

Chapter 20: Mission, Reform, and Suffering: The Challenge of the Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Church

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It is hard to imagine anything so antithetical to the mission of the Church as the sexual exploitation of the vulnerable. The Church's claim to promote the mission of Jesus Christ in the world rings hollow in light of the evidence of abuse we now know. There is an old maxim that evil is the perversion of the good; the greater the good, the greater the perversion involved. To so undermine the mission of the church, which entails the good of salvation, is a terrible evil, and it arises not just from the abuse but from the complicity of those who protected the perpetrators "for the good of the Church."¹ That so many of those in leadership acted the ways they have represents a cataclysmic collapse of their moral horizon. How has such an appalling situation been allowed to occur, when even a cursory reading of the Gospel should have brought it to a halt? The Gospel of Jesus has been replaced with an anti-Gospel of an anti-Christ where protecting the power and reputation of the Church has replaced the proclamation of God's kingdom.

In attempt to address this, I consider three issues. The first is the nature of the Church's mission and its relation to the mission of Jesus. This may help uncover at least one of the ways in which that mission may be perverted. Second, I consider the question of redemptive suffering in the

¹ Ample evidence for the damage done both by perpetrators and those complicit in subsequent cover-ups can be found in the report of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Volume 16 of seventeen deals specifically with religious institutions, including the Catholic Church in Australia. Vol. 16 consists of three books, the second of which deals solely with the Catholic Church. It is over 900 pages long. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, vol. 16: *Religious Institutions Book 2* (Australia: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), www.childabuse.royalcommission.gov.au/final-report.

Church's mission. And finally, I turn to the nature of reform in the Church, identifying three dimensions of possible reform.

Mission

As Pope Francis continues to make clear, mission lies at the heart of the Church, "I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 27). This impulse to move the Church beyond itself was even evident in his pre-conclave speech where he spoke of the dangers of a Church becoming "self-referential," of a "theological narcissism" overtaking the Church. Here, he is following the teaching of Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* where he taught that the "Church is missionary by her very nature" (no. 5). This insight into the missionary nature of the Church has been central to my ecclesiological research. In my book *Re-Visioning Ecclesiology*, I spell out five theses on the relationship between the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Church.²

*Thesis 1. The mission of the Church is the historical prolongation of the mission of Jesus.*³

The purpose of this thesis is to shift attention away from the Church itself and towards the person of Jesus, from ecclesiology to Christology. While we believe as a matter of faith that Jesus is the unique and irreplaceable redeemer of humanity, we also accept that while Jesus's death may have a universal efficacy, it is not universally effective. There is an ongoing and necessary work that endures in his name, a community of believers who effect Jesus's presence to the world to carry on his mission. This body of believers makes up in our own bodies what is lacking in the redemptive suffering of Christ (Colossians 1:24). Inasmuch as the mission of Jesus is incomplete in its effects if not its efficacy, the Church's mission is to carry on that task and realize it in human history.

² Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

³ Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 103–105.

*Thesis 2. The mission of Jesus is the advancement of the Kingdom of God amongst humanity.*⁴

One of the advances in Christological thought in the last century has been a renewed appreciation of the role of the Kingdom of God in the mission of Jesus. It is the central motif around which his earthly mission orbits. From the beginning of his preaching (“the kingdom of God is at hand,” Mark 1:15) to his final actions in the last supper (“I shall never again drink wine until the Kingdom of God comes,” Mark 14:25), the Kingdom is the core of Jesus’s preaching. Similarly, all Jesus’s miracles, his table-fellowship, and his reaching out to the poor and marginalized of society are about the in-breaking of the Kingdom amongst humanity. Jesus in fact embodies the Kingdom of God on earth. Nonetheless the notion of the Kingdom of God is heuristic, capturing something like “total human flourishing.” While this can be expressed in symbolic and metaphorical language with some ease, it is much more difficult to give an explanatory account of its meaning.⁵

*Thesis 3. Jesus achieves the advancement of the Kingdom of God through a redemptive suffering which overcomes evil through self-sacrificing love.*⁶

This is the heart of Jesus’s message. The advancement of the Kingdom of God requires more than just the doing of good deeds and avoiding evil. One has to ask what sort of good Jesus does and why he chose to do that particular sort of good. According to the Gospel accounts, the religious authorities of Jesus’s time had become agents of oppression, laying heavy burdens of people’s backs but not helping them carry their burdens. The religion they promoted was no longer an agent of salvation but of oppression. Jesus identified himself with the victims of those oppressive

⁴ Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 105–108.

⁵ Much of the methodological burden in *Re-Visioning the Church* is an attempt to move towards such an explanatory account, drawing on the work of Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

⁶ Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 108–110.

forces, he confronted and challenged that evil, and it is that evil which attempted to destroy him on the cross. Jesus transforms this mindless fate into life-giving sacrament by making of his death a symbol of the power of love, a new covenant in his blood, with the power to overcome evil through a free act of loving self-sacrifice. This is the Eucharistic mystery enacted in the Last Supper and embodied in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

*Thesis 4. The mission of the Church is the transformation of the present situation to a new situation which more closely approximates the Kingdom of God on earth, through the promotion of a self-sacrificing love which overcomes the evils of the present through redemptive suffering.*⁷

The Church will be an agent of personal, cultural, and social change as it seeks to move history towards a new situation that more closely approximates the Kingdom of God. As John Fuellenbach notes, “The church as the community of those who have been chosen to carry on the vision that Jesus conveyed must define itself in relation to the Kingdom, which is meant for humankind and the whole of creation.”⁸ As with the mission of Jesus this transformation will not be achieved through domination and power games—“He will not break the crushed reed, or snuff the faltering wick” (Matthew 12:20, quoting Isaiah 42:3). Its way will be the way of discipleship, of redemptive suffering. In a sinful world moral integrity comes at a price, a price Jesus did not shirk. It will be the same for his followers. In fact, “The tradition is unanimous that ... Jesus left His disciples in no doubt that they were committing themselves to suffering if they followed Him.”⁹ It is through such a suffering that we make up in our own bodies what is lacking in the redemptive suffering of

⁷ Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 110–111.

⁸ John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 15.

⁹ K.H. Rengstorff, “Mathetes,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), quoted in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 38.

Christ (Colossians 1:24) and so redeem the present age (Ephesians 5:8–16, Colossians 4:5–6).

*Thesis 5: The Church is empowered in its mission by the gift of the Holy Spirit poured into the heart of believers, giving them a love which more powerful than evil, a fidelity to the mission of Jesus, and a hope that transcends all human expectations.*¹⁰

Just as Jesus received the Spirit from the Father without reserve (John 3:34) to carry out the mission of the Father, so too those who carry on the mission of Jesus must be empowered by his Spirit. This Spirit is the “love of God poured into our hearts” (Romans 5:5), ensuring that our starting point is not self-aggrandizement or power but love of God and neighbor. Without love as our starting point, we are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1). The Spirit also empowers us to remain faithful to the mission, giving us confidence that we can meet the challenges we shall face (Matthew 10:20). The Spirit comes to us in our weakness (Romans 8:27ff), conforming us to the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). As a spirit of consolation, the Holy Spirit fixes us on our ultimate hope, a hope beyond all human expectations, a hope revealed in Jesus’s resurrection, that God is at work in human history raising up the lowly and rejected one and making him the Lord of History.

Here I focus on the fourth of these theses because I think it helps clarify how a body such as the church which is committed to the mission can go so radically astray. The language of self-sacrifice and redemptive suffering can too easily be perverted if sufficient attention and self-reflection is not paid to the problems this causes. At the heart of this perversion lies a perverted understanding of God, wherein God is confused with the Accuser (Satan).¹¹ When this happens, religion becomes demonic, and,

¹⁰ Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 111–112.

¹¹ See Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace and Redemption* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 84–87.

given the scale of damage done within the Church by the abuse scandal, we should not shy away from such an implication.

The duality in the language of sacrifice needs to be made explicit. There is what our liturgy would call a “sacrifice of praise,” the willing sacrifice of self to achieve a greater good—celibacy for the sake of the kingdom, personal hardship for the sake of family, military service to protect one’s country—that is good, noble, and praiseworthy. This willing sacrifice in the face of manifest evil has the power to turn around moral collapse, by revealing the heart of love, that turns the other cheek, that goes the extra mile, that returns insult with prayer. Jesus’s fidelity to his mission leads inevitably to his suffering and death on the cross, not because God wills it, but because of the sinfulness of human beings. Jesus’s love unto death is a revelation of the depths of divine love for humankind: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

However, there is a darker form of sacrifice, where we sacrifice the other to meet our own desires—the wife beater, the rapist, the narcissist—a sacrifice that perpetuates the spiral of violence and destruction in personal and social relations. Such people are willing to sacrifice anything and everything to protect themselves from the truth of their own failures to love. We see such a sacrificial attitudes writ large in the dictators and aspiring dictators who are regularly emerging in our troubled times. We also find it evident in the church: first, in those priests and religious who have sexually abused their victims, sacrificing them at the altar of their own self-gratification; secondly by church authorities, who have further sacrificed these same victims to protect the “good name” of the church, echoing the stance of Caiaphas, “Better one man die for the sake of the nation” (John 11:50).

The first type of sacrifice grows out of a fullness of love, the second out of the emptiness of self-hatred. The God who evokes the first is life-giving and generous; a God who demands the second is a moral monster. Indeed, soteriologies that paint the suffering and death of Jesus as a placation of an angry god are blasphemous, confusing God with Satan, confusing the

voice of love that says “Yes” to the universe with the voice of accusation, sowing doubt, shame, and self-loathing.¹² Historically the Church has regularly fallen into this perversion concerning the nature of God, corralling people into obedience through fear and punishment. From this perspective, it is relatively easy for the Church to cast the victim of abuse as the problem, to take to itself the voice of accusation towards the victim while protecting the perpetrator as “one of us.” The victim carries shame, while the perpetrator is offered therapy.¹³

This willingness to sacrifice the “other” to protect oneself personally or institutionally is the antithesis of the Church’s mission. Yet, this has been the recurrent experience of the victims of clergy sexual abuse. They do not find in the Church the consoling healing love of Jesus but a voice of accusation and intimidation seeking to silence the victims. The Gospels present Jesus as warning his early community of the dangers of the institution becoming an instrument of power and prestige: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:25–26). Yet, in the early decades of the church, the author of 1 Clement depicts those who

¹² Lonergan notes the ways in which this confusion occurs but provides no further analysis of it. See Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *The Redemption*, ed. Robert M. Doran, Jeremy D. Wilkins, and H. Daniel Monsour, trans. Michael G. Shields (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 153–167.

¹³ Shame, loss of self-esteem, and guilt are commonly reported by survivors of clergy abuse. See Rocío Figueroa and David Tombs, “Listening to Male Survivors of Church Sexual Abuse: Voices from Survivors of Sodalicio Abuses in Peru,” *The Canonist: Journal of the Canon Law Society Australia and New Zealand* 8 (2017): 135–167; Jennifer Beste, “Envisioning a Just Response to the Catholic Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2021): 29–54: “If we take seriously trauma theory’s insight about the crucial role communities play in exacerbating or ameliorating traumatization, it becomes clear that Christian communities’ inadequate pastoral response to abuse allegations or other forms of traumatic injury contributes significantly to survivors’ posttraumatic sequelae and suffering. Furthermore, the experience of institutional betrayal can increase their PTSD symptoms, feelings of inadequacy, self-deprecation, distress, anxiety, depression, shame, self-blame, poor physical health, suicidal ideation, and suicide.”

sought to overturn the existing church leaders as more interesting in power and self-aggrandizement than genuine service of their flocks. It is not difficult to find examples throughout all the Church's history where this has been the case. The problem is recurrent. For all this though, there is a constant failure on the part of the Church to recognize it and deal with it in a similarly recurrent fashion. What is needed is ongoing reform.

Redemptive Suffering

The history of clerical sexual abuse is one of suffering. As documented in the Australian Royal Commission and in the vast literature of sexual assault, victims suffer long-term ongoing trauma as a result of their abuse. I vividly remember one survivor of childhood abuse speaking of regularly waking dripping in sweat after a nightmare, some fifty years after his abuse by a priest in an orphanage. Ironically, this survivor remained celibate since all his associations with sex were painful. He did not want to inflict that on anyone, while the priest who abused him ostensibly vowed to the celibate life lived out a lie. After leaving the orphanage, this survivor was reunited with his birth mother, saved her from an abusive relationship, and provided financial support raising his two step-sisters. With counselling, he sought to address the impact of the abuse he endured and worked to bring the Church and state authorities to account for his suffering. He gave his suffering a redemptive meaning by working to address the problem of abuse.¹⁴

While it is possible for victims to take on this suffering and turn it into a creative redemptive response, as we find in various survivor networks who work for healing and justice, for the most part, this imposed suffering

¹⁴ The victim, David Owen, was part of the Case Study 26 of the Royal Commission. His evidence can be found in Royal Commission into Institution Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Public Hearing—Case Study 26*, by Rockhampton Magistrates Court. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015, www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Case%20Study%2026%20-%20Transcript%20-%20St%20Josephs%20orphanage%20Neerol%20-%20Day%20C072%20-%2016042015.pdf, 15–37. My wife and I have had many conversations with David about his abuse.

is simply degrading, dehumanizing, and destructive of people's lives. Such destructive suffering is not redemptive but rather its antithesis, the demonic suffering imposed by the powerful to protect their privilege and reputation, both personal and institutional. While it is possible that victims become the agents of institutional transformation, suffering not only their original abuse but also the power of the institution turned against them, genuine change needs to come from within the institution itself, when those who hold institutional responsibilities begin the painful yet redemptive work of reform.

Consider the transformation of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson from an anxious defender of the Church's privileges to become a fierce advocate on behalf of sexual abuse survivors within the Australian Church.¹⁵ In the early 1990s, he was invited by a network of survivors to meet with a small group to discuss their situation.¹⁶ He heard the pain of the survivors, their desire to hold the Church to account, their need for pastoral support, and for some their ongoing love of the Church. It was a transformative event, one of many I am sure, but he went on to play a major role in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in the development of a new response to sexual abuse survivors and a new attitude towards them within the Church.¹⁷ It involved much personal suffering for him. It assisted him in

¹⁵ Bishop Robinson was auxiliary bishop in the Sydney Archdiocese from 1984 to 2004. When he retired, he wrote on the need to reform the church and continued his advocacy work for survivors. He also gave testimony to the Australian Royal Commission. See Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).

¹⁶ While I was not present at the meeting, my wife Thea was one of the survivors present. Much of what I state here is personal recollection from various conversations with the bishop over the years.

¹⁷ Particularly the two documents, National Committee for Professional Standards, *Towards Healing*, by Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia (Alexandria, New South Wales: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2010), www.catholic.org.au/documents/1346-towards-healing-2010-2/file, and National Committee for Professional Standards, *Integrity in Ministry*, by Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia (Alexandria, New South Wales: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2004), www.catholic.org.au/documents/1344-integrity-in-ministry-2010-1/file.

naming his own abuse as a child (not clerical abuse in his case) and later abuse by a priest while a seminarian.¹⁸ More significantly, he experienced isolation within the Bishops Conference for his continued advocacy of survivors and his willingness to advocate for individual survivors. This was a truly redemptive suffering, willingly undergone, to transform the Church to truly live out its mission.

These two cases represent examples of redemptive suffering, a willingness to engage the Church with its failures and seek to change its processes and attitude. In particular, we need more of those in leadership roles such as Bishop Robinson to act as advocates for survivors, despite the ongoing resistance of the Church's institutional structures to hearing the voice of victims. Such people will undoubtedly experience marginalization, but unless a critical mass of those in leadership of the Church are willing to take up this suffering, little will change.

Reform

Reform of any institution is multidimensional.¹⁹ One dimension is personal transformation, a radical shift in the horizon of an individual, a commitment to a new way of life, to new values. Yet, the individual exists within an institutionally pervasive culture, of meanings and values which inform the individual, set expectations and role models, but which the individual may also be able to shift, to become a cultural change agent. Finally, all this will operate within an institutional set of arrangements, or duties, authorities, powers, and routines which are inertially resistant to change. These three dimensions interact in complex ways, shaping and being shaped by one another. All these are evident within the institution of the Church.

¹⁸ After the bishop's death, Michael Kelly, SJ, revealed a story of Robinson's abuse as a student priest in Rome by the spiritual director of students at the seminary (Propaganda Fide College). See Michael Kelly, "Obituary for Bishop Geoff Robinson," *Pearls and Irritations*, January 3, 2021, johnmenadue.com/obituary-for-bishop-geoff-robinson/.

¹⁹ The general structure can be found in Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 279–283.

Religious and Moral Reform

Often calls for reform are about an interior transformation, a radical conversion to the demands of faith and the preaching of the Gospel. They focus on the individual person and their relationship to God and to the good. They demand a higher level of commitment and fervor. While such reforms may create new institutional forms, such as the monasteries and mendicant orders, these reforms generally leave existing structures in place, but from those within them, a higher level of spiritual and moral performance is called for.

We find calls for such reform in recent pleas from Pope Francis summoning priests and bishops to be more prayerful, to know the “smell of their sheep,” to put aside the lust for power.²⁰ It is embodied in his own simplicity of life, so evident as archbishop of Buenos Aires and now as pope. A focus on spiritual and moral reform emphasizes the importance of divine grace as the primary agent of reform. Any attempt at a larger reform that ignores the importance of such a personal transformation will fail. As Gandhi once noted, we keep on dreaming of institutional forms so perfect that no one needs to be good.²¹ Such dreams are bound to fail.

There are at least two ways in which the call for personal reform can be subversive of genuine reform. The first is to conflate such personal reform with a promotion of more ardent piety. In relation to the sexual abuse issue, ardent displays of piety have proved ineffective in either preventing abuse or in reducing coverup. Certainly, in the Australian context some of the worst cases of abuse arose in religious orders with strongly pious routines.²² Overt piety does not equate with religious and moral

²⁰ See Robin Gomes, “Pope to Priests: Be ‘Shepherds with “the Smell of Sheep,””” *Vatican News*, June 7, 2021, www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-francis-priests-students-church-louis-french.html.

²¹ E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 24, notes “Gandhi used to talk disparagingly of dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”

²² One can note the abuse of children by the (Irish) Christian Brothers in Western Australia, well before the reforms of Vatican II, which was one of the case studies for the Australian

transformation and can in fact be a mask that covers up corruption. The second way is to use calls for personal reform to deny or circumvent needed cultural and institutional reforms—“reform starts with you” and often ends there. Those who actually exercise power in the church can use a call for personal reform to defuse demands for institutional reform. Rather, personal reform should drive cultural and institutional reform.

Cultural Reform

The cultural life of the Church too can be reformed. Culture is the lived meanings and values from which a society operates, and while the Church is primarily formed by the meanings and values of the Gospel, there are various other elements that arise from the surrounding culture as well as distortions of the key Gospel meanings that can occur. We have noted such distortions in relation to the inversion of the notion of sacrifice and the perversion of power that have been endemic in the Church’s life. The reform of the church’s culture will be driven largely by those who have undertaken their own personal religious and moral reformation in conformity with the demands of the Gospel. Such people drive the reform of our theologies, spiritualities, moral teachings, and popular practices that shape our Church culture.

Again, Pope Francis has been correct in identifying the cultural phenomenon of clericalism as a major contributor to the problem of clergy sexual abuse.²³ Clericalism combines elements of the aura of sacred power, a shared clerical life-style and patterns of formation, and sense of group loyalty that fails to identify perpetrators in their midst and covers up their deeds once they are exposed. Clericalism turns priesthood into a privileged

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. See Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, Case Study 11; Similarly, the Australian-established order, the Brothers of Gerard Majella, established post-Vatican II, is noted in the same report.

²³ Kathleen N. Hattrup, “5 of the Many Times Pope Francis has Warned against Clericalism,” *Aleteia*, August 23, 2018, aleteia.org/2018/08/23/5-of-the-many-times-pope-francis-has-railed-against-clericalism/.

status within the Church, rather than a service of the Church. At its heart, clericalism is a subversion of the mission of the Church. This problem is even more exaggerated in relation to episcopal ministry.

Cultural change will generally be initiated by leadership within an institution. Sadly, the last two papacies have elevated men to high office based on perceptions of loyalty wrapped in a form of religious piety that took strongly traditional forms.²⁴ The outcome has done little to address the problem of sexual abuse. If anything, these two papacies exacerbated the problem of clericalism through their writings on priesthood and the liturgy.²⁵ It is not difficult to see in Bergoglio's pre-conclave speech as reaction against these tendencies.

Social Reform

There are reforms which seek to leave existing structures and institutions in place but reform the people who work within them. These are often religious and moral reforms. There are reforms which seek to adapt and augment existing structures to improve their operation and efficiency in achieving their goals. We can call this *minor* social reform. Finally, there are reforms which seek to bring about change in the very institutional forms themselves. We shall call this *major* social reform. Such reforms respond to a major legitimacy crisis in the existing institutions which have lost their social license. Authentic institutional reforms seek to give better expression of the mission of the group; inauthentic reforms seek to maintain the power and privileges of those who manage the institution.

Pope Francis has engaged in various minor social reforms. Some of these have been directed towards assisting the Church's response to the sexual abuse crisis, for example: changes to canon law that clarify reporting

²⁴ One might identify the ascendancy of groups such as Opus Dei, the Legionaries of Christ, and the Neocatechumenal Way. Some such movements have been founded by a charismatic leader who subsequently has been found to have a history of sexual abuse.

²⁵ There is now evidence of Benedict XVI's complicity in covering up sexual abuse while he was archbishop Munich and Freising (1977–1982), in a recent report commissioned by the German Church into abuse in that diocese.

requirements and penalties associated with sexual crimes of clergy;²⁶ removal of bishops who have failed to properly respond to the crisis in their diocese; the promotion of men who share his own pastoral vision for the Church. However, we are yet to see reforms which would fundamentally change the power relationships within the Church. Authority remains firmly in clerical hands, largely to the exclusion of women and the laity more broadly. Pointedly, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse provided empirical evidence that the presence of women in key diocesan structures correlated with significantly lower rates of abuse by clergy. One Australian diocese where the local bishop had brought women into leadership roles (Adelaide) recorded the lowest rates of abuse in comparison with other dioceses in Australia. The report indicated that there had been credible allegations of abuse made against 7.9 percent of diocesan clergy across all dioceses in Australia whereas Adelaide had a figure of 2.4 percent.²⁷

This growing demand for greater lay authority in the structures of the church should not be viewed as in some way parallel to the investiture crisis of the Middle Ages.²⁸ The issue then at stake was to free the Church from the control of the feudal lords of medieval Christendom. The current situation is not about such Church-state relations but about appropriate participation and power sharing by the laity in the running of their common life, for the good governance of the Church. The present governance structures have demonstrably and consistently failed in their handling of the sexual abuse crisis. The current restrictions ensures that clericalism is never challenged, that alternative voices are not heard. This is

²⁶ Brendan Daly, "An Analysis of the Vademecum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith," *The Canonist* 11, no. 2 (2020): 197–217.

²⁷ Neil Ormerod, "Sexual Abuse, a Royal Commission, and the Australian Church," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (2019): 950–966.

²⁸ For a thorough analysis of Church-State relations in the Middle Ages see Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050–1300* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964). For an analysis, see Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church*, 243–245.

a recurrent institutional failure which requires a recurrent institutional response.

One step could be the approach of Pope Francis to move the Church to a more synodal path, bringing a larger range of voices into what could be called the “strategic aspects” of decision making. But more is needed than such an episodic engagement of non-clerical perspectives; something is needed which engages institutional authority on an everyday level. One such possibility is that of the diocese of Adelaide, noted above. During the hearings of the Australian Royal Commission Archbishop Philip Wilson (2001–2018) noted that on taking over the diocese he instituted canonical changes which secured the position of a diocesan pastoral council with women in its leadership team, who have delegated authority from the bishop.²⁹ He utilized the position of chancellor in the diocese, which is a non-gender-specific canonical position, and has been held by men and women. The diocese currently has two chancellors, one woman and one man, both laypersons. At a more local level, parish pastoral councils should have genuine deliberative authority.

As noted in the opening of this section, these three levels of reform interact in complex ways. However, they also operate on different timeframes. Personal reform can be relatively rapid, particularly where some major conversion experience occurs. Social reform operates on a longer timeframe as changes are implemented and embedded in practice. Cultural reform is the most difficult and longer-term prospect, though without such cultural reform gains at the institutional level will remain precarious. It is the steps Pope Francis is making at the cultural level which in the long run will determine whether his institutional reforms survive his passing on the mantle of the papacy to his successor.

²⁹ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, vol. 16: *Religious Institutions Book 2*, 665.

Conclusion

When the Church as a whole can adopt paths of redemptive suffering, it can truly return integrity to its mission. For too many survivors, the Church continues not to be a safe place. Only with a full accounting of the past, with genuine repentance for failures both individually and institutionally, and active outreach to survivors of abuse as having an active claim on the pastoral ministry of the Church, only then can the Church be a safe place. Survivors have already suffered more than enough; now the Church is suffering the humiliation of continued exposure of its sins. It can either indulge in self-pity and develop a persecution complex, or it can make of this suffering a redemptive moment for the good of the Church and its mission.



Neil Ormerod is widely published with fourteen books and over eighty-five articles, including in international journals such as *Theological Studies*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, *Gregorianum*, and *Louvain Studies*. His areas of interest include Trinity, Christology, historical ecclesiology, and the work of Bernard Lonergan. He is Honorary Professor, Alphacrucis University College, Australia. He has been a long-term advocate for clergy abuse survivors.