Chapter 19: Can Purgatory Help? Reflections from Dramatic Theology in the Context of the Abuse Crisis

Nikolaus Wandinger

In recent decades, theology has emphasized God's mercy and forgiveness. Following the Second Vatican Council, important theologians, among them Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Joseph Ratzinger, have spoken of a hope for universal salvation despite the real possibility of eternal damnation.[1] Pastoral practice in many places has relegated the idea of God's justice and punishment to the background and for good reasons. A long history of fear-mongering was abandoned in favor of a stance more compatible with the Kingdom message of Jesus.[2] Consequently, the traditional sequence of *Dies Irae*, which made for great musical compositions, was removed from the Liturgy of the Dead. However, more recently a number of theologians have renewed the issue, and some have protested against what they perceived as an injustice to victims and a cheapening of divine grace.[3] Similarly, in discussions involving the sexual

[1] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, vol. IV (Freiburg: Einsiedeln, 1983), 223–294; Karl Rahner, "Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums," in *Sämtliche Werke 26* (Freiburg: Herder, 1999), 417–418; Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatologie—Tod und ewiges Leben* (Regensburg: 1977), 178–179.

[2] According to New Testament Scholarship of the late 20th century, the Message of the Kingdom of God (*Basileia tou theou*) is the prime message that the synoptic gospels attribute to Jesus in his earthly ministry; its content will become clearer in the course of the article.

[3] Most notably see, Klaus von Stosch, *Gott—Macht—Geschichte. Versuch einer theodizeesensiblen Rede vom Handeln Gottes in der Welt* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 207, n. 112. For the discussion, see Jan Heiner Tück. "Inkarnierte Feindesliebe. Der Messias Israels und die Hoffnung auf Versöhnung," in *Streitfall Christologie. Vergewisserungen nach der Shoah*, ed. Helmut Hoping and Jan Heiner Tück, Quaestiones Disputatae 214 (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 216–258; Magnus Striet, "Streitfall Apokatastasis. Dogmatische Anmerkungen mit einem ökumenischen Seitenblick," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 184 (2004): 185–201; Bernhard Nitsche, "Eschatologie als dramatische Nach-Geschichte?," in *Von der Communio zur Kommunikativen Theologie. Bernd-Jochen Hilberath zum 60. Geburtstag* (Berlin: LIT-Verlag,

abuse crisis, I noted that many people deem talk of forgiveness an offense to the survivors of sexual abuse and its cover-up. The fact that many offenders have already died by the time their survivors find the strength to speak out and are finally believed aggravates this even more. Not only is it impossible to legally address the deeds of many assailants due to existing statutes of limitation, but it is also inconceivable to confront them on a personal and moral level—at least not in this life.

Christian faith hopes for an afterlife. Yet, what does this hope entail for victims of abuse and their tormentors? In an earlier time, the answer would have been quite simple: grave sinners who died in their sin would go to hell. If they repented and were reconciled to God and the Church in confession, they would have to be purified in Purgatory but could then enter heaven. This would become manifest in the last judgment where Christ would part the redeemed sheep from the damned goats (Matthew 25:31–46).[4]

This clear-cut model, however, has lost its power to resonate. The idea of hell seems incompatible with a merciful God; the idea of purification seems strange, to say the least. How would this purification occur? By enduring pain to make up for one's misdeeds? How could that contribute to purification? Both the traditional clear-cut perspective and the contemporary optimistic view have problems in common. Where is the voice of the victims of sexual abuse in the Church? Do they have a say in when God doles out forgiveness to their tormentors or condemns them to hell? Doesn't mercy for the criminals amount to renewed injustice to the victims? Or does damnation for the criminals diminish God's mercy?

As hope for universal salvation and the emphasis on God's mercy became the dominant expectation, these questions were largely neglected in the Church's ministry of the word. In contrast, theologians who work with the approach of Dramatic Theology have suggested new models of the last judgment in a narrative way that appeals to human imagination

2008), 99–109.

[4] Franz-Josef Nocke, "Eschatologie," in *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, ed. Theodor Schneider (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1995), 444–447.

more than other forms of systematic theology. In this essay, I give a short summary of this approach and then consider how this model might contribute to a new plausibility of the theology of purgatory.[5] Finally, I show how this may promote the idea of "justice in mercy" in the case of sexual abuse in the Church.

The Dramatic Approach

Raymund Schwager holds the view that Jesus's message of the Kingdom of God included the image of an all-forgiving Father of infinite mercy.[6] However, he argues that this had to be shown to be plausible by engaging with the New Testament in a systematic way. Doing that, one quickly realizes that the Kingdom Message seems to end at a certain point and in its place a message of judgment is delivered. The two seem diametrically opposed but the New Testament places both in Jesus's mouth. Outstanding examples would be for the former the Parable of The Merciful Father (Luke 15:11–32) and for the latter the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23–35).

Schwager argues that a dramatic interpretation can show that the two parables—and others like them—belong to different situations in Jesus's mission and that they receive their interpretative key from these situations and from their respective positions in the overall drama.[7] In this way, Schwager takes the judgment parables quite seriously and yet places them on a very different scale than the Message of the Kingdom. He deems the latter message to be Jesus's very own message as he is not reacting to somebody else but proclaiming the good news he was sent for, namely his heavenly Father has prepared a Kingdom for all who accept this gracious

[5] See also Nikolaus Wandinger, "The Rationale behind Purgatory," in *Personal Identity and Resurrection: How Do We Survive Our Death?*, ed. Georg Gasser (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

[6] Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption*, trans. James G. Williams and Paul Haddon (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

[7] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 54–59. For an overview, see Nikolaus Wandinger, "Raymund Schwager, SJ, Dramatic Theology," *Lonergan Workshop* 19 (2006): 325–346.

offer.[8] Nevertheless, this Kingdom does not materialize out of nowhere. It can only come about when humans accept Jesus's message by living according to Jesus's vision, which is most clearly captured in the Sermon on the Mount. Importantly, Jesus calls his listeners to even love their enemies, as the Father does when he lets the sun shine and the rain fall over both good and bad persons.[9] The full realization of the Kingdom, therefore, is dependent on the human reaction to its offer. Yet, this reaction turns out to be mostly negative. The messenger, the message, and the implied consequences are rejected.

This constitutes the situation for the judgment parables. "The two situations are ... opposed to each other not as offer and refusal of the offer, but as offer and demonstration of the consequences of rejection of the offer. The transition to the second situation is not made by Jesus, but it results from the reaction of his hearers. Jesus simply makes clear the theological consequences of their decision."[10] These consequences are that they bring judgment upon themselves. It is a self-judgment for they themselves cause it, and they also determine the criteria for it. It can only be called a divine judgment insofar as God permits it to occur, but in fact, it is not brought about by God but by human resistance against the message of the Kingdom. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant illustrates this well, as the master initially forgives an astronomical sum, and when he changes his mind, he merely emulates his unforgiving servant's behavior. The criteria by which the master judges and punishes are the servant's.

The climax of the drama is Jesus's crucifixion. A new situation occurs through his freely giving up his life. The changes this brings about can be highlighted by comparing the Parable of the Tenants (Matthew 21:33–46) to the events that the gospels tell about Jesus's death and its aftermath. At first glance, the parable seems to be foretelling Jesus's fate and its

[8] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 29–53.
[9] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 36.
[10] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 56.

consequences. However, on closer look, we see that this is only partially so, and in this partial identity lies the hermeneutical key for our question. The parable clearly alludes to the imagery of Israel as God's vineyard, God sending the prophets whose warnings are not heeded, and finally, God sending His son who is not heard either but put to death. This provides structural similarity. However, differences are significant. The parable relates no sayings of the son; The gospels relate numerous sayings of Jesus during his Passion. In the parable, the father avenges his son by killing the murderers.[11] In the gospels, the Father raises the Son from the dead, and the Son returns to the disciples and brings them a message of peace, which they carry on after Pentecost.

One of Jesus's words during the Passion is his prayer of forgiveness (Luke 23:34). It contains two important aspects. First, it reveals the divine will to forgive because Jesus's prayer cannot be construed as demanding something from the Father against His will but as consenting to and proclaiming the Father's will. Second, it indicates a reduced responsibility on the side of the perpetrators of evil because they know not what they do.

Christ's crucifixion has to be seen as a revelatory event. It revealed the unfathomable love of God and Christ for us. It also revealed the inextricable entanglement of human beings in sin. All persons who were active in the trial and execution of Jesus knew not what they were doing. Schwager argues that, besides other things, this also means they did not realize that they were in fact bringing judgment on themselves, that in their own sinful actions they themselves were also victims of sin. "The reasoning in Jesus's request … makes clear that the distinction between responsible action and being a victim is not identical with that between active deeds and passive suffering. The executioners of Jesus were certainly active at the crucifixion, but because of their lack of knowledge they were ultimately not responsible agents: in their actions they were victims."[12] At a "deeper

[11] For the parable and the fine differences between Matthew's (21:33–46) and Mark's (12:1–12) versions of the parable, see Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 135–136.

[12] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 171.

level, Jesus no longer stood over against his opponents, but he underwent together with them the blows of a destructive power, but in such a way that *he alone experienced this suffering for what it was*. Through his identification with his executioners, he suffered together with them ... being killed by sin."[13] Józef Niewiadomski analyzes how this became possible. He concludes from his reading of Carl Améry:[14]

> A victim's hate immediately directed at the perpetrator only creates superficial distance. In the victim's phantasy, the victim becomes a perpetrator for an instant, and the perpetrator a victim; the hateful extinction of the other only creates a blank spot, a screen for a projection from which hate rebounds back on the victim. That way, the victim is on the path to self-victimization, to becoming what the perpetrator in fact intends, namely a *victima* and nothing but a *victima*, victimized by the perpetrator and by themselves. A victim thus defined incarnates victim-perpetrator-entanglement.[15]

Jesus could avoid that because he did not direct his desire at his human enemies but at his divine Father. Therefore, there is no direct face-off between Jesus and his adversaries at the crucifixion, but the situation is structured as a triangle with the Father mediating the relationship. This is shown in the way that Jesus does not directly forgive his enemies but prays to the Father for them.[16]

However, there is a significant difference between Christ's relationships to those who become victims of sin by sinning and to those who—like Christ himself—become victims of sin by being wronged. With the latter he identifies directly, he is one of them and has experienced their

---

[13] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 187, emphasis added.

[14] Jean Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (München: Szczesny, 1966).

[15] Józef Niewiadomski, "Das Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis und die Frage nach dem Letzten Gericht," in *Erben der Gewalt. Zum Umgang mit Unrecht, Leid und Krieg*, ed. Jörg Ernesti, Ulrich Fistill, and Martin M. Lintner (Brixen-Innsbruck: Brixner Theologisches Jahrbuch, 2015), 111–112.

[16] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 112–113.

pain. With the former he identifies without them realizing what they are doing and what he is doing, and only in a certain respect: "Since the crucified one identified himself with sinners only insofar as they are victims, all people still retain a responsibility for themselves, for which there is and can be no longer any substitution, and this responsibility makes the conversion of each individual necessary, precisely because of Christ's act of standing in for all."[17] In short, the Passion can be understood as a substitution—not, however, not a substitution by which Jesus underwent God's judgment but a substitution by which Jesus underwent *our self-judgment*.

The Last Judgment Re-Imagined

Józef Niewiadomski's construction of a vivid image of the last judgment as human self-judgment in his dramatic theology is relevant for this analysis.[18] He claims that it is a trans-historic and trans-cultural phenomenon that human beings who have been wronged accuse those whom they deem responsible and demand retribution in the forms of judgment, condemnation, exclusion, expulsion, or even killing.[19] Niewiadomski imagines this between all human beings, including the great villains of human history: Hitler meeting the victims of Auschwitz, Stalin those of the Gulag; the victims of Hiroshima confronting those who developed the bomb and ordered its use; suicide bombers and child abusers meeting their victims; the unborn facing a society that did not welcome them into life; and the millions of children of the poor Global South who were cheated out of their rights facing the citizens of the rich Global North.[20]

[17] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 192.

[18] First developed in Józef Niewiadomski, "Hoffnung im Gericht. Soteriologische Impulse für eine dogmatische Eschatologie," in *Herbergsuche. Auf dem Weg zu einer christlichen Identität in der modernen Kultur*, Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1999). Enhanced in Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis."

[19] Niewiadomski, "Hoffnung im Gericht," 169.

[20] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 116.

> All who violated my rights, wronged me, whose victim I've become stand before me as perpetrators. Being their victim, I will be able to give a verdict on their justice. It is up to me. What will I demand? Probably, I'll insist on my rights and demand retribution and revenge. Simultaneously, I will be confronted by all victims of my life, my lies, my accusations. They will have the same right over against me. Probably, they will also insist on their rights, their retribution and their revenge; I, however, will profess my innocence by accusing others in order to deflect the retribution ... . This could become a *dies irae*—a day of wrath—in the best Biblical tradition, if all depended on us alone on this day and if this judgment were only a self-judgment. Then humanity ... would, without any contribution by God, condemn each other into hell (of self-righteousness, accusation, deflection, and lies). Everybody would insist on their victimhood, demand retribution, and deflect the retribution directed towards them onto others.[21]

However, it will not depend on humans alone. Another, decisive element in this universal reckoning will be "God's immeasurable charity and readiness to forgive,"[22] which from a Christian perspective is experienced by meeting Christ as a forgiving judge.[23] Niewiadomski speculates that when faced with Christ's model of forgiveness, "hardly anybody will be able to deny forgiveness and to insist anachronistically on their rights and their retribution."[24] He concludes his article by expressing his conviction that "this confrontation will be painful and 'as through fire' ... but this doesn't change anything about the hope that the day of wrath will be changed into a day of forgiveness, grace and mercy."[25] Niewiadomski here alludes to 1 Cor 3:15, the passage that was generally used as the Biblical

[21] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 116, my translation.
[22] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 117, my translation.
[23] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 116–117.
[24] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 117, my translation.
[25] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 117, my translation.

foundation for the theology of purgatory, and recommends rethinking the theology of purgatory from this perspective.[26]

Judgment and Purgatory

On the basis of the analysis thus far, dramatic theology enables us to imagine the last judgment and purgatory in a new way: A day of reckoning between all gathered, in which everybody voices their pain and anger about having been wronged and accuses the perpetrators. This accusation serves the indispensable element of justice. Justice demands that all crimes, all sins, and their perpetrators be uncovered. Victims' accusations must be heard, including those that have not been attended to by any attorney, judge, or counselor. The grievances and hurts of those who have been sidelined as untrustworthy witnesses or as children who don't know what they are saying will be listened to. In this scenario, they will be heard by God, by all gathered, and—among them—by the offenders themselves who will have a hard time closing their ears in the presence of God. That these accusations will be permeated and amalgamated with anger, wrath, even hatred seems only likely in all cases where a process of healing and reconciliation could not yet take place, and such a process could hardly occur when the perpetrators closed themselves to it or when they had already died. At the last judgment, they cannot avoid this reckoning anymore.

However, if we move on to only employing God's mercy, we might cause the impression that once again the grievance and pain of the victims are overruled by some higher power. According to the Creed and its Biblical basis, the Parable of the Last Judgment (Matt 25:31–46), Christ will be the judge. If we take this seriously and account for him in his dual nature of divine and human, we might avoid this impression of a divine overruling.[27]

---

[26] Niewiadomski, "Hoffnung im Gericht," 185, n. 202.

[27] For the following see: Nikolaus Wandinger, *Die Sündenlehre als Schlüssel zum Menschen. Impulse K. Rahners und R. Schwagers zu einer Heuristik theologischer Anthropologie*, Beiträge zur mimetischen Theorie (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2003), 374–386. Also: Niewiadomski,

Jesus's Role in Judgment

Let us look at Jesus, the human being, and his role in that judgment. As he is equal to us in all but sin, he has wronged no one. Thus, no one can rightfully accuse him. Jesus, however, could accuse those who have wronged him. Here, we may first think of those who were responsible and those who were instrumental for his crucifixion. This would seem strange after having already prayed to the Father for forgiveness for them (Luke 23:34). It seems more plausible that he will act in accordance with his own prayer and will forgive.

The Parable of the Last Judgment, however, indicates that Christ has been affected by much more than the sins directed to him during his earthly ministry. If everything that was done or not done to one of the least brothers and sisters of Jesus was done to him (cf. Matthew 25:40–45), this comes to bear in the last judgment as well. Can Christ also simply forgive these misdeeds? On the one hand, this seems to follow from his prayer for forgiveness and the identification it conveyed. On the other hand, the Parable of the Last Judgment clearly states that the Son of Man will send some into the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Is there a way out of this conundrum?

I argue that it is here that the transformation that the crucifixion brought about, exemplified by the Parable of the Tenants, becomes clear. Schwager showed that Christ included even the perpetrators in his identification as he realized they were also victims of sin. So, the event of the crucifixion transcends the clear-cut separation between sheep and goats that the parable espouses and shows that—certainly to a lesser or greater degree—all human beings (except Christ and his mother) belong to both camps.[28] If Jesus had not undergone the Passion with the love of enemies then the condemnation of the "goats" would follow. But Christ's substitution on the cross has subverted this outcome just as it has transformed the ending of the Parable of the Tenants.

"Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 117.

[28] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 196.

Turning Towards Reconciliation

Returning to Niewiadomski's image of that day of wrath, we can imagine Jesus, the human, standing among all the accusing and deflecting victims of sin, and he and his mother being the only victims who are not also perpetrators. Jesus, the human, does not accuse and demand retribution but offers forgiveness and aims at reconciliation. As this is the last judgment, the identity of Jesus, the human, with Christ, the divine Son, is revealed to all participants. They realize that, through Jesus, God invites to a universal reconciliation, which, however, can only occur after all grievances have found expression. What would be demanded for this to occur?

First of all, as already stated, all sins and crimes would need to be unveiled, all pain and suffering be named. If they had not been uncovered before, they will certainly be now as "nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light" (Luke 8:17). Also, all entanglements in sin, all inhibitions of freedom, all consequences of original sin that limited the responsibility of evil-doers will become visible. Then victims and perpetrators alike will encounter the unbelievable reaction of Jesus: his willingness to forgive what he suffered on the cross and by identifying with all victims of human sin.

It seems likely that the other victims would not just watch this as unconcerned bystanders. Christ has identified with them in the most direct manner. Thus, his identification will be most palpable to those who have been victimized most. Just as during the crucifixion Jesus did not direct his desire at his enemies but at his divine Father, so that he as victim did not directly confront his persecutors but met them mediated through his relationship with the Father,[29] so now the victims in this process need not face their persecutors directly but mediated through Christ. This might enable them too to see where their tormentors were in fact victims of sin themselves. Hopefully this enables them to slowly move closer to

[29] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 112.

healing and thus also to move closer to becoming able to forgive. They are face to face with the one who completely identified with them, the one whom nobody can accuse and who could accuse (almost) everybody yet does not accuse but forgive. Hopefully, this would move them in a kind of positive mimesis[30] and empower them to offer forgiveness too.

Furthermore, the perpetrators would be faced with Christ's forgiveness and, if and when it develops, also by their victims' readiness to forgive. By no means does that mean that they have already finished the process of judgment. The offer of forgiveness is only the first step; acceptance of that offer is needed to turn it into realized forgiveness, and the constitution of a new kind of relationship between perpetrator and victim is needed to reach reconciliation. Acceptance of forgiveness presupposes acceptance of one's guilt. It means giving up all pretexts, excuses, belittling, denial, and deflection of guilt and accepting that responsibility "for which there is and can be no longer any substitution."[31] It means suffering the accusations and accepting the burden of pain one has caused others. If persons who are entangled in sin succeed in moving—slowly and painfully—towards that attitude, redemption will occur. If that happened to all of humanity, universal salvation would occur. This is the hope that such a theological vision leads to.

Judgment as Purgatory

So far, I have imagined the last judgment. In classical belief, the last judgment occurs after purgatory. So, why do I still emphasize purgatory? It is obvious that the last judgment, as imagined here, is not the instantaneous pronouncement of a divine verdict. It is an arduous process in which the final verdict is being revealed. The boundaries that separated purgatory from the last judgment in traditional imagery have been deliberately blurred here as both purgatory and the last judgment become

[30] Petra Steinmair-Pösel, "Original Sin, Grace, and Positive Mimesis," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 14 (2007): 1–12.

[31] Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama*, 192.

aspects of one complicated process that certainly requires psychological time but not necessarily chronological time. Similarly, the distinction between individual judgment at death, the intermediate state until the last judgment, and the final judgment is deliberately blurred. These theologoumena highlight important aspects of the process that we imagined, but they need not be distinct entities. They can be viewed as stages of a single process that we may call purgatory or judgment.[32] The term "judgment" emphasizes that this process is not indefinite. It comes to an end, and its outcome then stands for eternity. The term "purgatory" emphasizes that while it is going on, changes are still occurring that can be described by the notion of purification in two ways: being purified from the stains of one's own sins and also being purified from the painful residue of the crimes committed against oneself.[33]

---

[32] By deliberately blurring these boundaries, it also seems possible to avoid the discussions about whether there is a diastasis between individual death and the resurrection of the body and about the state of the soul that have determined much of the discussion in German-speaking theology of the late twentieth century. The proposed conception takes up the most important concerns of both sides of this debate: it is the human person that enters this process, not just a disembodied soul, but the salvation of this person is not complete unless all the relationships of this person will have been evaluated and incorporated into the resurrection body. I will leave the ontological implications of this to another discussion.

[33] Tradition also stipulates that some will move into Heaven immediately after death, others might be condemned into Hell immediately after death, and all those who enter Purgatory will eventually enter Heaven. Can our model accommodate for that too? We are not talking about locations but of the finalization of a human person's relationship to God and to the rest of humanity. It is possible that some need not enter into this painful process because there is nothing they have to suffer through—or because they have already done so during their pilgrimage on earth. So, these go "straight to Heaven." For most people purification might be necessary, but it will eventually lead them to reconciliation, to "Heaven." Some seem to have taken final decisions against the love of God and of neighbor. For them, the presence of Christ, who is offering his forgiveness, is a challenge to probe the finality of that decision. And there might be some whose rejection of love was indeed final. For them, the process would not lead to reconciliation but to eternal self-exclusion; for them, the described process is not Purgatory but the onset of "Hell." That implies, of course, that while the process is still going on, a human person does not know whether this is Purgatory or already the beginning of "Hell." This will only be revealed when the process ends. This does not contradict the conviction that God knows.

Sexual Abuse, Purgatory, and Reconciliation

When applying this model to the case of the sexual abuse of minors, there arises a grave problem. The proposed model of human self-judgment implies that a perpetrator who would be unable to accept forgiveness could not be saved. Does this also imply that a victim who would eventually not be able to forgive could not be saved either? And is this not the utmost re-victimization that threatens victims of grave crimes with damnation for their inability to forgive? This issue is already implied by the open ending of the Parable of the Merciful Father (Luke 15:11–32): When the "good" son becomes angry at his father's treating his brother to a great feast and refuses to go in, the father comes out to convince him to join the feast. Yet, the parable does not tell us whether this succeeds. It is not a question of not being allowed in. It is a question of not wanting to go in and celebrate with those who have wronged him. But the interpretation of this parable also must take into account the transformation that occurred through the cross and Easter. Yet the objection looms large. For many survivors of sexual abuse and their advocates, the mere mention of the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation arouses objection, even resentment. Telling them, then, that their eternal salvation is dependent on it, seems an absolute outrage.[34]

A first response is that this is in fact what Niewiadomski's imagery of the last judgment presupposes. I emphasized that accusation should be seen as fulfilling an important task: justice. However, leaving it there would not just make reconciliation impossible. It would freeze victims in their victimhood and would act contrary to their healing processes. One reason why the reaction to any suggestion of reconciliation is so harsh might be that the suggestion often comes prematurely and is perceived as self-serving. When an organization whose representatives were offenders, that protected offenders and thus became an offender herself, then preaches forgiveness to the survivors, this can only arouse rejection. Yet, proclaiming the message of forgiveness belongs to the core of the Church's

[34] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 105–106; for references 118, nn. 4–5.

mission. By destroying the Church's ability to plausibly fulfill this mission, the abuse and cover up crisis threatens the very essence of Christian faith.

To be clear, I am not talking of reconciliation today or tomorrow but of reconciliation at the end of a long arduous process that could continue beyond this life and then is called "purgatory." It is a reconciliation that is probably more akin to a resurrection than to a mere continuation of what was before. This eschatological horizon might open up possibilities that remain closed in the here and now. In this image, it is neither the Church who preaches forgiveness nor God who demands it. It is Christ, the innocent victim, who grants it and offers his own model to be emulated by other victims through the Holy Spirit, the defender of victims.[35]

This process can already begin in this life: through prayer, the Eucharist, and substitution by Christians living the message of reconciliation;[36] in counseling and therapy sessions, in mediated confrontation with those perpetrators who allow themselves to be confronted, and perhaps also in approaches to human justice that move away from retributive towards restorative justice.[37] Avoiding the pains of these kinds of purification would mean remaining a prisoner to the pain and resentment that the perpetrators have caused. If it is true that a victim remains defined as a victim and entangled with their perpetrator as long as they are dominated by hate against the perpetrator, then victims become real survivors only by allowing themselves to be liberated from this entanglement, by being healed of their hate. A very striking example of overcoming this kind of entanglement is given by Eva Mozes Kor, who as a child survived Auschwitz together with her sister as so-called "Mengele twins": twins who were abused for medical experiments by the Nazi doctor

[35] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 115–117.

[36] Niewiadomski, "Opfer-Täter-Verhängnis," 117.

[37] Of the vast field of publications and websites, I only want to refer to two here: Tom Roberts, "Justice for all: Restorative Justice Goes beyond Retribution," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 4, 2021, www.ncronline.org/news/justice/justice-all-restorative-justice-goes-beyond-retribution; Clare McGlynn, Nicole Westmarland, and Nikki Godden, "'I Just Wanted Him to Hear Me': Sexual Violence and the Possibilities of Restorative Justice," *Journal of Law and Society* 39, no. 2 (2012): 213–240, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6478.2012.00579.x.

Josef Mengele. When she discovered that she could forgive one of Mengele's accomplices, she realized that this finally empowered her:

> I ... discovered ... what power I actually possessed. I had the power to forgive! And no one could give me this power, no one could take it away. It was solely in my control and I could use it however I saw fit. An amazing discovery. Up to this point in time, I had simply reacted to everything that people had done to me. I had acted just like victims tend to act. They do not feel like they have control over their lives. So, instead, they react to what other people say and do. Now it suddenly dawned on me: I am in control of my life. *I have power*.[38]

She then mentally applies this even to Mengele himself:

> The idea that I could somehow gain the upper hand over Josef Mengele was an incredible experience for me. I was no longer the victim, passive and helpless, but the active person. That made me feel powerful. I realized that forgiveness was freeing—not for the offender, but for the victim. I didn't need to get revenge, retaliation, or atonement in order to experience this sublime feeling. ... I would forgive Dr. Mengele and finally be free. That was my personal epiphany.[39]

That way, forgiveness is not viewed as a demand on the survivors. It is seen as an act of self-liberation and empowerment for them. Some, although few, like Eva Kor, are able to act that way even during their life-time. Why should there not be hope that all will be able to do so at the final judgment? When we talk of the hope for universal salvation, this is not an unfounded hope. This hope comes from the knowledge that, while God is "that greater than which nothing can be conceived," Jesus in his crucifixion has fallen lower than any human can fall.[40] Because Jesus has identified with

[38] Eva Mozes Kor, *The Power of Forgiveness* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2021), 94.
[39] Mozes Kor, *The Power of Forgiveness*, 95.
[40] Józef Niewiadomski, "Vom Geheimnis königlicher Hingabe. Predigt zum Christkönigsonntag," November 21, 2021, www.uibk.ac.at/theol/leseraum/texte/1359.html.

the victims of sin in a way that cannot be surpassed, his identification encompasses and permeates their wounds and their pain in a way that we cannot fathom before we meet him in the last judgment. But then, we may hope, the victims of these crimes will be suffused by Christ's love for them but also by his love for the perpetrators. Therefore, it may be hoped that—as far-fetched and inconceivable as this sounds now—it might be less difficult for the abused children to forgive their tormentors than for those tormentors to accept that offer. In a similar way, it might be less difficult for the victims of the great crimes of humanity to forgive their murderers than for the murderers to accept that offer.

Therefore, I argue that the idea of purgatory can help to open up a horizon for survivors of grave crimes, such as sexual abuse, by promising them that they will be heard and by expressing hope that they might eventually be healed. This cannot be an excuse for neglecting steps to safeguard minors or to bring offenders to justice here and now. But it can give hope when—as often is the case—human justice proves inadequate.

Nikolaus Wandinger is associate professor of Catholic Dogmatic Theology at the University of Innsbruck. He studied Catholic theology and philosophy in Innsbruck, at the University of San Francisco, and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. His main area of research is the application of the approach of Dramatic Theology to important theological questions, especially soteriology, eschatology, and a theology of the human person. The theology of (original) sin in Karl Rahner and Raymund Schwager was of special importance in this endeavor. Also, the dialogue of this approach with other theological schools—especially Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan—garner his interest. The human propensity to mimetic behavior, as analyzed by René Girard, also forms an important element in Wandinger's theology. Wandinger taught introductory courses to Christian theology and courses on the theology of the sacraments, on ecclesiology, and on creation.