

Chapter 17: Ecclesiology and the Challenge of Ecclesiological Failure

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2021 was a typical year in the recent history of the Catholic Church. “Typical” could imply the absence of anything noteworthy. In this instance, the opposite is true. 2021 was the year in which authorities in France and in the US state of Nebraska issued reports detailing a long history of the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults by Catholic priests, religious, and lay workers. It was also during 2021 that investigators at a former “residential school” for indigenous children in Canada, a school that the Catholic Church administered, discovered unmarked graves containing the remains of hundreds of children, many of whom were the victims of abuse or neglect. This discovery proved to be representative of a wholesale pattern of abuse in the church-run schools. In addition to these large-scale matters, there were numerous instances of individual priests and bishops facing charges or lawsuits involving sexual abuse. Sadly, these events are what makes 2021 representative of present-day Catholic life. Since 2002, when the *Boston Globe* published its landmark series on sexual abuse by priests and malfeasance by bishops, a series that the film *Spotlight* later made widely known, similar findings have flowed from other news sources and from judicial authorities.

As findings on the sexual crimes of ordained ministers and the compromised integrity of many officeholders in the church have multiplied, anger and consternation have likewise rippled through the ecclesial community. Crimes against children and vulnerable adults continue to stir the moral outrage of Catholics, especially when, as in the Canadian schools, it was often those with a direct “duty-of-care” and ministerial responsibility who perpetrated not only horrendous physical or

sexual abuse but also “determined efforts to instill a sense of inferiority, to rob people of their cultural identity, to sever their roots.”¹

What has faded from the response of most Catholics, however, is any sense of surprise at the constant flow of such revelations. Catholics have now lived through too many years like 2021, too many reports that have conditioned them to expect further distressing news. The exposés that are so familiar in the United States have also become more frequent in many other parts of the world. ‘Scandal’ now clings to the Catholic Church with a dispiriting viscosity, allowing little room for shock when yet another inquiry publishes damning findings about priests and bishops.

Catholics who remain faithful to participation in the worshipping community as it celebrates the Eucharist—a commitment that the abuse crisis has ruptured for many ‘former Catholics’—will proclaim each week their creedal conviction that the church is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” Understandably, these worshippers might experience a significant amount of dissonance as they profess their faith in the church’s holiness. Taken together, the elements of the creedal formula identify the church as the product of God’s initiative and enduring presence; they testify to the church’s existence as the “universal sacrament of salvation” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 48), the unique guarantee that God, through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, offers God’s reconciling love to the whole of creation. Nonetheless, the mark of ‘holiness’ sits awkwardly alongside the crimes of the church’s ministers, crimes that have inflicted long-term harm on fragile lives, while also enveloping the ecclesial community in shame.

Exacerbating the dilemma of Catholics about their participation in a scandal-ridden church is the fact that it is the ordained leaders of the church who have most notoriously failed to practice “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). The Second Vatican Council explicitly charged bishops to “exercise a powerful

¹ Pope Francis, “Meeting with Representatives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada,” April 1, 2022, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220401-popoli-indigeni-canada.html).

influence for good ... by abstaining from all wrongdoing in their conduct” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 26). In the wake of the abuse crisis, this precept rings hollow. The devastation that the church’s ordained ministers have wrought has undermined trust in ordained ministers, while also shining a critical light on clerical privilege. These developments have given new urgency to calls among many Catholics for the reframing of the church’s ordained ministry and the purging of all vestiges of clerical exceptionalism. In the same vein, there is a burgeoning pressure for revisions in the church’s organs of governance, over which clerics currently hold a monopoly.²

The contrast between the present pall over the Catholic Church and an ecclesial community enthusiastically committed to the “missionary option” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 27) which Pope Francis identifies as essential to authentic ecclesial life, raises questions for the work of ecclesiology. If ecclesialogists are unable to meet the challenges of the abuse crisis, unable to show how the church’s inherited faith might inform constructive responses to the crisis, then the discipline is unlikely to be a constructive agent in the formation of the Christian community for discipleship in the world. In the absence of theological resources with the capacity to generate conversion and creativity in the church, the official ecclesial response to the crisis would default—as already seems often to be the case—to lawyers and insurance companies.

This essay addresses whether ecclesiology offers fruitful possibilities to a church in need. A focus on the church’s sacramentality is integral to this discussion of ecclesiology. Although there are other ecclesiological frameworks, sacramentality warrants close attention as it features prominently in the ecclesiological teaching of the Second Vatican Council: “All those, who in faith look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, God has gathered together and established as

² For one example, from Australia, of a proposal for reform to the church’s governance, see Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, “Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia,” May 1, 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TXZd4SP-EBk4VtH9JyB9PMSmjY9Mfj7E/view>.

the church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 9). Not only this “canonical” status of sacramental ecclesiology but also its potential for conveying an exalted view of the church makes it a particularly apt subject of investigation in the context of the abuse crisis. If sacramentality suggests a church immune to failure, it furthers an irredeemably naïve view of the church, a fantasy at odds with the harsh realities of the church’s past and present.

The immediate task for the chapter is twofold: to specify the role of ecclesiology within the panoply of theological disciplines; to consider the capacity of ecclesiology to engage with the concrete realities of the church’s history, a step that will involve a focus on hope in relation to ecclesial life. Fulfilling these two tasks will provide a base for appraising sacramental ecclesiology in the final section of the chapter.

The Dynamics of Ecclesiology

The goal of ecclesiology is not to conjure an ideal church, one that could be failure-proof, immune to complexity, or composed only of saints. Equally, ecclesiology cannot guarantee that the community of the church will march in lockstep towards any particular outcome or certify that a vision for the community of faith will invariably translate into effective action. What ecclesiology can do, by drawing on its affinity with the Christian tradition and its familiarity with the present circumstances and specific contexts of the ecclesial community, is highlight any lack of congruence between the Christian community’s profession of faith and its actions.³ In so doing, ecclesiology underscores that the church remains responsible to the Holy Spirit, rather than directing the Spirit. As a

³ On the role of ecclesiology in indicating whether the church actions are congruent with its faith, see Paul Murray, “Searching the Living Truth of the Church in Practice: On the Transformative Task of Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Modern Theology* 30 (2014): 252–281; see also Clare Watkins, “Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying the Church?,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 167–181.

corollary of its recognition of the Spirit's primacy, ecclesiology can challenge the ecclesial community to acknowledge where it has failed to respond to the call of grace.

Such self-reflection is a prelude to conversion, to a renewed appropriation of all that gives the church its identity as the people of God. The work of ecclesiology, then, aligns with the overall mission of theology: "Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community."⁴ Ecclesiology critiques the practices of the ecclesial community in light of their consequences. At the same time, the discipline also identifies what might be more in accord with authentic responses to grace. In both actions, ecclesiology exhorts the Christian community to more radical faithfulness.

Casting ecclesiology as exhortatory, as visionary and aspirational, might engender the perception that it is merely a form of wishful thinking. Just as exhortations to action in the context of today's climate emergency carry the stigma of being "blah, blah, blah," of lacking plans for action and detailed timetables, exhortatory ecclesiology may well appear impotent to effect change in the church. Although the power to enact a vision might seem more desirable than exhortation, it is crucial to keep in mind that grace too is exhortatory. The Holy Spirit, consistent with God's self-emptying in the incarnation of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5–11), does not impose salvation on humanity. The Spirit moves hearts rather than twists arms. The eschatological framework in which the Spirit operates provides the assurance that "all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28) but proffers neither schedule nor step-by-step plan for accomplishing what is good. Nor does this unequivocal assurance illuminate the Spirit's strategy for overcoming the pilgrim church's susceptibility to faithlessness.

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 9.

Ecclesiology affirms that Christ and the Spirit are “the co-instituting principles” of the church but properly rejects attributing quasi-divine status to the ecclesial community.⁵ Even as theologies of the church articulate how the church might embody in the world the grace of the Spirit, no theology can transcend the church’s limitations: “Faced with the confused and sinful practices and intentions and construals of our congregations, we need to know how the Holy Spirit, rather than being ‘bound’ to the church and its practices, can *overcome* the effects of the churches upon their membership, and the membership upon the churches, so that in spite of the church as well as by its help we may be sanctified and brought closer to Christ.”⁶ Consistent with this need, ecclesiology prompts the ecclesial community to greater faithfulness in the present.

As a pilgrim community that “carries the mark of this world which will pass” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 48), the church, ecclesialogists included, must live “by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). This requirement is congruent with the church’s existence as a body that is “the result of the synergy of a gratuitous divine gift that is pure in itself and a human activity that is characterized by human freedom, limitations, and natural fallibility.”⁷ Paradoxically, then, ecclesiology underscores the intimacy between God and the Christian community, while reminding members of the church of their limitations, which confirm that God alone, not the church, is the source of salvation. In so doing, ecclesiology itself is an act of faith. More explicitly, ecclesiology is an expression of trust in God’s capacity to overcome the impact of humanity’s sin. This trust embodies the “hope that does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured

⁵ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1983), 9.

⁶ Nicholas Healy, “Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003): 303; original emphasis.

⁷ Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, rev. ed., trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2011), 90.

into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5).⁸

Ecclesiology and Hope

The invocation of hope, like the profile of the Spirit as exhortatory, is not a soft option. In the Christian setting, hope has its foundations in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For this reason, Christian hope implies the capacity for “obedience to what horrifies,” for facing reality unflinchingly, rather than avoiding a confrontation with the truth.⁹ Christ-shaped hope enables the embrace of the truth since it trusts that nothing can overcome “the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord” (Philippians 3:8). Hope, then, proceeds from faith, while being also a reception of God’s love in Christ, the love that is the source of compassion and generosity within the church no less than beyond it: “Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love ... can free our life and the world from the poisons and contaminations that could destroy the present and the future” (*Spe Salvi*, no. 35). This hope can acknowledge the extent of clerical sexual abuse, listen humbly to the witness of survivors, and accept the call for repentance and conversion, doing so without defensiveness.

Clerical sexual abuse shares in the breach of trust that is intrinsic to all abuse, but the fact that the victims of church-based abuse have largely been the most defenseless members of the community adds an extra layer of damage. This aspect of the crisis, together with sheer number of documented assaults by bishops, priests, and religious, as well as manifold instances of cover-up by bishops, identifies clerical sexual abuse as an

⁸ For an analysis of the church in terms of hope and for the role of ecclesiology in promoting this hope, see Richard Lennan, “The Church as a Sacrament of Hope,” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 247–274.

⁹ Paul Crowley, *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 61.

egregious betrayal of a life-giving and compassionate God. As horrifying as are the specifics of the present situation, this moment is far from being the first time in the church's history when the actions of Christians have contradicted the faith they profess. History is a reminder that the church has never been failure-proof. Hence, the abiding need for theologies that promote conversion of the ecclesial community rather than proceeding as if the church knows no barriers to Spirit-inspired holiness.

There is an undeniable record of holiness in the church's past and present, "a great multitude that no one could count" (Revelation 7:9) of saintly people who selflessly cared for those in need and witnessed in other ways to the inbreaking of God's reign. Alas, the stories of holiness are not the only entry in the annals of the ecclesial community. Myriad expressions of self-righteousness, vanity, and arrogance, all of which fuel the exploitation of others, sit alongside chronicles of sanctity. Indeed, even the inner circle of Jesus's companions could be conceited and self-seeking, "for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34). Disputes and divisions in the Christian community that began in its first generation—"I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ'" (1 Corinthians 1:12)—did not cease with the early church but have continued, and expanded, since that time.

The enduring legacy of division in the church is most obvious in the still-unhealed Catholic-Orthodox and Catholic-Protestant separations. As if this historical wound were insufficient to damage the church's witness to Christ, the current generation of the church's members is more than capable of adding its own forms of resistance to the gospel. Evidencing the impact that today's "culture wars" exert on the church, present-day Catholics reproduce in the ecclesial sphere the polarization characteristic of the wider social and political culture.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a discussion of ideological divisions in the contemporary church in the United States, see Michael Peppard, "Can the Church Transcend a Polarized Culture?," in *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal*, ed. Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles Camosy, and Tricia Bruce (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 145–157.

The Catholic community can often reflect the world's shortcomings, rather than the way of being present in the world that the Spirit enables. Thus, Catholics, far from embodying courageous Christian discipleship, have been as complicit as other sectors of civil society in, for example, the prolongation of racial injustice in the United States, including within the church itself.¹¹ The ecclesial community professes its conviction that "there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ" (Galatians 3:28), but its lack of openness to many groups on the margins of society and the church indicates that the Christian community does not always take its inspiration from gospel-centered principles.

As disheartening as it is to acknowledge such collective failures, they echo the inescapable truth proper to every Christian that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Consequently, as Pope John Paul II acknowledged, the lives of members of the church can "constitute a counter-testimony to Christianity. ... Our sin has impeded the Spirit's working in the hearts of many people" (*Incarnationis Mysteriorum*, no. 11). This is explicitly true in relation to the catastrophe that "the clerical sexual abuse crisis" encapsulates. The past and present reality of sinfulness in the church underscores the eschatological orientation of the church, confirming God alone as the source of salvation and fullness of life. More immediately, the failures that express sinfulness amplify the impossibility of failure-proofing the ecclesial community, of certifying that the church's witness to Christ can be free from any manifestations of human sinfulness.¹²

¹¹ On the experience of Black Catholics in the United States see, for example, Edward Braxton, *The Church and the Racial Divide: Reflections of an African-American Catholic Bishop* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021); M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African-American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018); and Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

¹² For a recent study of the church's sinfulness, see Brian Flanagan, *Stumbling into Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

Consistent with the history of failure in the church, ecclesiologists could advocate for the practice of “loss management,” frequently adjusting downwards the church’s proclamation of its relationship to God. This tactic, responsive to the church’s failures, would ensure that the self-understanding of the ecclesial community generates minimal expectations of holiness and virtue. A downgrading of claims about the church would make it possible to dismiss with a shrug all revelations of individual and communal failure, classifying them as no more than indicators of the church’s ineradicable humanity. Such a church would inexorably fade into oblivion as its futility would become ever more difficult to disguise.¹³

An ecclesiology that sought to resist defeatism and assert the church’s merits might dismiss even the demonstrated breadth and depth of clergy abuse as the sins of “bad apples,” from whom the rest of the community is distinguishable. More broadly, lay members of the church could claim—with more than a little justification—that since the ordained members of the church are principally responsible for the abuse crisis, it is the “people of God,” understood as inclusive of only the laity, who are more truly representative of the church.¹⁴ In their different ways, each of these options reduces a complex reality to a one-dimensional solution that traffics in the misapprehension that hope requires the denial of failure.

Importantly, two components of the ecclesiology that emerged from the Second Vatican Council offer a way of proceeding more in accord with authentic hope. First, the council stresses that the whole church is “at once holy and always in need of purification,” and so “follows constantly the path of penance and renewal” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 8). There can be, therefore, neither a perfect church nor sectors of the church exempt from

¹³ See, for example, the analysis of young people’s disaffiliation from the church detailed in Robert McCarty and John Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: St Mary’s, 2017).

¹⁴ “The people of God” appears often as a synonym for “the laity,” but this is not the approach of Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 9–17, depicted “the people of God” as the entire community of the baptized; that is the laity and ordained together form the one people of God.

conversion. Second, Vatican II acknowledges that “the whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the holy one, cannot err in matters of belief” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 12). Accordingly, the possibility of a holy church, one responsive to the grace that underpins authentic expressions of faith, requires the engagement of the whole people of God.

The analysis of the church’s sacramentality, which is the theme of the final section of this essay, considers whether a renewed appreciation of the facets of ecclesial theology that Vatican II amplified might contribute to forming constructive responses to the abuse crisis. It argues for the compatibility between sacramentality and a self-critical church, contending that self-criticism deepens the hope of the community and so enhances its sacramentality.¹⁵

Sacramentality and the Self-Critical Church

The identifications of the church as “the people of God,” “the body of Christ,” or “the temple of the Holy Spirit,” are perhaps more familiar to most Catholics than the invocation of the church as sacrament. Yet, it is the church’s sacramentality that is at the forefront of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. The council begins its document on “the church” by comparing the church to a sacrament, naming the ecclesial community as “a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 1).

As sacrament, the church has an exalted status. This status can render sacramental ecclesiology problematic, especially if it fosters a self-congratulatory stance that resists the abiding need for conversion common to all members and all activities of the church.¹⁶ So, then, is “the church as

¹⁵ On the need for self-criticism in the life and mission of the church, see Karl Rahner, “The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12: *Confrontations 2*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1974), 229–249.

¹⁶ See for example the critique of sacramental ecclesiology in Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 1978), 78–79. For a positive view of the concept, see

sacrament” a stumbling block to reform in the ecclesial community, or even a tactic that legitimates denial of the church’s sinfulness?

It is certainly true that sacramental ecclesiology presumes an intimate connection between the church and God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit: “The Spirit from the Father, with whom Jesus the *Christos* was anointed, is the same Spirit whom the Father sends upon, and whom the Risen One shares with, the community of Christ’s disciples at Pentecost. ... The church is the place where the mission of the Word and the mission of the Spirit find their clearest point of conjuncture in human history.”¹⁷ Building on the presentation of God’s trinitarian initiative in establishing the church, Vatican II concludes that there is “no mean analogy” between the “social structure of the Church” in relation to the Holy Spirit and the human nature of Jesus in relation to his divine nature (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 8). This remarkable statement might suggest that Vatican II was attributing divinity to the ecclesial community, a perception that the council’s description of the church as “unfailingly holy” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 39) might buttress.

It is crucial, then, to make clear that all references to the church’s holiness attest to the ineradicable presence of the Spirit as the church’s source of life. The council’s stress on the Spirit equates holiness with the presence of God, not human perfection. Vatican II also insists that members of the church must remain open to grace. This openness is necessary so that “the holiness of the church is shown constantly in the fruits of grace that the Spirit produces in the faithful” (*Lumen Gentium*, no 39). Grace is not the possession of the ecclesial community nor does it automatically transform human beings into paradigms of sanctity. Rather, “If charity is to grow and like a good seed produce fruit in the soul, all of the faithful must carry out [God’s] will by what they do, with the help of [God’s] grace” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 42). Prayer, self-denial, service of

Richard Lennan, “Narcissistic Aestheticism?": An Assessment of Karl Rahner’s Sacramental Ecclesiology,” *Philosophy and Theology* 25, no. 2 (2013): 249–270.

¹⁷ Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 37–38.

others, and a desire to embrace virtue, all of which have their basis in the Eucharist (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 42), are aids to the realization of the “good fruit” that the church is to make present. This fruit is the sacramental expression of grace at work in the ecclesial community.

Far from legitimating either superiority or mediocrity, the link between the church and sacramentality is the motive for the conversion that can flower in just and compassionate actions that embody grace in the world. Fulfilling this mission requires all members of the ecclesial community to understand that the church is always “both the proclaiming bearer of the revealing word of God as his utterance of salvation to the world, *and at the same time* [the] subject hearkening and believing, to whom that word of salvation of God in Christ is addressed.”¹⁸ The church’s sacramentality, in short, mandates that the ecclesial community not see itself as a privileged body. Rather than being the exclusive community of the saved, one perennially untroubled by the specter of failure, the church is a people whose faithfulness to God, and their God-given mission, is inseparable from their ongoing openness to grace, and their acknowledgment of the inevitable gap between all that the Spirit enables and what their actions reveal of their response to the Spirit.

Recognition of this gap is key to Louis-Marie Chauvet’s contention that the church as sacrament “radicalizes the vacancy of the place of God. To accept its mediation is to agree that this vacancy will never be filled.”¹⁹ The church, through God’s initiative and enduring grace, can be a sacramental expression of God’s life-giving presence in the world, but the church is not a substitute for God. In fact, the church’s constitution in grace means, paradoxically, that the church has the capacity to be a unique obstacle to the working of grace in the world, as the abuse crisis illustrates

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, “What is a Sacrament?,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, *Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1976), 143; original emphasis.

¹⁹ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine M. Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1995), 178.

most tragically. To be other than a hindrance, the church must be, and remain, self-critical, alert to the possibility that the ecclesial community will obscure rather than symbolize the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Self-criticism is also “a primary condition enabling the Church to exercise a critical function with regard to society,” as only a church that acknowledges its own capacity to turn away from God can challenge that same capacity evident in the wider world.²⁰ Once again, it is evident that there is an inextricable connection between the church’s sacramentality and the conversion of the community of faith, its humble recognition that it depends on grace rather than being the source of grace. The possibility that the church can be a body nurturing hope in the world derives from this connection.

The self-criticism and conversion that are irreducible components of the church’s sacramentality can resist any tendency to use sacramental ecclesiology in ways that idealize the church. No less importantly, the recognition that the Spirit at the heart of the church is a gift in which all the baptized share, can challenge those practices and relationships that convey the impression that the church is “a clerical, religiously camouflaged kind of totalitarian system.”²¹ It is not, then, solely clerics who manifest the church. All the baptized share in the vocation to proclaim Christ in word and action. As the product of God’s initiative, the God who alone will bring the church to fulfillment, the church is not at the disposal of any single sector of the ecclesial community.

The church’s sacramentality implicates the whole ecclesial community. Accordingly, worship, ministries, missionary endeavors, and organs of governance in the church will be more likely to reflect all that the Spirit empowers when they facilitate the participation of all the baptized. Greater mutuality and accountability between officeholders and the wider community will serve the strengthening of a self-critical church, which, in

²⁰ Rahner, “The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society,” 237.

²¹ Karl Rahner, “Freedom in the Church,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2: *Man in the Church*, trans. K. H. Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 99.

turn, fosters the church's sacramentality. Pope Francis's advocacy for a "synodal" church, one that consciously engages all who seek to live as disciples, aligns precisely with the sacramental mission of the ecclesial community in the world.²²

Sacramental ecclesiology is not a formula for perfection. The emphasis on grace at the heart of the church, the emphasis that is central to sacramental ecclesiology, can spur the repentance and reform of the ecclesial community. This conversion, in turn, facilitates the emergence of a more faithful and hopeful church, one better able to image Christ in its actions. Such a church does not outgrow its need to embrace the repentance that its failures in the abuse crisis require. The church can be a sacrament of healing and hope only by embracing its own brokenness and need for conversion, a need that exists in all the baptized and every ministry and agency of ecclesial life. By constantly renewing its dependence on grace, the ecclesial community can witness to God's reconciling and life-giving mercy.



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²² For Pope Francis on synodality, see, for example, Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod," October 9, 2021, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html.