrary, it must be understood as part of the effort to address the crisis through a deeper comprehension of the roots and mechanisms of abuse itself, of the cover-up, and of the failure to respond to it.

The abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is a problem that the Church cannot solve alone, without the help of, for example, public and law enforcement authorities, the public education system, and health care providers. At the same time, it is a crisis with deep ecclesiological and ecclesial roots and consequences that calls for resources internal to the Christian community to guide it towards better systems of prevention and, where possible, a just way of dealing with the past and the present of the Church.

Until very recently, the primary and often exclusive focus was on the episcopal hierarchy. The individual bishops and the national bishops' conferences have been the main targets of investigations and of moral outrage, resulting in undeserved relief for others with responsibilities in the Church. Only in the latest phase in the global history of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, beginning in winter 2017-2018, have we begun looking for a more complete and accurate picture of the scandal and of the responsibilities. What we mean by "the Church's hierarchy" has only recently started to include religious orders and new ecclesial movements. This has been part of the information available to clerical decision-makers for several decades but did not enter the picture of the abuse crisis because of the greater difficulty, compared to the linearity of

the parish and diocesan structures, of framing them from a litigation perspective.

The need for an historiographical approach to the abuse crisis is also necessary because the courtroom litigation perspective, by focusing on the responsibilities and failures of the bishops, has further clericalized a crisis that is ecclesial and not just clerical. Abusers could rely on a web of protection much wider than only the hierarchical church. In most cases, this included a lack of attention combined with willful ignorance to the pieces of information that were available to a number of members of the church beyond the bishops, the diocesan curias, superiors of religious orders, and the Vatican. Abusers could count on the silence and willful ignorance in the institutional and clerical structures of the Catholic Church *but also* among lay Catholics as individuals and as organizations.¹⁸

An historiographical study of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church from a comparative perspective must look at various actors: the Catholic media system (both the Catholic media which depends on the support of the institutional Church and the independent Catholic media); organizations run by Catholic laity; lay ecclesial movements; Catholics in the justice system, in the police, in the secular media, and in politics; and parents and family members of both victims/survivors and abusers.

Investigative journalism and the criminal prosecution of abusers and their protectors are absolutely necessary. Even so, we should remember the temptation that comes with the “tribunalization” of the Church bringing down the guilt solely on the abusers and those in the hierarchy who covered it up. Few or many delimits a small number of individuals. This dichotomy between a few “bad apples” in comparison to the otherwise

¹⁸ One example of the wide network of silence of those who knew emerges also from the report Secretariat of the Holy See, *Report on the Holy See’s Institutional Knowledge and Decision-Making Related to Former Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick (1930–2017)*, (Vatican City: 2020), www.vatican.va/resources/resources_rapporto-card-mccarrick_20201110_en.pdf. It is known that until the *Boston Globe*’s investigative reports published at the beginning of 2002, national mainstream media in the USA had almost unanimously refused to publish Jason Berry’s articles.

healthy batch can too easily become self-absolatory for the rest of the Church. If we assume that we can clearly identify the individuals responsible for the crimes, we feel relieved of the fault that weighs on the Church. There is a gray area between “the bad ones” and “the good ones” that the entire Church must address: “The gray area, it’s not just the others. The gray area is also us.”¹⁹ The ecclesial community cannot delegate this work to others, and it is difficult to accomplish without approaching the crisis historically.

There is no guarantee that an historiographical approach to the abuse crisis will liberate the debate from “tribunalization”; forensic history is one of the possible ways to write the history of a collective trauma. But especially for the modern and contemporary period, during which there is greater access to more abundant and diverse sources than during the medieval period, we can and must think historically about the phenomenon of abuse in the Catholic Church in a way that is conscious of the fact that overreliance on courtroom sources results in listening to and empowering the voices only of those who have access to the justice system. Something similar can be said about those whose stories are heard because they capture the attention of investigative journalists. In a time of crisis for local journalism, we must remember the key role played by those news outlets in discovering cases of abuse.

An historical approach to the abuse crisis in the church is necessary to give voice, and also some justice, to all those who were not and will not be heard in the courtrooms, whose stories were not and will not be told by journalists. We need a new season of historical studies able to understand and present the phenomenon of abuse in the Catholic Church from a comparative and global perspective, without reservations, without apologetic intentions, and without invoking alibis or blaming others. This

¹⁹ Hans Zollner, “Die Stille vor dem Showdown,” *Die Zeit*, February 13, 2019, www.zeit.de/2019/08/sexueller-missbrauch-katholische-kirche-weltbischoefe-vatikan. In print, Hans Zollner, “Die Stille vor dem Showdown,” *Die Zeit* 8, February 14, 2019, 48.

would be an important way to receive Pope Francis's invitation to "judge the past with a hermeneutics of the past."²⁰

We live in an epoch-making crisis, which has evoked comparisons with the times of indulgences which led to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.²¹ The response of the Church to the scandal of corruption at the time of the Reformation required updating the theological tradition and a Catholic reform; the same update and reform is necessary today to confront the abuse crisis. But there can be neither update nor reform of the tradition without an historiographical reflection and sense of what happened.



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²⁰ Pope Francis, "Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia," December 21, 2018, www.vatican.va/content/francescomobile/en/speeches/2018/december/documents/papa-francesco_20181221_curia-romana.html.

²¹ See Massimo Faggioli, "The Catholic Church's Biggest Crisis Since the Reformation," *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2018, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-10-11/catholic-churchs-biggest-crisis-reformation; Tomáš Halík, "With a Sorrowful Heart..."—the Scandal of Abusive Priests," *The Tablet*, October 2, 2021, 8–11.