

The Child at the Center: What Can Theology Say in the Face of the Scandals of Abuse?

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Abstract

Approaching the subjects of child safeguarding and children through a theological lens, the author shows the devastating scale, impact, and ramifications of the Catholic Church's failures in safeguarding children, which become apparent in the current child abuse scandals, and how this crisis creates an opportunity to bring the child (back) into the church's focus. This leads to a focus on core reasons or factors for the scandals and how these are linked to a lack of attention given to children in the scientific thought of the church. There exists a lacuna in systematic theology when it comes to children, but one can find promising theological grounds for exploring and promoting a more child-centric theology and church culture.

Keywords

child sexual abuse, clergy sexual abuse, evil, forgiveness, justice, sacrament of reconciliation, sexual abuse, theology of the child

Over the past few years, some helpful theological reflections on the crimes and horror of sexual abuse of minors by clerics have been published, but it bears repeating that, “particularly in systematic theology, there is still an enormous need for further reflection and research. Essential religious and church-related facets of

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the sexual abuse of minors have yet not even started to be theologically addressed.”¹ This is all the more surprising as there is hardly any topic that concerns the church that has been discussed and reported so often and that impacts the faithful, priests, and church leaders worldwide—in quite a few countries to a great extent. The reluctance to reflect on abuse and its impact on the understanding and living out of the Catholic faith mirrors the refusal by church authorities to confront this issue head-on and with necessary rigor and decisiveness. The reasons for such unwillingness may be manifold, both personally and structurally, but the results are devastating and the cost is huge: lack of orientation; paralysis of inner spiritual, intellectual, and emotional resources; and smothering of the spiritual, educational, and charitable mission of the church. Despite the overall lacuna of profound systematic approaches, as well as the rather rare and incomplete Catholic social teaching on the child, we can find some promising theological fragments and scientific contributions dealing with this subject.

The following article accordingly seeks to indicate theological grounds that appear auspicious for digging deeper and exploring further. Bearing in mind that there are many questions and theological areas that cannot be addressed in depth here, and which seem to have been infrequently and insufficiently explored from a child-centric perspective,² it would be promising to stimulate and contribute to more systematic theological research on the child.

Dimensions and Ramifications of the Child Abuse Scandals

To gain a clearer understanding of its devastating scale and effects, it can be practical to distinguish different, cumulative levels of scandal. Although often interconnected, they usually refer to divergent periods and events and can have differing causes: the actual sexual/physical abuse of a child committed by a person of the church; institutional knowledge, toleration, and cover-up of the abuses committed; and institutional reluctance toward and obstruction of disclosing failures, a refusal to change, and a lack of concern for victims once abuses become public. Every additional level of scandal added to previous wrongdoing causes new pain and anger, especially for those directly abused, but also for their families, communities, and the larger public. Reflecting on the multidimensionality of abuse, Pope Francis has in recent times often spoken of the triad linking sexual abuse, the abuse of power, and the abuse of conscience.³

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1. Katharina A. Fuchs, “Kindesmissbrauch und die Folgen,” *Stimmen der Zeit* (August 1, 2015), <https://www.herder.de/stz/online/kindesmissbrauch-und-die-folgen-bericht-ueber-die-anglophone-conference-2015/>.
 2. For example, such topics as original sin, the child in the various contexts of family relationships, and child rights cannot be addressed in depth.
 3. Francis, “Letter to the Bishops of Chile” (May 17, 2018), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180517_lettera-vescovi-cile.html; Francis, *Letter to the People of God* (August 20, 2018), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html (hereafter cited as *LPG*).

The Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, the Australian Royal Commission's Final Report, and other reports show that the abuse of power and position attributed to individuals appears systemic. The verdict is devastating: "a wholesale institutional failure that endangered the welfare of children."⁴ Differentiating between the levels can help to avoid anachronistic fallacies: the mentioned reports deal mainly with abuse cases that occurred a long time ago. The improprieties of cover-up, and particularly of reluctance to change, are often of more recent date. In any event, we can properly speak of the "scandals of abuse," as we are addressing a multilayered reality.

The scandals at all levels have something in common. They are characterized by a "disturbing disdain for [the] victims,"⁵ an insufficient perception of children and their safety, and an unwillingness to put children before personal/institutional interests. In addition, abuse produces not only direct victims but also a wide range of "secondary victims." Consequently, in the context of the church, one can speak of the person who suffered sexual and/or physical abuse as a child; the family and close environment;⁶ the parish or school in which the abuse happened, which elicits great shock that a person whom parishioners and pupils have deeply trusted could do such things; and all other indirectly involved members of the church—the laity as well as clergy. Above all, these scandals of abuse have catastrophic consequences for the child victim: "most of all it destroys the very basis of trust ... It destroys trust in oneself, in others, and in God. If the abuser is a priest or a religious or a person within the Church, that is the identification of anybody in that position."⁷ In addition, as children become adults, "there [are] very often some conflicting emotions and attitudes towards sexuality and the question is, quite often, how can one put together one's own identity, in terms of what am I worth and can I venture into a life that has been very often, very much harmed by such kind of abuse early on?"⁸

Needless to say, the scandals of abuse also have catastrophic consequences for the church. In Christian theology, it has long been tradition to structure the essence and functions of the church along three core tasks (cf. Acts 2:42): *martyria* (to give testimony and evangelize), *leiturgia* (to worship God), and *diakonia* (to care for the poor and needy). Outlining these tasks in more detail and noting that "all three of them are undermined

4. Pennsylvania 40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury, *Report I*, Redacted, July 27, 2018, Office of the Attorney General, https://www.attorneygeneral.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/A-Report-of-the-Fortieth-Statewide-Investigating-Grand-Jury_Cleland-Redactions-8-12-08_Redacted.pdf, 69, 300, 297.

5. Pennsylvania 40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury, 5.

6. "Victimization has a ripple effect, spreading the damage in waves out from victims to all those with whom they have intimate contact." See Rory Remer and Robert A. Ferguson, "Becoming a Secondary Survivor of Sexual Assault," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 73 (1995): 407–13 at 407, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1995.tb01773.x>.

7. Hans Zollner, "Full interview with Fr Hans Zollner: Confronting the reality of abuse," interview by Catherine Sheehan, *The Catholic Weekly*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/full-interview-with-fr-hans-zollner-confronting-the-reality-of-abuse/>.

8. Zollner, "Full interview"; cf. Hilary Kaiser, "Abus sexuels dans les Églises catholiques et protestantes traditionnelles aux États-Unis," in *Sexualités Américaines*, ed. Claudine Raynoud (Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 1997), 141–52 at 142.

and compromised” by the scandal of abuse, Bishop Robert Barron observes that “this scandal is a diabolical masterpiece because it undermines the work of the Church in practically every way.”⁹ The scandals—and breach of trust they entail—might be especially severe in light of the church’s high moral standards and her self-portrayal as a safe haven. Thus, “these ‘affairs’ are not behind us. They form our spiritual present.”¹⁰

And it is here that we must ask why the child has not been a major part of the church’s theological imagination, even before these scandals broke.

Understanding the Background to the Church’s Failure to Focus on Children

Several factors can be flagged as contributing to the present situation with regard to a theology of the child, or the lack of one in the church’s imagination. Here I treat of four: (1) a variety of intra-ecclesial interpretations of the act of sexual abuse; (2) a tendency to focus on the priest offender rather than the child victim; (3) a culture of “cheap forgiveness,” including in the sacrament of reconciliation; and (4) an underestimation of the power and subtlety of evil.

I will discuss each of these factors briefly here with a view toward asking what kind of theology of the child might emerge from these considerations.

A Variety of Interpretations of the Act of Child Sexual Abuse

Although often only linked to the last decades, a closer look into church history reveals that “child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is not a recent phenomenon,”¹¹ and that

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9. Robert Barron, “Bishop Barron Q&A about the Sexual Abuse Crisis,” *Word on Fire*, August 27, 2018; see also YouTube video, 24:05, August 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncMEXr60AeI>.
 10. Luc Ravel, “Mieux vaut tard. Lettre pastorale sur les abus sexuels,” special issue, *L’Église en Alsace*, September, 2018, 3, <https://www.alsace.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2019/04/lettre-pastorale-abus-sexuels-Mieux-vaut-tard.pdf>.
 11. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report*, vol. 16, bk. 1, *Religious Institutions* (Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), 163, https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_volume_16_religious_institutions_book_1.pdf. Cf. Mark D. Jordan, “The Confusion of Priestly Secrets,” in *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims: The Sexual Abuse Crisis and the Catholic Church*, ed. Mary G. Frawley-O’Dea and Virginia Goldner (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 231–48 at 232; also Faisal Rashid and Ian Barron, “The Roman Catholic Church: A Centuries Old History of Awareness of Clerical Child Sexual Abuse (from the First to the 19th Century),” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 27 (2018): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2018.1491916>; William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 233–34; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Penguin, 2014), 206; Hubertus Lutterbach, “Sexual Violence against Children,” *Concilium* 3 (2004): 61–71 at 66.

there have been many “church-internal critics” condemning such abusive practices.¹² Like Peter Damian,¹³ many of these critics seemed, however, less concerned about the welfare of the children than about the impurity of the priests.

Before delving into institutional issues or listing any suggested “therapeutic” means, it is crucial to look at how the abuse of a minor was and in some quarters is still understood. Depending on how it is interpreted, the chosen approach for “correction” may differ. As sin against God, it may be addressed in the sacrament of reconciliation. As crime against the child and society, it requires punishment and restorative justice. And, if seen as the result of mental conditions, psychological treatment may be recommended. Various bishops not only report that there have been shifts in interpretation but also admit that they misconstrued the basic characteristics and impact of child sexual abuse. In a private letter to the Chilean bishops, Pope Francis inveighed against the minimization of “the absolute gravity of [priests’] criminal acts, attributing to them mere weakness or moral lapses.”¹⁴ A dismissive understanding of the problem often led to the adoption of inadequate solutions for correcting what were seen as “moral failures.” Understanding that pedophilic disorder is classified as a mental disorder¹⁵ does not mean that such a condition cannot be influenced by behavioral therapy or other measures at least to some extent.¹⁶

Yet such interpretations are often tied to cultural views of sexuality. To identify cultural elements of the abuse, Archbishop Mark Coleridge’s speech at the 2018 Safeguarding Conference can provide a helpful orientation as it compiles core problematic and influential topics that need to be addressed.¹⁷ Coleridge denounces a “rigorous attitude to the body and sexuality.” In a similar vein, other authors allude to

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12. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, vol. 16, bk. 1, 175. In 1576, Cardinal Borromeo introduced the confessional box into churches: *inter alia*, in an effort to prevent sexual contact between penitents and their confessors.
 13. St. Peter Damian was an eleventh-century Benedictine monk and cardinal. His *Liber Gomorrhianus* (Book of Gomorrah) addresses clerical corruption and child sexual abuse by clergy.
 14. Francis, “Private Letter to Chilean Bishops” (May 15, 2018), quoted in Harriet Sherwood, “All Chilean bishops offer their resignation over sexual abuse cover-up,” *The Guardian*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/18/chilean-bishops-offer-their-resignation-over-sexual-abuse-cover-up>.
 15. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric, 2013), 302.2 (F65.4).
 16. According to Brendan Geary, describing pedophilia as an illness in which perpetrators have no will is unhelpful and too simplistic. See Rebecca Catto, *Child Abuse in the Catholic Church—What Can Be Learned?* (summary of conference at Heythrop College, University of London, November 4, 2010), 2, http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/attachments/files/1294135171_Report%20from%20Child%20Abuse%20in%20the%20Catholic%20Church%20Workshop%204%2011%2010.pdf.
 17. Mark Coleridge, “The Culture of the Catholic Church and the Abuse of Minors” (speech, Anglophone Safeguarding Conference, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy, June 20, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0eiPsTodas>.

a church culture of discomfort when it comes to topics related to sex(uality). This might have facilitated the looking away and cover ups.”¹⁸ Bishop Franz-Josef Overbeck of Essen, Germany, admits that “our Church has raised high moral expectations. Especially in previous decades, many Catholics perceived some requirements of the Church sexual morals as exaggerated, onerous, and obtrusive. It was then even more terrible to see, in retrospect, to what extent the Church authorities have morally failed.”¹⁹

Adding to this problem, the often strong focus on sexual morality by some moral theologians can run into the danger of overaccentuating the violation of church rules so that an act’s “abusive” character—mainly characterized by dominance and violence—may appear as an inferior evil. Thus, it seems all the more important not to neglect the essential dimensions of power abuse—physical force as well as abuse of the victim’s body. According to Martin Reynaert, “it can be argued that the abuse of power is more significant than the sexual motive, as it lies at the root of the sexual abuse and expresses itself through the body and a misuse of sexuality. The power difference makes the abuse possible ... When an adult abuses a child, there is always power through the adult’s position and possibilities.”²⁰ It cannot be disregarded that perpetrators usually do not only act out of sexual interests, but—to use Augustine’s phrase—from a “libido dominandi.”²¹

A Tendency to Focus on the Cleric Offender

The church may clarify that the Second Vatican Council’s claim that a priest “acts in place of Christ himself [and] is enriched by a special grace”²² does not justify all his misdeeds as a human, and is limited to his ministry and to administering the sacraments. As stated

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18. See Mark Coleridge, *Seeing the Faces, Hearing the Voices: A Pentecost Letter on Sexual Abuse of the Young in the Catholic Church*, May 23, 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/cm/lb/4384078/data/archbishop-mark-coleridge27s-pentecost-pastoral-letter-data.pdf>.
 19. Franz-Josef Overbeck, *Brief des Bischofs an die Gemeinden*, September 14, 2018, https://www.bistum-essen.de/fileadmin/relaunch/Bilder/Bistum/Bischof/Texte_Ruhrbischof/Brief_des_Bischofs_an_die_Gemeinden_14.09.18.pdf.
 20. See Martin Reynaert, “Sexual Abuse of Children as a Form of Power Abuse and Abuse of the Body,” *Acta Theologica* 35 (2015): 189–200, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v35i1.11>.
 21. See Robert Barron, “Scriptural Sources for Renewal,” 2015 Anglophone Conference, Pontifical Gregorian University, 13, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/Anglophone-Presentation-2015-Barron.pdf>. Among “common factors ... that people express by abusing minors [is] especially a power differential. [For example,] me as a priest ... I seek to express my superiority, which shows that psychologically speaking many of those who have abused feel themselves really weak interiorly. They may not appear to be weak but they feel ... they cannot cope with an adult peer to peer relationship, they may not be able to face the opposite sex.” See Zollner, “Full interview.”
 22. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (December 7, 1965), 12, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html.

in the *Catechism*, holy orders do not preserve a priest from sinning.²³ In contrast, a priest can (and often does) act “as an *Alter Christus* and as a sinner.”²⁴ In this context, theologian Sarah Butler refers to the church’s position of Anti-Donatism.²⁵ Clergymen need not be faultless for their ministry to be effective and their prayers and sacraments to be valid. This may not only give a certain security to all who received a sacrament from an abusive priest but also highlights that the essence and form of a sacrament is central, not the moral disposition of the one who dispenses it. This teaching can, however, also appear quite irritating as it states that even wicked priests still serve Christ as a “lifeless”²⁶ but nonetheless effective instrument. It would therefore be important to underline that it does not legitimate or relativize any priest’s moral wrongdoing—whether in the administration of a sacrament or in everyday life. Accordingly, it must be made clear that “clergy and bishops will be held accountable when they abuse or fail to protect children.”²⁷ Therefore, “when priests use the authority of their priestly office to lure children ... they not only violate their victims, they betray Christ, the Church, and the priesthood.”²⁸

Dogmatically speaking, the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* 8 provides the present-day church with a conducive framework for further institutional steps.²⁹ The belief that the church of Christ “subsists in”³⁰ the Catholic Church can consequently give the assurance that the church does not have to fear any truth or sincere disclosure of its misconduct as long as it is guided by his message. A church merely concerned with its status would in contrast not only deviate from Jesus’s path, but lack faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Defining itself furthermore as an *ecclesia semper purificanda* which is “at the same time holy and always in need of being purified,”³¹ this “holiness” does not contradict a structural process of penance and renewal.³²

23. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1550, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4T.HTM.

24. Jean Mercier, “Pédophilie, omerta et crise de confiance,” *Revue d’éthique et de théologie morale* 3, (2010): 25–32 at 30, <https://doi.org/10.3917/retm.260.0009>.

25. Sara Butler, “Responding to the Abuse Crisis as Committed Disciples” (speech, Anglophone Conference, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy, 2015), 8–9, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/Anglophone-Presentation-2015-Butler.pdf>.

26. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3, q. 64, a. 5, ad 2.

27. Francis, “Address of the Holy Father” (meeting with victims of sexual abuse, Philadelphia), September 27, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150927_usa-vittime-abusi.html.

28. Butler, “Responding the Abuse Crisis as Committed Disciples,” 15.

29. See Ravel, “Mieux vaut tard. Lettre pastorale sur les abus sexuels,” *L’Église en Alsace*, September 2018, 4, <https://www.alsace.catholique.fr/.../lettre-pastorale-abus-sexuels.pdf>.

30. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1965), 8, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*).

31. *LG* 8.

32. Pope Francis asks “to continue building a prophetic Church, which knows how to restore to the centre what is important: service to your Lord in the hungry, in the prisoner, in the migrant, and in the abused.” Francis, “Private Letter to Chilean Bishops.”

To refocus on the church's key message—God's unconditional love—needs also what Butler called a "committed discipleship" of the faithful, laity as well as clergy. Especially for the victims and their families, it is crucial that God's "love comes by human pathways, and so, if those who are close to the perpetrator, 'representative' of him in some way, can walk in love with the survivor, then healing will have a better chance and love a richer opportunity."³³ In a similar vein, Francis addresses the entire people of God and makes clear that a cultural transformation within the church cannot only be attained by clergymen alone:

It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God's People ... Whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives. Without the active participation of all the Church's members, everything being done to uproot the culture of abuse in our communities will not be successful in generating the necessary dynamics for sound and realistic change.³⁴

A Culture of Cheap Forgiveness

Coleridge points out that "in the case of clerical abuse of the young, we are dealing with crime, and the church has struggled to find the point of convergence between sin and forgiveness on the one hand and crime and punishment on the other."³⁵ For survivors of child sexual abuse it is often a further shocking moment to hear how swiftly and vividly some speak of God's mercy toward the offender and the victim's "duty" to forgive.³⁶

As stated by John Paul II, "forgiveness neither eliminates nor lessens the need for the reparation which justice requires."³⁷ It is important that the church and the abusive priest be held accountable for the ecclesial and social/societal crimes that were

33. James Corkery, "Toward an Understanding of Salvation that Could Be 'Salvific' for Survivors of Sexual Abuse in the Church: An Exploration of the Notion of Representation in Joseph Ratzinger's Soteriology," in *Safeguarding: Reflecting on Child Abuse, Theology, and Care*, Karlijn Demasure, Katharina Fuchs, and Hans Zollner, eds. (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 17–35 at 34.

34. Francis, *LPG* 2.

35. Coleridge, "Seeing the Faces, hearing the voices," 4.

36. See, for example, the stories of victims in Erika Kerstner, "Achtsam Feiern, Sprechen und Lernen: Was Betroffene wollen," in *Kinder haben Rechte! Der Europäische Tag zum Schutz von Kindern vor sexueller Ausbeutung and sexuallem Missbrauch am 18 November [2016]*, 20–22 at 21, https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2016/Kinder_haben_Rechte_2016_Bundeskonferenz-dioezesane-Präventionsbeauftragte.pdf.

37. John Paul II, "Offer Forgiveness and Receive Peace: Message for the XXX World Day of Peace" (January 1, 1997), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121996_xxx-world-day-for-peace.html.

committed. It is thus essential to accentuate that the church's understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation is based neither on forgetting nor on a relativization of the harm caused. In addition, it does not equal mere amnesty for the wrongdoer.

The same holds true for Catholic theological thought on God's grace. On the one hand, no one can work for grace as it is a free and unmerited gift. On the other hand, this does not mean there is a mercy which Bonhoeffer called a *cheap grace* or a *cheap forgiveness*: "Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before ... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, ... absolution without personal confession."³⁸

Interpersonal forgiveness cannot be imposed; it is "above all a personal choice."³⁹ In a similar vein, the sacrament of penance cannot be reduced to confession and absolution. It consists also of contrition and a fruitful satisfaction and reparation.⁴⁰ In it, the priest should act as God's minister of both mercy and divine justice.⁴¹ Recognition of the offense and guilt are central for abuser and victim.⁴²

There is concern that any eternal unity in God (or *apocatastasis*) would ignore the experienced injustice and treat victims and offenders alike. Many victims might fear that an ultimate reconciliation between the perpetrator and God would occur at the expense of their longing for justice ("behind their backs"). In this regard, a reference to the teaching of the Last Judgment can be expedient as it merges God's mercy with the vision of a real, restorative, and divine justice.⁴³ For victims (of abuse) "the image

38. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, with some revision by Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 46–48.

39. John Paul II, "No Peace without Justice, No Justice without Forgiveness: Message for the XXXV World Day of Peace 2002" (January 1, 2002), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_XXXV-world-day-for-peace.html. "Forgiveness cannot be reached through coercion. For the Church, it must be 'understandable that you [i.e. the victims] find it hard to forgive or be reconciled with the Church.'" Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland* (March 19, 2010), http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html.

40. *Catechism*, 1491, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4I.HTM.

41. *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983) c. 978 §1.

42. See James Corkery, "Ecco perché ora serve una teologia anti-abusi," interview by Vittoria Prisciandaro, *Jesus* 9 (2015): 56–61 at 61, <http://childprotection.unigre.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/JESUS-Intervista-Corkery-Settembre-2015.compressed.pdf>.

43. "Both these things—justice and grace—must be seen in their correct inner relationship. Grace does not cancel out justice. It does not make wrong into right. It is not a sponge which wipes everything away, so that whatever someone has done on earth ends up being of equal value. Dostoevsky, for example, was right to protest against this kind of Heaven and this kind of grace in his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Evildoers, in the end, do not sit at table at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinction, as though nothing had happened." Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (November 30, 2007), 44, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html (hereafter cited as *SS*).

of the Last Judgment is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope; for us it may even be the decisive image of hope.”⁴⁴ This opens the door for an eschatological theology of (humble) hope—for the victims, that they find answers, peace, and a just restoration in God; for the abusers, that they, after acknowledging their guilt and submitting themselves to the demands of justice, do not despair of God’s mercy.⁴⁵

This perspective opens the possibility of a new theology of salvation. Driven by a strongly pastoral concern for the victims of sexual abuse by clergy, James Corkery, following a thought of Joseph Ratzinger, has suggested that the Christian theology of salvation should not stick to a primarily sin-centered terminology: instead of only concentrating on “saved from,” it could be helpful to speak more often about “saved for.”⁴⁶ Otherwise “the victim [of abuse], even though he or she has no fault, nevertheless perceives himself or herself as a sinner. Thus, the more one insists that Jesus died for our sins, the more the image of God becomes alien.”⁴⁷ Sin may not be “a category that is good for the victims to begin with. In fact, it could make them feel worse because they think the perpetrator has been forgiven.”⁴⁸ Observing that “salvation comes from the only person who is not a sinner, who is good, worthy, excellent and, as such, can compensate, in some way, our own inadequacy,” Corkery maintains that “we must speak of salvation less in terms of substitution . . . and more in a way that emphasizes the relationship, solidarity, the closeness of Jesus with us.”⁴⁹

How, then, might we see the role of the sacrament of reconciliation in this context? In clergy abuses, three specific challenges have been faced with regard to the sacrament of reconciliation: (1) in some cases, the confession itself turned into a *locus delicti*;⁵⁰ (2) in addition, many victims see it as a situation in which the “power difference” became visible; (3) furthermore, priests have “often identified potential victims and their vulnerability in the confessional, leading them to begin the grooming process.”⁵¹ Absolution for clerical offenders can raise suspicion. This applies all the more as many do not see the church as a neutral mediator or third party.

44. SS 44.

45. See Benedict XVI, “Pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland.”

46. Corkery, “Ecco perché ora serve una teologica anti-abusi,” 58.

47. Corkery, “Ecco perché ora serve una teologica anti-abusi,” 58.

48. “Theologian: Church must be more than fortress of guidelines,” *CathNews New Zealand*, July 3, 2015, <https://cathnews.co.nz/2015/07/03/theologian-church-must-be-more-than-fortress-of-guidelines/>.

49. Corkery, “Ecco perché ora serve una teologica anti-abusi,” 58–59.

50. This was, for example, the case during assaults that took place in Ampleforth. “A victim [named RC-A61] of Piers Grant-Ferris described how he had made him remove his clothes in the confessional of the chapel, then beat his bare bottom.” Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, *Ampleforth and Downside (English Benedictine Congregation case study) Investigation Report*, August 9, 2018, iii, 41, <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/6583/view/ampleforth-downside-investigation-report-august-2018.pdf>.

51. Des Cahill and Peter Wilkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: An Interpretive Review of the Literature and Public Inquiry Reports* (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2017), 217, <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017/09/apo-nid106721-1214606.pdf>.

In light of these concerns, it is crucial to emphasize that a confession does not replace a judicial inquiry. Furthermore, the church must reflect theologically and canonically upon the seal of confession⁵²—when it applies and what it does and does not include. During the Australian Royal Commission hearing, the Catholic archbishops present in the hearing publicly disagreed on what the seal applies to: literally everything that is said from the moment the confession starts until it ends, or whether the seal applies in the strict sense of the word to the sins of the penitent. A clarification is all the more needed as some countries or states have introduced legislation that would abrogate the priest–penitent privilege for cases of child abuse (e.g., the state of South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory).⁵³

An Underestimation of the Power and Subtlety of Evil

Many victims of abuse do not only demand (earthly) justice but also start doubting that God can be just at all. They pose a burning question of a theological nature: “Where was God while I was being abused by an adult? How can God allow such a thing?”⁵⁴ The reality of violence and abuse shows that “there is an element of evil that goes way beyond human understanding and certainly there is something that has also a component of some evil presence in human beings that is not comprehensible.”⁵⁵ The evil of abuse by clerics “has particular abhorrence because not only is it a terrible abuse of power, but also because, in its evil, it both employs and destroys the very goodness of faith and trust in God.”⁵⁶ Faith and trust in God are subtly twisted to serve a nefarious intent, just as the serpent subtly poisoned Adam and Eve’s trust in God (Gen 3), just as Satan attempted to make Jesus doubt and despair while in the desert (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). It is easy to underestimate the cunning of evil and to be oblivious to its insidious advancement.

52. The term “seal of the confessional” is misleading, as it implies that a confession is always made in a confessional (box)—which is neither necessary nor required.

53. In this context, it might be intriguing that while the Truth Justice and Healing Council rejected lifting the seal, it did “recommend a thorough examination of the theology of the sacrament [and] the theology of the child ... to identify ways in which the theological purpose of the seal can be maintained while complying with the civil responsibility to protect the welfare of children.” Truth Justice and Healing Council, *Final Report*, vol. 2 (2018), 29, <http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/img/pdf/TJHC-Volume-2.pdf>.

54. Joseph Carola, Mark Rotsaert, Michelina Tenace, and H. Miguel Yáñez, “Theological and moral reflections on sexual child abuse in the Catholic Church,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/resources/upload/Theological-Moral-reflections.pdf>, 12.

55. Zollner, “Full interview with Fr Hans Zollner: Confronting the reality of abuse.”

56. “Cardinal Expresses Sorrow and Shame about Abuse in the Church,” Diocese of Westminster, August 22, 2018, <https://rcdow.org.uk/cardinal/news/cardinal-expresses-sorrow-and-shame-about-abuse-in-the-church/>.

In analogy to the “theology after Auschwitz,” systematic theological approaches recognize that the harm caused by child abuse cannot make any sense.⁵⁷ Keeping this as a still open question in mind, one can point to the compassion of God and the belief that Jesus is present, show solidarity with and accompany the victim while suffering, which is especially accentuated in liberation theology.⁵⁸ Waiting and hoping for answers that can finally only be given in the encounter with God, such an approach incorporates a strong, explicitly eschatological perspective.

Where Is the Child in Catholic Theology?

As observed before, ecclesial reactions to sexual abuse have often lacked regard for the child: it seems evident that the church at all levels of the scandal has turned a blind eye to minors or sees them merely as objects.⁵⁹ In a similar vein, many theological reactions to the scandals also have not concentrated on the child. This is not surprising given various misunderstandings of sexual abuse, a clerical focus on priest offenders, the danger of a theology of “cheap grace” associated with the sacrament of reconciliation, and an underestimation of the power of evil. These observations raise the question about why the child victim is missing from the picture, and what Catholic theological and social tradition say about attitudes toward and the status of children at all in the church’s life.

In this respect, a first glance at theology is sobering: all in all, there is little Christian—much less Catholic—teaching or theological ethics focused on children per se.⁶⁰ Within

57. “How can a child pray to the [heavenly] Father, when the father presented by the Church has destroyed his safe place in the name of an omnipotent God, has sown confusion by his lies, like the ancient serpent of Genesis 3?” Véronique Margron, “Pour les victimes, la vie longue à revenir,” *Revue d’Éthique et de Théologie Morale* 299 (2018): 77–98 at 77, <https://doi.org/10.3917/retm.300.0079>.

58. See, for example, Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), or Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

59. See, for example, Pennsylvania 40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury, 112. Donald Trautman, then Bishop of the Diocese of Erie, in a formal request to the Holy See for an abusive priest’s dismissal from the clerical state, “stated that [the priest] saw his victims as objects rather than people.”

60. Cf. Anna Maria Riedl, “Kindeswohl zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit” (ICS AP no. 7 [working papers series], Institut für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften, University of Muenster, 2017), https://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/fb2/c-systematisc-hetheologie/christlichesozialwissenschaften/heimbach-steins/ics-arbeitspapiere/ics_ap_nr_7_kindeswohl.pdf, 17; Todd D. Whitmore and Tobias Winwright, “Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching,” in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd D. Whitmore (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 161–85 at 175–76.

Christian theology there is still a tendency to “instrumentalize” childhood, and so to “devalue childhood qua childhood.”⁶¹ One can find little theology concerning the child.

But what would be a valid, theologically reflective view of the child. As a central point of reference, a glance into the Bible may give first answers. Scripture must help lay the foundation for a modern theology of the child in the Catholic Church.

The Child in Scripture

When the Old and New Testament refer to children, the term can be understood in at least three non-congruent, though sometimes overlapping, ways:⁶² (1) genealogical: as an expression for the relationship between parents and their direct descendants, without consideration of the latter’s age; (2) cultural-anthropological: as a reference to the first years in a person’s life; (3) religiously metaphorical: as a term that describes a non-biological relationship resembling the intimacy of human families, for example in the “children of God.” Here, the focus should primarily be on children of the second category.

The Hebrew Bible mentions the most significant term for “child” eighty times. In more than 75 percent of these passages endangerment, death, or violence play a role.⁶³ The God–child relation within the Hebrew Bible is ambivalent and complex. Examples include Genesis 22 and 1 Kings 3:16.⁶⁴

At the same time—and especially against the backdrop of the rather brutal culture of the pagan environment—a closer look at core texts of the Hebrew Bible can display outstandingly positive features in the characterization of children.⁶⁵ In the “the judgment of Solomon” pericope, the king refers to the infant as a subject rather than a possession (“the living child,” “the living baby”), and the true mother begs for the child’s life, preferring to relinquish her rights as a mother than to kill her son (1 Kgs 3:16–28, NABRE throughout). The child is a subject whose well-being is of the utmost concern.

An infant also stands at the center of attention in the two gospels that accentuate God’s incarnation. In analogy to Moses and the Pharaoh, Jesus is introduced as an “antitype” of the ruling Herod. While the latter killed innocent children, as well as two of his own sons, the “new king” reveals himself in the most vulnerable creature of a newborn.⁶⁶ However, with the exception of the disputation in the Temple (Luke 2:41–52), the gospels say almost nothing about Jesus’s childhood and adolescence. But even this passage seems more to speak about a grown-up than a child.

61. Jason Goroncy, “Karl Rahner on a Theology of Childhood,” *Jason Goroncy* (blog), February 3, 2009, <https://jasongoroncy.com/2009/02/03/karl-rahner-on-a-theology-of-childhood/>.

62. Andreas Michel, *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder im Alten Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 6–7.

63. Michel, *Gott und Gewalt*, 21. A notable example is the death of every firstborn in the land of Egypt, the tenth plague visited upon the Egyptians for Pharaoh’s refusal to let the Israelites go (Exod 11).

64. Michel, *Gott und Gewalt*, 338.

65. E.g., children are regarded as a blessing: Samuel is called to service as a boy (1 Sam 3:1–18); Jeremiah declares that the Lord appointed him as prophet when he was still in his mother’s womb (Jer 1:4–5).

66. Cf. Barron, “Scriptural Sources for Renewal,” 13.

That the evangelists concentrate on his birth and then skip to a few years of adulthood—in total not much more than a tenth of Jesus’s earthly lifetime—may be interpreted by some as a sign of either a general disinterest in childhood or a degradation of this phase of life. That would at least have fit into the pagan Greco-Roman environment.⁶⁷

However, as his teaching and behavior show, children are a key focus of Jesus’s ministry; for him they have status and standing. He even scolded his disciples for preventing parents from bringing their children: “Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16). It was a commonplace in the ancient world to hold up distinguished figures as models, like commanders and religious and political leaders.⁶⁸ Jesus turned this tradition on its head by placing the “little ones” in this position of honor, by making them models of discipleship: figures of no social prominence, no influence, no connections.⁶⁹ In the ancient world, the child had to become an adult to be of value and have dignity in the political realm; Jesus’s kingdom demands that adults be like children: “Who humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:4).

In this context, it could be particularly interesting to see how the perception of the “distinctive” trait of children was understood and instrumentalized over the centuries: It was, for example, linked to their “sexual purity,” simplicity, credulity, openness, and similar qualities. There is one especially salient pericope on the issue. Jesus says,

⁵Anyone who welcomes one child like this in my name welcomes me. ⁶But anyone who is the downfall of [offends] one of these little ones who have faith in me would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone round his neck ... ⁹And if your eye should be your downfall, tear it out and throw it away: it is better for you to enter into life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into fiery Gehenna (hell fire). ¹⁰See that you never despise any of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven do always behold the face of my heavenly Father. (Matt 18)

Verses 5–6 have often been interpreted as mere metaphors for Jesus’s disciples. However, in his recent exegetical research, Lorne Zelyck has demonstrated that the words chosen in Greek were closely linked to the exposure and sexual abuse of children.⁷⁰ The vehemence and radicality of verse 6 are manifested in three points: (1) Matthew speaks not about an ordinary millstone but about a great one, normally only moveable by a donkey; (2) in contrast to Mark, he refers to the “depths of the sea”; and (3) he underlines that this scenario is even better than what can be expected. That Gehenna is mentioned—a former biblical place where children would have been sacrificed—is no coincidence, and it interlocks verses 7–9 with the pericope. Though

67. Cf. Margaret McDonald, *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2014).

68. Cf. Judith Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 29–60.

69. Cf. Barron, “Scriptural Sources for Renewal,” 15.

70. Lorne Zelyck, “Matthew 18,1–14 and the Exposure and Sexual Abuse of Children in the Roman World,” *Biblica* 98, (2017), 37–54, <https://doi.org/10.2143/BIB.98.1.3197384>.

these verses do not repudiate Jesus's teaching of love and forgiveness, his severe warning underlines the extraordinary gravity and outrage of such offenses.

In light of these harsh words and condemnation, it might be hard for any theology, or the church as such, to talk down and minimize the disgrace of child abuse.⁷¹ Further biblical passages make clear that, when Jesus embraces children, "the clear implication is that the failure to accept, protect, and love a child, or what is worse, the active harming of a child, would preclude real contact with Jesus."⁷²

In sum, there are three principles, derived from Scripture, that could help inform a theology of the child for the Catholic Church. The first is Jesus's call to become like a child, and a deeper understanding of those distinctive traits of children which that call entails. The second is a consideration of the emphasis placed on the consequences for harming a child, an importance which cannot be ignored in the name of a false mercy. The third would be the interaction of Jesus with the children: in the midst of the gathering Jesus took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them, and blessed them. All three points provide direction for future theological reflection.

Development of a Modern Theology of the Child

A few attempts at a theology of the child have already been undertaken. Karl Rahner gathered together "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" (1963), but "did not develop full-fledged teachings about children or their spiritual formation."⁷³ His paper is only a few pages long. He condemns applying the cognitive developmental theory approaches of his time to assessing children's "value," speaking instead of "the unsurpassable value of childhood."⁷⁴ Childhood does not derive its justification and its value from the lifetime that comes afterwards:

71. That this biblical text remains a "thorn in the flesh" of any overly soft idea of forgiveness—that lacks any account of justice and disregards the victim—becomes obvious in a homily Pope Francis gave for victims of clergy sex abuse. In it, he did not only refer to "the millstone and the sea" but added that the church must "let no wolf enter the sheepfold": a statement that is all the more remarkable and provoking as the quoted pericope is followed by the parable of the lost sheep, for which the shepherd leaves his flock of ninety-nine animals. Francis, "Homily of Pope Francis" (Mass with a Group of Clergy Sex Abuse Victims, Domus Sanctae Marthae, July 7, 2014), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2014/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20140707_vittime-abusi.html.

72. Barron, "Scriptural Sources for Renewal," 16.

73. Bunge, "Introduction," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge, 1–28 at 11.

74. Karl Rahner, "Gedanken zu einer Theologie der Kindheit," *Geist und Leben* 36 (1963): 104–14 at 104. For an English version, see Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," *Theological Investigations* 8, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1977), 33–50. Putting the child's development only within a biological or psychological framework (Piaget's stages) one loses sight of the depth dimension and the completeness that one needs in looking at the human person. A functional or mechanical point of view, progression from one stage to another, does not explain everything—certainly not a child's "unsurpassable value." Theory is always short of the reality.

Probably there is no religion, no philosophic anthropology which insists so manifestly and so strongly upon this point as one of its basic presuppositions as does Christianity: ... the child is already a human person, that right from the beginning he is already in possession of that value and those depths which are implied in the name of a human being. It is not simply that he gradually grows into a person.⁷⁵

Childhood is a mystery and characterized by the child's infinite openness to God. For Rahner, "biological" childhood is closely interrelated to the "mature" childhood that makes us "children of God": "And thus without glorifying children or failing to recognize the radical insufficiency of their natures, Jesus see in children those whom he can receive lovingly into his heart. This is what he means when he says, 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 19:14). They are those with whom he identifies himself."⁷⁶

Within Protestant thought, a "Theology of the Child Movement" was launched in 1996. Haddon Willmer and Keith White defined *child theology* in a working definition as

an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology—historical, biblical and systematic—in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples. This child is like a lens through which some aspects of God and his revelation can be seen more clearly. Or, if you like, the child is like a light that throws existing theology into new relief ... Child Theology stresses that the child Jesus placed in the midst of his disciples is not intended as the object of analysis or adoration, but as a sign or clue to a greater understanding of God and his kingdom.⁷⁷

Yet the authors are aware that "there are two dangers that confront theology reformed by the child in the midst ... On the one hand, it must never again overlook or undervalue the child ... On the other hand, [it] must also avoid idolatry of children."⁷⁸

In 2015, *Catholic Education Australia* sketched out a (Catholic) child theology:

Childhood and children's relationships with God are valuable in themselves, and not simply as a prelude for what is to come. These relationships are already expressions of the eternal love of God present and at work in children's hearts. The child is already a partner of God.

75. Karl Rahner, "The Child," in *The Content of Faith. The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings*, ed. Karl Lehmann, Albert Raffelt, and Harvey D. Egan, trans. D. Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 2013), 123–29 at 123. See also Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 33–50 at 37.

76. Rahner, "The Child," 127. The phrase "radical insufficiency" does not imply an essential deficiency. The original German text is "ohne ... den Abgrund ihres Wesens zu verkennen"—children's natures are unresolved, not fully developed, ambiguous.

77. Keith J. White and Haddon Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology*, rev. ed. (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2008), 4, <https://www.moortownbaptistchurch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CT/Intro%20to%20Child%20Theology%20Booklet%20text.pdf>.

78. White and Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology*, 6.

And therefore, no less than the lives of adults, the spiritual lives of children are of unsurpassable value.⁷⁹

Each child “is an ‘icon’ through which the Mystery of God shines.”⁸⁰ According to the Australian Truth Justice and Healing Council, we can accordingly claim that “children show us the grace of God at work in their inquiries, uncomplicated affection and trust, and their inclusion and care of others.”⁸¹

What becomes apparent from these three examples, however, is that there is much work to be undertaken by Catholic theologians in this arena.

Possible Future Directions

If Catholic theologians are to pursue a theology of the child, there are several directions they might take. I offer here a few proposals.

First, the sacramental practice of baptizing infants can be interpreted as precious or as a dangerous contribution to a theology of childhood: On the one hand, it can highlight that every newborn is already endowed with all that is necessary to become a full member of the Christian community. Taking the child’s personal dignity seriously, there is no more merit necessary.⁸² It is not the baptism that gives a child human dignity. It is the already existing full human dignity of the child that allows for baptism.

On the other hand, there can be the hazard of linking the “unsurpassable value” of children to their baptism. Accordingly, their high rank and equal standing would need to be “imposed” and would, in consequence, not exist from the beginning of life. Besides, it would only be given to Christian children. Dealing with this issue, it could be insightful to refer to and discuss the impact of different theologies of original sin.

Second, it may be helpful to analyze the church’s reception and implementation of children’s rights in more detail: What are challenges and opportunities? How can the participatory aspect be reflected in theology? To what extent can child rights be derived from biblical foundations, Catholic social teaching, and systematic theological deliberations? What could a theology of childhood teach and/or learn from the human rights conversation?⁸³

Third, although moral theology and Catholic social teaching and other disciplines accentuate the role and importance of families, there is much less written about the

79. Catholic Education South Australia, “Children: Close to the Mystery of God” (CESA Stimulus Paper, July 2015), 7, http://reintheey.weebly.com/uploads/2/0/0/3/20032421/children_close_to_the_mystery_of_god.pdf.

80. Catholic Education South Australia, “Children,” 9.

81. Truth Justice and Healing Council, *Final Report*, 1 (2018), 35, <http://www.tjhcouncil.org.au/img/pdf/TJHC-Volume-1.pdf>.

82. See, e.g. Edmund Schlink, *Die Lehre von der Taufe* (Kassel, Germany: Stauda, 1969), 132.

83. See, e.g. Don S. Browning and John Witte, Jr., “Christianity’s Mixed Contribution to Children’s Rights: Traditional Teachings, Modern Doubts,” in *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 272–91; and Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis, *Honouring Children. The Human Rights of the Child in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 2004).

child's status within the family and the parent-child relationship. In this context, it could be fruitful to think about a child theology in the framework of the "domestic church." Furthermore, one could ask how the "idealized" visions of married life and family held by some church members influence the role and protection of children. Is the family's great work of love in care for children visibly affirmed in these idealized theologies? And is it affirmed at every level of the universal church's public, sacramental life?⁸⁴

Fourth, as indicated, there are the first elements of a theology of the child that were developed in a broader Protestant context. It could be intriguing to dig deeper and reach out to the Eastern churches as well (e.g., child as "icon").⁸⁵

Conclusion

Many bishops admit that we are in a state of mourning and pain, in which no pastoral encouragement can be appropriate: "There are times when words fail us."⁸⁶ It is moreover acknowledged that action and considerable transformation are needed.⁸⁷ In fact, one can detect the first hopeful signs of a rising sensitivity for structural and theological considerations that no longer overlook the abuse, or ignore the importance, of children. It seems that this is part of God's call in our present situation: to develop in the face of the abuse scandals a Christian theology of the child. Such a theology would lead to a spirituality of safeguarding youth, leading to the prevention of their abuse,

84. See *LG 11*; Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 110.

85. Catholic Education South Australia, "Children," 9. Like an icon, the child reveals the beginning of salvation in the child Jesus and is an image of the salvific intervention of God in human history and human beings.

86. Archdiocese of Boston, "A Message from Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, OFM. Cap., Archbishop of Boston," online video, 4:56, August 17, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/285548145>. Cardinal O'Malley, OFM Cap. is the Archbishop of Boston and the President of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

87. See Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "Statement from ACBC President Archbishop Marc Coleridge," media release, August 21, 2018, <https://www.catholic.org.au/all-downloads/bishops-1/media-releases-1/2137-acbc-statement-on-pope-francis-letter-on-sexual-abuse/file>. Francis asserts, "Looking back to the past, no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient. Looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated." Francis, *LPG*, opening paragraph. Looking at the changes in the Australian Church, Archbishop Coleridge clarifies that "until there is a genuine restoration of trust, no apology is going to land." Mark Coleridge, "Developing Story | The Australian Catholic Church in Turmoil," interview by Tim Reidy, *America*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/09/05/archbishop-coleridge-us-needs-become-humbler-church-response-abuse-crisis>. See also, YouTube video, 24:22, September 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1YfnmbCjzw>.

and the creation of a culture of protection of the most vulnerable—enfolded them with the affection, healing, and hope of the Gospel that was modeled by Jesus.

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