

Chapter 18: Interconnectedness: The Thread that Enables a Theological and Synodal Response to Abuse

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In Greek mythology Ariadne gave a thread to Theseus to enable him to find his way out of the Labyrinth. Had Theseus become distracted and lost that thread, he would have been condemned to wander amidst the maze or, more likely, been killed and eaten by the Minotaur, who lived in the depths of the labyrinth. Only by following the thread was there the prospect of emerging from the darkness of the labyrinth into Life. Interconnectedness, I suggest, is a thread that enables us to see the congruent elements of a theological response to the sexual abuse crisis—amidst a spectrum of important diverse areas where we could consistently focus our attention—and move towards a coherent life-giving response. This golden (or truthfully somewhat tarnished) thread of interconnectedness also enables us to appreciate something of the enormity and depth of darkness/profanity that lies at the heart of the sexual abuse crisis and continues to affect the whole Catholic Church.

This article raises some key features integral to this interconnectedness including an understanding of authority as service and the importance of the child as agent and teacher. Though discrete areas, these are interconnected and have profound theological significance. In addition, if recognized as integral, they make a fruitful contribution to a synodal response. Both of these features find their deepest resonance in the person of Jesus who issues a clear injunction to pay attention to the child. Indeed, his own identity is inseparable from his being a child in relationship with the Father, the eternal child, always the Son of the Father. This Christocentric focus opens the foundation of the triune mystery of childhood. The primal trust in the Father rests in the Holy Spirit common to both Father and Son.

There is also a call to conversion and transformation for the ecclesial community, from the abuse of power and authority—an abuse that all of us can engage in as parents, teachers, social workers, bus conductors, cleaners, anyone involved with others—to the exercise of authority as service after the manner of Christ. Accordingly, there is a challenge to the whole Church to a more profound appreciation of the depths of this interconnectedness enabling a theological imperative for a synodal way of proceeding in our own life-giving response to the abuse crisis.

Authority as Service

Contemporary generations have seen the radical questioning of authority. Caught between the Scylla of anarchy with the consequent destruction of culture and the Charybdis of despotism which tramples human dignity, the concept of authority ongoingly seems indispensable for our human interactions. What might an edifying authority in the Church look like? And how can the fundamental relationship of trust which is vital for the exercise of true authority as service be re-established? I say re-established, as underlying the sexual abuse crisis is a betrayal of trust and a predatory misuse of authority. Pope Francis has argued that at the heart of the sexual abuse crisis is the abuse of power. I have proposed that part of the way to address this is through a discussion of the appropriate use of power.¹ Perhaps the best way to think about the appropriate use of power is through the notion of the appropriate use of authority—as service.² Within the Christian tradition there has been an honourable exercise of authority in this way across generations: in the service of the poor, the provision of education, especially for girls, the foundation of medical care facilities, and the daily witness of countless holy men and women in

¹ Gill Goulding CJ, “Towards a Theological and Synodal Response to the Abuse Crisis,” *New Blackfriars* 102, no. 1097 (2021): 96–107.

² Christopher Butler poignantly notes that New Testament sources view the authority of Christ as having been perceived by his followers primarily because of his service of exorcism and healing within the community. See Christopher Butler, “Authority in the New Testament,” *Downside Review* 57, no. 4 (1939): 505–523.

positions of authority. The fact that authority is sometimes dishonoured does not negate that reality. “Engaged theological reflection could enable such authentic authority by a dialectical process, that also identifies and seeks to reform the dishonourable.”³

Within the Christian faith tradition there is an understanding of a certain authority within our very being. This stems from the Trinitarian act of creation which arises from the ebullience of God’s dynamic loving activity and asserts the essential dignity, value, worth, and goodness of each human person, made in the image and likeness of God. This authority of being involves a dependence which belongs to the very nature of creaturehood. We are creatures who have a Creator, and this intimate link of dependence calls us to a deep relationship with God that is mirrored in our human need to relate in depth to one another. There is a two-fold dynamic here: to depend upon God “sets us free from every form of enslavement and [secondly this] leads us to recognize the great dignity [of human persons]” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 32.). The maturity of a well-lived Christian life evinces that relational intimacy with God and appropriate expressions of intimacy with other human persons. The apprehension of such lives gives encouragement and support to the developing relational identities of children and young people. When young lives suffer the trauma of sexual abuse the perverted imprint on their experience of relational identity and intimacy can mar all future relationships.

The Inuit peoples of the Arctic region of Canada built inuksuk or inukshuk, human-made stone landmarks or cairns found in northern Canada. These stone structures were important to the people for navigating their way across the frozen north. They were used, amongst other things, as a point of reference indicating a direction for travel. They were pointers to something beyond themselves. In a not dissimilar manner, those who exercise authority in the context of Christian faith are called to be people who point to an authority which lies beyond themselves, indeed

³ Goulding, “Towards a Theological and Synodal Response to the Abuse Crisis,” 98.

that is far superior to them. God is the final authority, and all creatures are subject to God. Accordingly, those called to represent God in exercising authority within the Church are called also to give an example of obedience to God if they are to be credible in exercising that authority as service. The life of the representative of the authority of God must reflect that intimacy with God which is the foundation for all authority and which overflows into a service that is hope-filled and life-giving for others. This is a truly edifying exercise of authority.

The Authority of Christ

“Total and generous availability to serve others is the distinctive mark of those in positions of authority in the Church ... (as) the first servant of the servants of God is Jesus.”⁴ Rooted in the profundity of his relationship with the Father, Jesus was always reaching out to his disciples and beyond them to the poorest and most forgotten. “In him God reveals his personal innermost being: his most humble love in the world to the point of his putting off of all his own power (Phil 2:6–7), to the point of obedience on the Cross of shame (Phil 2:8), and precisely in all this the breaking forth of the light of his absolute superiority over every power opposed to himself which is not the power of love. ... Christ remains as the one who realizes (by his Cross) God’s decision of absolute love for the world.”⁵ In the mystery of the cross we find a freedom from the abuse of power and the most profound image of authority as service. Indeed, the final hermeneutic is always the cross.

This power of love is central to Jesus’s delegation of authority to his Church, Peter, the twelve, and those to whom they would subsequently delegate. It is important to note as Balthasar does that the primary authority was of forgiving sins, which was key to the mission of Jesus.⁶

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, March 24, 2006, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060324_consistory.html.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Authority,” in *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 137–139.

⁶ Balthasar, “Authority,” 137.

Also, it is clear that Peter assumes this responsibility only by himself being willing to lay down his life for the Church. The gift of being able to offer forgiveness is linked to the willingness of those so gifted to offer their lives in the service of others. It is, however, important to indicate that, by virtue of baptism, where we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we receive some share in his authority and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This means that the witness of Christian lives is a fundamental duty. At the heart of this witness is a willingness to being open to forgiving and being forgiven.

There is a significant delineation of authority within the Church, which can only truly be understood in an analogous sense. "An analogy between the authority of the Church in their totality and the authority of those who by Christ are endowed with particular authority among the people, an analogy in which the presence of the authority of God in Christ is made concrete (incarnate) for the people in their differentiation."⁷ The dilemma across all generations is that the authority of the Church is to be a continuation of Christ's own authority and yet it can never fully measure up to the office of Christ. Only when authority is exercised in that spirit of humble love which characterized the ministry of Jesus is it credible to the people.⁸ Pope Francis has emphasized the importance of the priestly ministry as a great mystery of love which needs to be fostered "through prayer, through listening to the Word of God, through the daily celebration of the Eucharist and also through regularly going to the

⁷ Balthasar, "Authority," 138.

⁸ Balthasar, "Authority," 139. He continues: "The authority of the Church must understand that it can function only within the analogy of the total authority of the people of the Church, or to put it in modern and concrete terms, in a continual dialogue between the whole Church and the Church leadership (the bishops in their collegiality and their head, the Pope); ... the right sense of direction lies both in the sense of the believers of the generality of the Church and in the general college of the bishops and in the head which, as it were, sums up and epitomizes them, but which none the less is only 'head' *of* and *for* and *with* something. ... Christ is the authority in the Church which can never be surpassed. But he does not exercise his authority one-sidedly as the exalted, law-giving judging Christ, but as *the* appearance of God who is exalted only in humiliation, legislates only in love, and judges only as he forgives."

Sacrament of Penance.” Without availing of these practices, the priest “inevitably ends up losing sight of the authentic meaning of his own service and the joy which comes from a profound communion with Jesus.”⁹ It is at this point that the trajectory towards abusive behaviour can open up.

Clearly, the call to holiness is a very striking reminder for those in identifiable positions within the Church—priests, bishops, religious, and laity—but they, like we ourselves, are all members of the People of God. As such, we share a responsibility and a need for accountability in the way we use the authority that we have in our differing circumstances. We are all called “into a people who might acknowledge [God] and serve him in holiness” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 9), and where more importantly should that holiness be seen but in the way we exercise the authority we have in different spheres? Indeed, *Lumen Gentium* insists that we “are called by the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father himself is perfect” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 9).

The Importance of the Child

At the heart of all consideration of the sexual abuse crisis is the person of the child or vulnerable young person. Yet, so often, there is still a failure to engage children directly on the topic of their experience. There is still a cultural ambivalence towards children, perhaps rooted in Rousseau’s romantic idealism of childhood or Kant’s view of children as unformed and animal-like and a childhood as a preparation for the adulthood that is to come when childhood disappears.¹⁰ Also, there is the Victorian idealization of the nuclear family.¹¹ These representations take little or no

⁹ Pope Francis. “General Audience,” March 26th 2014, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140326_udienza-generale.html.

¹⁰ See Immanuel Kant, *Über Pädagogik* (Königsberg: D. Friedrich Theodor Rink, 1803). Kant specifically addresses this view of the development of children in the Introduction and Chapter 1.

¹¹ See David Popenoe, “Victorian Fathers and the Rise of the Modern Nuclear Family,” in *Families Without Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 81–108.

account of children's agency, even though the notion of the agency of the child is pivotal to the various subdisciplines of the humanities which have flourished since the 1980s, variously named *childhood studies*, *social studies of childhood*, or *the sociology of childhood*. It is vital that we challenge our ongoing cultural assumptions about: what constitutes real knowledge and capacities required for reliable communication; the nature of children; and the difficulties of honest conversation about pain and suffering, even more so when it is a child that one desires above all to shield and protect from suffering. An honest question might be to ask are we protecting ourselves from pain rather than the child? I suggest that it is possible and necessary to speak with children about their experiences, because children are knowing persons, inter-subjective subjects, indeed communicating subjects by reason of their fundamental inter-subjectivity.¹² While they often lack capacities for abstract formulation, children have a drive for knowledge and a gift for creative meaning-making. They are able to communicate and engage in dialogue with others, including adults, through conversation, but especially through art, stories, and play. We have much to learn through children and not least because the gospel imperative (Mark 10:13–16 and Matthew 18:1–6) is that we should pay attention to children, not just to protect them but to learn from them.

Decades before childhood studies, Karl Rahner, SJ, wrote an article¹³ that raised up the agency of the child and the unsurpassable value of childhood by exploring the transcendent dimension of children's knowing and loving and how open they are to the mystery of God's presence. Indeed, he emphasized that childhood is not something that we lose or leave behind as we progress to being adults. Rather "we go towards it as

¹² There is literature about how to talk with child victims about the abuse they suffered. See "Practitioner and Parent/Caregiver Guides," Office for Victims of Crime, ovc.ojp.gov/child-victims-and-witnesses-support/guides; Haroon Siddique, "Child victims of sexual abuse 'often accused of lying to police,'" *The Guardian*, June 24, 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/24/child-victims-of-sexual-abuse-often-accused-of-lying-to-police.

¹³ Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 33–50.

that which has been achieved in time and redeemed for ever in time.¹⁴ We only *become* the children whom we *were* because we gather up time—and in this our childhood too—into our eternity.”¹⁵ Childhood, Rahner asserts, has a value and importance way beyond our human conceiving because “childhood itself has a direct relationship with God.”¹⁶ Childhood has a unique value in itself, and this is applicable to every child.¹⁷ Christianity has reverence for the child. Rahner’s theological conception of childhood is not one of naïve optimism, but of hope placed in God’s grace that abounds.

The child is a child, and we have all been children or, rather, we have all been a particular and unique child. Our experiences of being a child will be different according to the unique nature of our being and according to the circumstances in which we lived. It is the remembering of the experience of our own childhood that is important here. It is vital that we do not disregard our own experience of being a child. As Rahner insists, both scripture and tradition presuppose that we understand what a child really is from our own experience rather than treating this as a question to be explored. Among other things, our childhood can remind us of our

¹⁴ Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 39: “The child and his origins are encompassed by the love of God through the pledge of that grace which, in God’s will to save all mankind, comes in all cases and to every man from God in Christ Jesus.”

¹⁵ Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 36. He continues: “Childhood may always remain open. ... We do not move away from childhood in any definitive sense, but rather move towards the eternity of this childhood, to its definitive and enduring validity in God’s sight. Childhood is not only of eternal significance for man’s destiny to the extent that in childhood the foundations are laid for decisions which have an eternal significance. ... It is important in itself also, as a stage of man’s personal history in which that takes place which can only take place in childhood itself.”

¹⁶ Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 36.

¹⁷ Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 38: “The child is right from the first the partner of God ... who can love the smallest thing because for him it is always filled with the all; who does not feel the ineffable as lethal to him, because he experiences the fact that when he entrusts himself to it without reserve he falls into the inconceivable depths of love and blessedness.”

shared vulnerability, our fragility as human persons in relation with one another.

Children of God

Childhood is also, Rahner argues, open to mystery. Indeed, in the last analysis, it is a mystery. “And because it is a mystery ... life itself is mysterious ... and provided we reverently and lovingly preserve this state of being delivered over to the mystery, life becomes for us a state in which our original childhood is preserved for ever ... a state which endows us with the power still to be able to play, to recognize that the powers presiding over existence are greater than our own designs, and to submit to their control as our deepest good.”¹⁸ The mysterious nature of being a child we come to realize only later in life as we grow to become what we are, namely children. Indeed, as Rahner indicates, the experience of childhood involves not just an existential but an eschatological reality. Jesus points to children as those who know their own needs (Matthew 18:4), that they have nothing of themselves that merit the help of God, but who expect everything from God and trust in God’s loving kindness and protection. This mystery of trusting openness to God mirrors something of the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

Yet, it is vital, as St Paul asserts (Ephesians 3:26), to acknowledge that human persons are called to realize their identity as children of God. This, for Rahner, is the maturity of our understanding of what it means to be a child. Integral here is the “trust, openness, expectation, of interior harmony with the unpredictable forces with which the individual finds himself confronted ... a readiness to journey into the untried and the untested.”¹⁹ In this expression of maturity, it is made evident that it is the very fact that we are children of God that has been present within our lives from the beginning. It is not that this is an attribute acquired over time

¹⁸ Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 42. He continues: “And when our powers are at an end we realise in a childlike-spirit that our task too is at an end. ... When we take up this attitude, we make the mystery the protection and defence of our lives.”

¹⁹ Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 47–48.

through diligent exertion or merit. “In the last analysis, ... Childhood is only truly understood, only realises the ultimate depths of its own nature, when it is seen as based upon the foundation of childhood of God.”²⁰

Rahner appears conscious that those who as children felt neglected, abandoned, or, I would add, suffered the scourge of sexual abuse may interpret that experience in an ultimate and metaphysical sense such that it overwhelms all of life. Such persons will often not be able to overcome subsequent experiences of life’s difficulties or the impact of further psychological trauma by reappropriating the memories of a secure childhood which roots them positively towards meaning and life. Rather, they will interpret such experiences as further projection of the experience of negativity, insecurity, and retraumatized abuse.

It is those children and young people who have been abused, who are in many cases unable to acknowledge and live out the fullness of their identity as children of God, due to the suffering caused by abuse. The experience of sexual abuse when the perpetrator is a member of the clergy not only involves the violation of an understanding of relationship and intimacy but is also a deep betrayal of the soul of the child or vulnerable person. If there is then an attempt by the perpetrator to justify such abuse using the authority of the priest or utilizing the sacraments, such as the sacrament of reconciliation, there is a profanation of what is sacred. Both the reality of the child or young person and the sacraments are profaned by a sacrilegious act. The priest who stands to that child or vulnerable adult as a spiritual authority in their relationship with God has both betrayed that trust and indelibly marked the soul of the one who was abused. Stephen Rossetti in a landmark book written in 1990 used the term “slayer of the soul”²¹ to depict the depth of the profane action of abuse. It is of uttermost importance that the ecclesial community reflects on the

²⁰ Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 49.

²¹ Stephen Rossetti, *Slayer of the Soul: Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990).

profound suffering that is occasioned by abuse both catastrophically for the victim and also for family, friends, and the wider church community.

The Eternal Child Who is Christ

In this profound betrayal of those who have suffered abuse, we may also glimpse something of the depth of betrayal of Jesus. In the profanation of the sacred species which was his body, through torture and crucifixion, we glimpse something of the betrayal of his mystical body, which is the Church, and especially the most vulnerable therein. In the indifference shown to his sacred body made vulnerable to us in the Eucharist, we glimpse something of the rejection and indifference shown over the years towards those who are victims of abuse. In the parable of the last judgement in Matthew's gospel, Jesus clearly states, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Abuse of any child or vulnerable adult is abuse of Jesus, a sacrilegious act. For, he goes on to say, "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:45). When there was a refusal to listen to the painful stories of sexual abuse; when victims were blamed for daring to suggest such an action on behalf of a priest; and when no comfort was offered, only misunderstanding, denial, and ostracism, here, once more, Jesus asserts, such actions were taken towards himself. The alignment that Jesus makes between himself and the most vulnerable is inviolable. When children are involved, his words become graphic. "Whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believes in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matthew 18:5–6). This is a punishment imposed for the most pernicious of crimes.

Anyone who welcomes a child in the name of Jesus welcomes Jesus himself. He is not asserting that a child is some kind of analogy for the Son of God. Rather, he is emphasizing that to welcome the child is to welcome "the archetypal Child who has his abode in the Father's bosom. ... Whoever turns to the most insignificant of children is in fact, attaining to

the ultimate, to the Father himself.”²² Here, we touch on a profound mystery at the heart of the gospel, Jesus is always the eternal child of the Father. The word becomes flesh in the concrete person of Jesus of Nazareth, born of the virgin Mary and with a foster father, Joseph. At the same time this God-Man, Jesus Christ is Son of God, Son of the Father. His own trusting obedience to the Father includes an openness and willingness to go as far as the loving will of the Father may dispose him.²³ The foundation on which Jesus stands in his earthly life is his relationship with the Father. This is reiterated many times by Jesus himself, particularly through the gospel of John. His own identity is inseparable from his being a child in relationship with the Father. “Precisely this shows to what extent he remains a child even as an adult, and why this permanent characteristic gave him such a unique understanding of childhood and made him exalt so highly the condition of being a child.”²⁴

And what does it mean to be a mature child of God? It means to be one who is always dependent, who knows that one owes one’s existence to God, and, with a lifelong awareness of being a child, is always willing to ask and to give thanks. A child is also open to giving to others. A childlike attitude is open to the intimate character of the Church as mystery acknowledged in the reception of sacraments: in the proclamation of the word, in the leadership ordained by Christ and the special priesthood of the faithful; and in confidence that the grace of God is contained therein for childlike receptivity. The child also lives in the present, willing to take

²² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 10.

²³ Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 31: “This primal trust in the Father, which no mistrust ever clouds, rests on the Holy Spirit common to Father and Son. In the Son the Spirit keeps alive the unshakeable trust that the Father’s every ordinance (even the transformation of the distinction of persons into abandonment) will always be an ordinance of love, which the Son, now that he is a man, must reciprocate with human obedience.” Further theological reflection probing the depths of the eternal childhood of Jesus is necessary to bring forth the extent of this fecund understanding. Such profound exploration is beyond the parameters set for this article, though further work is being undertaken as a resource for a different text.

²⁴ Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 33.

one day at a time and to look for the grace evident within that day. “A child that knows God can find him at every moment because every moment opens up for him and shows him the very ground of time: as if it reposed on eternity itself.”²⁵ To be a child of the Father holds primacy over the whole drama of salvation since it is what leads the Son from his human childhood through his public ministry and rejection by human persons all the way to his high priestly office on the cross.²⁶ The eternal child holds us up to the Father as he intercedes for us as eternal High Priest. The Church’s motherhood wrought by grace, rests upon the primary foundation of her own childhood which persists and which permeates all authority when exercised as service.

In order for this interconnected understanding to positively contribute to the life of the church and her way of proceeding, there needs to occur significant conversion and transformation. Conversion is necessary from the abuse of power and authority to a way of exercising authority as service after the example of Christ. We become God’s children by adoption, the Son unites us with himself and takes us to the Father. Definitively, this is accomplished at the cross and recapitulated for us in the Eucharist, but this being-in-him is already contained in God’s plan before the foundation of the world for the Father chose us in Christ (Ephesians 1:4). The Church baptizes according to the Trinitarian formula, consecrates the human being to God, and communicates to the person the divine gift of birth from God and membership of the family of the Church. From this foundation, there are clear implications for the way we are called to exercise authority. Any life-giving exercise of authority needs to include: an awareness of its accountability; a cognizance of the unique dignity of those

²⁵ Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 55.

²⁶ See Hans Zollner, SJ, “The Child at the Center: What Can Theology Say in the Face of the Scandals of Abuse?” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019): 692–710, where he spells out some theological lines for further theological study, in particular “an underestimation of the power and subtlety of evil”; and looking toward the “development of a modern theology of the child.”

entrusted to its care; and a childlike, humble openness and receptivity both to God and to others in the expression of that authority.

To assist individual reflection on this matter of the exercise of authority, I suggest three salient questions for consideration. *What* is the authority that you are called to exercise? It is important to identify and acknowledge this. *When* do you exercise this authority, in relation to which persons? *How* do you exercise this authority? Do you see yourself as trying to serve the people with whom you exercise that authority or is it the case of just telling others what to do or not do? Thirdly, *why* do you exercise this authority, is it out of love for others—a path of service? A way of responding to these questions might be to consider prayerfully your experience by seeking the help of the Holy Spirit. As I have already indicated, it is only when authority is exercised in the spirit of the humble love which characterized the ministry of Jesus that it is both credible to people and free from abuse. This humble love needs to be nourished by prayer, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of reconciliation in order to receive the joy which comes from profound communion with Jesus.

The Synodal Spirit

This love that we receive from the Lord is the force that transforms our lives, opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit and enabling mission. Here we encounter the dynamic of the synodal process, where two key dispositions are essential. The first is an openness to deep humble listening to all involved in the process. The second is to have the boldness to speak openly, honestly, and not inhibited by fear. Such a process is open to listening and learning from the most vulnerable, fragile, and marginalized, engaging in communion with them, and participating in being on mission to serve them.

In addition, I would assert that exploring this way of interconnectedness is a synodal way of proceeding. Thus, it is one which is in line with what Pope Francis has designated to be a proper way of proceeding for the Church in living out her evangelical mission. In particular, this synodal way of proceeding, inclusive of those who suffered the trauma of sexual

abuse, can contribute to a path of healing both for victims/survivors and for the wider Church. When we engage in that process of intense listening to the Holy Spirit, a listening “with the ear of the heart” as Pope Francis stated,²⁷ we are able by grace, to hear and perceive profound truth. In listening to those who have suffered from abuse, we may glimpse something of the depth of their pain and the profanation of both their whole person and the person of Jesus. The realization that they have been heard at that depth of their being can be a life-giving step for the survivor of abuse and a moment of grace also for the Church brought to recognize her own complicity. Listening together, discerning together, focusing on communion and participation, and being open to the Spirit of God moving within the Church enables the people of God to follow the thread that leads to Life. As Pope Francis stated, “This recent time is a time of listening and discernment to arrive at the roots that allowed such atrocities to occur and be perpetrated and thus find solutions to the abuse scandal, not merely with containment strategies—essential but insufficient—but with the measures necessary to take on the problem in its complexity.”²⁸

Conclusion

The theme of interconnectedness is not an immediate solution to the problem of sexual abuse within the Church. What it does do is to raise up the complexity involved in any response. Interconnectedness indicates some of the diverse and discrete theological elements constitutive of the problem and suggest that the way forward involves a consideration of different levels of discourse, one of which involves theological considerations. To focus on one element alone—even the experience of victims/survivors of sexual abuse—is too simplistic.

²⁷ Pope Francis, “Message for the 56th World Day of Social Communications,” January 24, 2022, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20220124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

²⁸ Pope Francis, “Letter to the Church in Chile,” May 31, 2018, no. 3, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180531_lettera-popolodidio-cile.html.

If the Church is to move forward into being once more a sign of hope and a beacon of light and life in the contemporary world, it is important to be open to the way the Spirit of God is proceeding. Like Ariadne's thread, the Spirit aims to draw us out of darkness and into the, though painful, light of God's redeeming activity within the lives of those who have suffered and the wider ecclesial communion. Having in one hand the thread of interconnectedness while engaged in any of the discrete areas—both those indicated above or others—sets the disposition for openness in which the Spirit of God can work prodigiously.



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