

Concerning Victims, Sexuality, and Power: A Reflection on Sexual Abuse from Latin America

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Abstract

This article offers theological reflection on the sexual abuse crisis in the Latin American church, focusing on the child victim. Beginning with a summary of the scandal as it has hit the Latin American church, the author shows how the clerical sexual abuse crisis engages with the particular sociopolitical contexts of children in Latin America. The article then contextualizes a theology of childhood in the Gospel accounts of Jesus's care for the young and vulnerable children. Finally, the author offers some fundamental theological reflections for an ecclesial response to the crisis, focusing on a theology of the child.

Keywords

child abuse, Latin American church, poverty, Puebla, sexual abuse, sexuality, theology of the child, victim

The clerical sexual abuse crisis as it has emerged in Latin America calls for delicate theological thought, with a focus on the victims. In his book *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, Jon Sobrino considers the category of the victims as the hermeneutical point of departure for considering the mystery of Jesus

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Christ.¹ For Sobrino, the victims are the poor, crushed by an oppressive and unjust system. They are also the victims of the violence generated by this same system. By analogy, the victims in this reflection are the vulnerable minors and innocents—children, adolescents, and youth—who have suffered and suffer abuse by members of the clergy and by the actions of some members of the hierarchy of the church. I make use of this hermeneutical approach because it seems that we can thereby open a way toward thinking theologically about the church's lived experience of the sex abuse scandal. Here, as in sociopolitically oppressive systems, there are victims and victimizers. The process of oppression in both contexts is very similar, as is the cause. In the final analysis it concerns the abuse of power.

I shall begin by discussing the meaning of the term “victims” as applied to the minors that have been the object of abuse by members of the church, recalling that the present moment stands within a history of such abuses. I will then analyze the situation of clerical sexual abuse in the church today, focusing on the Latin American continent, the context from which I speak. This is not simply a matter of statistical and quantitative analysis, but rather of theological reflection upon this painful situation—one that the church is living throughout the world.

Next, I will consider how Scripture can illuminate these reflections. This entails considering the state of the child within Christian revelation, examining some texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, focusing on the attitude of Jesus in relation to the children of his time. In light of these texts, we seek to discover how the innocence and fragility of children work to turn them into defenseless victims as a result of predatory action of abusers of every type, including pedophiles. This vulnerability becomes even more profound when the abuse is committed by someone who has the complete confidence of and responsibility for the child, considering that they represent an institution, the Catholic Church, that has always been respected and considered a source of good works, caring for the vulnerable.

Following upon this analysis, then, we seek to locate these victims within a fundamental theological framework that identifies their place within the ecclesial community, drawing upon some fundamental points for a theology of the child suggested by Karl Rahner. Finally, seeing the sexual abuse problem as multilayered, and involving issues of sexuality, power, and spirituality, I will suggest theologically informed practices that could prove fruitful in combatting clerical sexual abuse and in diminishing its damaging effects. I thus conclude not with concrete solutions, but rather with some reflections about actions that might help the church heal its structures and recover its credibility as a community that desires to be of service to the God of Jesus and to the building of the Kingdom of God.

The Perspective of the Victims

According to the *Diccionario de la lengua española* of the Real Academia Española, “victim” originates in Latin and means, among other things, a “person who endures harm

1. Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

by the fault of others or by coincidence; a person who endures that dangerous consequences of a crime; a person who dies through the fault of others or by an accident.”² We will add to this definition the fact that a victim is someone who is the recipient of aggression and harm against their will and who is incapable of defending themselves. This harm could bring physical consequences, incapacitating them, hurting them profoundly, or robbing them of life; but it could also equally bring them moral and psychological consequences that place them in a state of vulnerability for the rest of their lives, compromising the normal rhythm of their existence and even their human development.

The underlying characteristic of this particular dictionary definition of the term is that the victim is someone who *endures* harm or *endures* harmful consequences. Hence, a victim is someone who is in a disadvantaged situation who, when attacked, cannot respond to the attack; instead they suffer and undergo the consequences. Or they may be a person deprived of the capacity to act or to react to something that happens to them, reduced to a state of passivity such that they cannot manage to leave a situation because they are unable to do so.

The abuses we are addressing here have occurred over a long period of time and there have been very many victims. According to Spanish canon lawyer Gil José Sáez Martínez, who has studied the problem from the standpoint of church history and canon law, these abuses in the history of the church “form part of a ‘historical patrimony’ of the horrors of humanity.”³ He maintains that history teaches that minors are always among the most defenseless and vulnerable, and that is why the abuse perpetrated toward them is the a most horrendous violation. He and other scholars thus address a grave problem that must be approached within a multidisciplinary perspective.⁴ And, given that these abuses have occurred within the church, this multidisciplinary has to include the resources of theology.

In recent centuries, the Catholic Church has condemned such abuse and has tried to protect minors against sexual abuses. According to Sáez Martínez, ecclesiastical legislation from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries has in one form or another penalized priests who abuse minors. During the twentieth century there were still priests who abused minors, and the church created new canonical legislation to punish these crimes. However, ignorance of the penal legislation on the part of some bishops and religious superiors, and the frequent lack of use of the canonical penalties, contributed not only to not solving the problem, but also to magnifying it into a crisis. Cases were covered-up, allowing offending priests and bishops to continue exercising pastoral ministry despite their involvement with the abuse of minors—all of this provoking more pain for the victims.

2. 3. f. Persona que padece daño por culpa ajena o por causa fortuita.

4. f. Persona que muere por culpa ajena o por accidente fortuito.

5. f. Der. Persona que padece las consecuencias dañosas de un delito.

Diccionario de la lengua española, <https://dle.rae.es/?id=b1R0t2m>.

3. Gil José Sáez Martínez, “Aproximación histórica a los abusos sexuales a menores,” *Eguzkilore: Cuaderno del Instituto Vasco de Criminología*, no. 29 (2015): 137–70 at 169, <https://addi.ehu.es/handle/10810/24352>.

4. Sáez Martínez, “Aproximación histórica,” 169.

The problem was made more visible and widely known when the first victims started to speak. As is well known, after a long investigation, a group of reporters from *The Boston Globe*, brought to light in 2001 various cases of sexual abuse and their cover-up by church authorities. What is less well known is that when the issue of pedophilia started to explode massively in the churches of the global North—Europe, Australia, and the United States—there was already knowledge of cases in Latin America, like those of Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionnaires of Christ.⁵ Knowledge of these cases grew through the work of the press and the reach of social media. Recently, cover-ups of abuses in the Catholic Church in Chile were exposed, compromising whatever belief people may have held that the church of South America might be safe from the scourge of clerical sexual abuse.⁶ The enormous network that Fernando Karadima (now expelled from the priesthood) assembled has revealed in Chile a cascade of cases: more than a hundred priests and religious leaders have been found guilty of sexual abuses against minors.⁷ Although the majority of victims are males, there are also female victims.⁸

There is no place in the world where there have not been cases of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. And, while Latin America has been called “the continent

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5. For a lengthy examination, see Jason Berry, “Money Paved Way for Maciel’s Influence in the Vatican,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 6, 2010, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/money-paved-way-maciels-influence-vatican>.
 6. See the complete story of the abuses in the Chilean church included in the intervention of Pope Francis: “Papa Francisco: viaje a Chile ‘ayudó’ a entender abusos en la Iglesia Católica,” *El Dinamo*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.eldinamo.cl/actualidad/2019/05/28/papa-francisco-viaje-a-chile-ayudo-a-entender-abusos-en-la-iglesia-catolica/>.
 7. To learn more about Fernando Karadima and the summary of the scandals of which he is the subject, see “Quién es Fernando Karadima, el exsacerdote que causó el mayor escándalo de la Iglesia católica de Chile,” *BBC News Mundo*, September 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-45686485>.
 8. Chilean professor of theology Marcela Aranda has claimed that since she was nineteen years old—a minor under Chilean law at the time—she was constantly abused for many years by the Jesuit Renato Poblete. Poblete’s actions created a huge scandal because he was an icon in the recent history of Chile, noted for his effective social action on behalf of the most poor, and having been the director of the Hogar de Cristo, one of the most important works of the Catholic Church in the southern part of the continent. See Carla Pía Ruiz y Fredi Velásquez, “El cara a cara más duro de los jesuitas: cómo las denuncias por abuso sexual marcarán su cónclave íntimo,” *La Tercera*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.latercera.com/reportajes/noticia/cara-cara-mas-duro-los-jesuitas-las-denuncias-abuso-sexual-marcaran-conclave-intimo/522322/>. See also the website of the Chilean newspaper *La Tercera* (www.latercera.com) for other reports on the same topic. On Renato Poblete, see Boris van der Spek, “Renato Poblete: National Hero Topic of Sexual Abuse Scandal,” *Chile Today*, January 29, 2019, <https://chiletoday.cl/site/renato-poblete-national-hero-topic-of-sexual-abuse-scandal/>. See also “Un conocido jesuita chileno abusó de 22 mujeres en un período de 48 años,” *Religión Digital*, July 31, 2019, https://www.religiondigital.org/america/conocido-jesuita-chileno-mujeres-periodo-abusos-sexuales-48-anos_0_2145085472.html.

of hope,”⁹ the fact that the majority of Catholics have not escaped the reach of this scandal puts at risk the credibility of the church as a whole and tarnishes the relationship of the faithful with its pastors, stigmatizing the church with distrust and suspicion.

Violence against Minors in Latin America

One reason for believing that there is hope in Latin America is the fact that it is here that life already speaks more strongly than death. The birth rate exceeds the death rate, making us a continent both young and with a future. In contrast to other cultures, like those of the global North, where couples sometimes opt to not have children, Latin American culture celebrates the child, who enjoys a privileged position in the household and whose birth brings joy—even though it adds another mouth to feed when food can be scarce.¹⁰

The other side of this hope-filled reality, however, is the drama of Latin American reality: boys and girls have to live in the poor and even miserable conditions into which they are born and reared.¹¹ Families often live piled into small spaces, and frequently children are initiated sexually by very close relatives, including stepfathers, uncles, and even their own fathers.¹² Studies on sexual violence committed against minors show that when it is not committed by relatives or sexual partners, others close to the victim are among the perpetrators. “The majority of the perpetrators of sexual violence, other than partners, are people known to the victims, including relatives, neighbors, friends, classmates, *priests*, and teachers.”¹³

The economic and material poverty that undergirds a large part of Latin America has sharply increased in the last few decades, creating a disposable culture that uses children for drug trafficking, prostitution networks, and chemical experiments leading

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9. [Translator’s note: This term “continent of hope,” is used frequently in church documents and addresses. See, for example: Francis, homily for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Vatican City, December 12, 2014), https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141212_nostra-signora-guadalupe.html.]
 10. José Eustáquio Diniz Alves, “Taxa de fecundidade total e nascimentos na América Latina,” *EcoDebate*, July 11, 2014, <https://www.ecodebate.com.br/2014/07/11/taxa-de-fecundidade-total-e-nascimentos-na-america-latina-artigo-de-jose-eustaquio-diniz-alves/>.
 11. For complete statistics on sexual violence in Latin America and the Caribbean, see Juan Manuel Contreras et al., *Violencia sexual na América Latina e no Caribe: uma análise de dados secundários* (Pretoria, South Africa: Sexual Violence Research Initiative, March 2010), http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/publicacoes/violencia_sexual_americalatina_caribe.pdf.
 12. For example, the famous case in Recife, in northeastern Brazil, where a 9-year-old girl was raped by her stepfather and became pregnant with twins. The mother brought her to a doctor who advised her to terminate the pregnancy, since the uterus of the girl could not support a pregnancy, much less twins. The case provoked the reaction of the bishop and pronouncements from members of the Catholic hierarchy in all of Brazil and even beyond. See Camilla Costa, “O médico excomungado por aborto de menina de 9 anos vítima de estupro,” *BBC News Brasil*, May 27, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-36402029>.
 13. See Contreras, *Violencia sexual*, 29; emphasis mine.

to death.¹⁴ These are victims of the injustice and of the violence that it generates. They are also victims of a lack of opportunity in education and work, throwing them into the arms of trafficking or crime, where many may die without reaching adulthood.¹⁵

As noted earlier, this negative profile extends to the existence in Latin America of a great number of children and minors who have suffered abuses within the Catholic Church. And, for all the cases of abuse that have been discovered, there are just as many that have been covered up and made secret by the church in an effort to preserve its image.¹⁶ In spite of the valuing of the child in principle, the Latin American church also appears guilty in relation to these minors and vulnerable persons.

The Child in Scripture

How, then, might Scripture offer an alternative vision of the child?

The theme of the child appears in many biblical passages. In the Hebrew Bible, we see texts that mention certain children and youth: Samuel, a boy through whom God delivers a message to the priest Eli (1 Sam 3); David, the youth chosen by God to be the king of Israel (1 Sam 16); Josiah, the boy king through which God reforms the religious and social state of his country (2 Kgs 22).

But most important are the defenseless children, specifically the orphans,¹⁷ whom God himself supports and comforts. The God of Israel is the *go'el*—the redeemer of all categories of vulnerable ones in the midst of the chosen people—most specifically, the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the foreigner. The conscience of the people of the covenant, given and revealed by the same God, is continually alerted to the importance of all the vulnerable, and concretely in the case of the child who loses their father and is without protection in life. God always is with them.¹⁸

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14. See statistics from UNICEF stating that 81 million Latin American children live in poverty: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Child Poverty Affects Almost 81 Million Children in Latin America and the Caribbean,” news release, May 17, 2011, <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/child-poverty-affects-almost-81-million-children-latin-america-and-caribbean>. On children and drug trafficking, see ; on children and prostitution, see ; on children as victims of chemical experiments, see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drugs Report 2018: Executive Summary: Conclusions and Policy Implications* (June 2018), 17–21 and 27, <https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/en/exsum.html>.
 15. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drugs Report 2018: Executive Summary: Conclusions and Policy Implications* (United Nations, June 2018), https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/prelaunch/WDR18_Booklet_1_EXSUM.pdf.
 16. See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drugs Report 2018: Executive Summary: Conclusions and Policy Implications* (June 2018), https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/prelaunch/WDR18_Booklet_1_EXSUM.pdf.
 17. In ancient Israel, a child was considered an orphan if its father died; women were relatively powerless and were themselves left vulnerable with the death of their husbands. In ancient Israel, a child was considered an orphan if its father died; women were relatively powerless and were themselves left vulnerable with the death of their husbands. See J. T. Fitzgerald, “Orphans in Mediterranean Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *Acta Theologica* 23 (2016): 29–48, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v23i1s.2>.
 18. See Exod 22:22–24, where the God of Israel declares his protection of orphans. See The passage in fact refers to “resident aliens (*gerim*), people living more or less permanently in

Children are also present in the New Testament, and the behavior of Jesus toward them is worthy of attention. The preference that Jesus demonstrates for children, as for other types of powerless people (women, the impoverished, the ill, etc.), highlights a particular and most essential aspect of the Gospel: the priority of Jesus to announce the liberating Good News to the oppressed. The disinherited, the rejected, fisherman, tax collectors, and those marginalized by all manner of circumstance in Jesus's time, including women and children, he designates as privileged in the kingdom. He integrates them fully in the community of the children of God, because, informed constantly by the movements of the Spirit and by the filial relationship with the Father, he knows how to discern in all these oppressed—in whom children are included—values otherwise ignored.

Because of this, when Jesus says that the reign of God has already come, he means that he is going to finally institute the condition desired by all of the oppressed of the earth: the effective realization of justice, the protection and the help of all those who are not valued in themselves, and those that do not have voice or place; those disinherited from the land, the oppressed, the hungry, the marginalized, and defenseless. The kingdom is above all for the poor (Luke 6:20), for children (Mark 10:14), for the little ones (Matt 5:19), and in general for all those whom society marginalizes and discounts.

Jesus not only defends those without protection, particularly children, but also sees in them a model for those who wish to follow him and enter the kingdom of heaven. He places the child as an example to all who aspire for power and prestige and who oppress the rest: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matt 18:3–5 parr.).¹⁹ Even more, he lovingly embraces children near to him, while the disciples want to throw them out for disturbing the Teacher:

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. (Matt 19:13–14 parr.)

Why such special care for children? Because of their innocence and absence of ambition.

Contrary to the norms of society during the time of Jesus, and in contrast also with what is still occurring in our society, Jesus does not tolerate anyone imposing themselves on anyone else in the community. On the contrary: in the kingdom heralded by Jesus the basic rule is that the first shall be last and available to serve all. And, like children, they must become humble and learn obedience.²⁰

a community other than their own, [who] were often classed with widows and the fatherless as needing protection... As outsiders, often without clan protection, they were vulnerable and often poor... Special access to Yahweh is their protection." See Richard J. Clifford, "Exodus," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 54.

19. [Translator's note: NRSV used throughout.]

20. "To use the image of childhood is to make an ironic inversion of the rigidity of the law." See Nicolás Panotto, "'Porque as revelaste': O empoderamento da palavra frente à violência do silenciamento," in *Para Falar de Criança: Teologia, Bíblia e Pastoral para a Infância*, ed. Harold Segura and Welinton Pereira (Rio de Janeiro: Novos Diálogos, 2012),

In the community of Jesus, therefore, one cannot have ambition or desire power or domination. Because of this, Jesus prohibits honorific titles; “father,” “master,” “teacher,” “doctor,” and so forth are prohibited terms (cf. Matt 20, 26–27; 23:11; Matt 23:8–10; Mark 9:35; 10:43–44; Luke 22:25; John 15:13, 24). On the contrary, Jesus says to the crowd: “And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven” (Matt 23:9), and “The greatest among you will be your servant” (Matt 23:11). In the community of Jesus, absolute equality and care should rule, so that even Jesus calls the disciples “friends” (Luke 12:4; John 15:15) and “brothers” (Matt 28:10; John 20:17), a sentiment echoed by Paul (1 Cor 3:21–23; Rom 14:7–9; Gal 3:27; Col 3:11). And to exemplify how the relationships among the disciples should look, he puts a child in the midst of them:

He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” (Matt 18:2–5)

Jesus not only defends children, values them as a model to be followed by his disciples, and gives them precedence in the kingdom of his Father; he also identifies with their state. The Gospels tell us that Jesus rejoiced happily in the Holy Spirit when he saw that the Good News was being absorbed and accepted by the childlike. “At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants’” (Matt 11:25). Jesus, it could be said, identified with children, and, it could be said, had in himself the spirit of childhood.

Yet, as in the time of Jesus, one still encounters many places where children experience disdain and violence. As noted earlier, very many children face grave circumstances in Latin America. Even more grave are the cases of children who have been abused constantly and regularly by members of the clergy or the hierarchy of the church. These boys and girls are the faces of Jesus today in Latin America and one should contemplate them with the same attention and reverence with which Jesus beheld the children of his time.

The Situation of the Children within the Church: From Promise to Victim

Children and youth embody and represent the future, the *promise* of the church’s future. They embody the hope that the Gospel will continue being announced and that the project of the kingdom of God will continue to fascinate people and implant within them the Gospel dynamic of the eschatological “already but not yet.” In Latin America very specifically, children participate directly in all that also brings life to the church: celebrations, reunions, courses. They do so not because the church hopes that from there they

13–28 at 13. Also see, concerning a theology of childhood, Benjamim Sathler Lenz César, *Teologia da Criança: A infância como caminho de se falar sobre Deus, a vida cristã e os vulneráveis* (MA thesis, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.17771/PUCRio.acad.34959>.

will contribute and participate as adults do, but because children, especially little ones, accompany their mothers, who do not have others to leave them with. Many times, these children will not go even to school. The church is the place where, apart from their home, they will likely be found.²¹ Adolescents, too, are involved in ecclesial activities, like youth groups, where they often find the place to construct their identities and to manage the very difficult circumstances created by poverty and lack of resources. In the setting of the church they feel valued, and heard and can make their presence felt.²²

The constant coexistence of children and members of the clergy occurs naturally, therefore, from the frequent presence of the children in church, at the parish house, and at centers of formation. It is sad to realize, now that the facts have come to light, that many abuses were committed in those very spaces that have always been places of confidence and sure affection for children and youth: the parish house and the church. We now have an idea of the total number of victims who have already been counted in official figures, and, adding those of whom there is still no news, the number is astonishing and repulsive.

What is at the crux of the matter? Why do those who are officially the object of such special pastoral care and attention suddenly find themselves in a state of victimhood, the object of constant and perverse abuses that affect their corporeality, their emotions, and their mental health for the rest of their lives? What lies behind the abuses that today disfigure the face of the church in such an astonishing manner? And, given that the larger part of abuses occur outside the church, what is it about the abuses committed by members of the hierarchy, such as priests, monks, and even bishops, that have disturbed public opinion, resulting in a crisis of such magnitude?

The problem is complex, and it is not advisable to address it simplistically. There are many factors that surround this crisis. We do not expect to exhaust them all here, but rather I will highlight some preliminary theological reflections that are required before undertaking any more specific theological response to the crisis. These all involve a fundamental theological reflection upon the child, who as victim lies at the heart of the scandal and the ensuing crisis.

Childhood as Parable of the Christian Life

The child becomes in itself a great teaching about the grace of God. Although the child feels grateful to parents for the care they have given, the child's relationship with them is not built upon any record of favors, benefits, or the payment of debts, but rather upon the liberating structure of love. Children receive to a great degree all the care and affection

21. See the interview with Monsignor Carlos Castillo, archbishop of Lima: Castillo, "Un pueblo muy herido necesita hablar mucho y ser escuchado también," *Religión Digital*, July 30, 2019, https://www.religiondigital.org/america/arzobispado-Lima-prioridad-opciones-infancia-hambre_0_2144185573.html.

22. Francis, *Christus Vivit* (May 25, 2019), 216–20, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

graciously intended for them without questioning why they receive it or what they can give in return. This is also the position of one who receives life and salvation from God. There is no negotiation with God in order to win over favors or receive advantages. There is only the relationship based in the love that does not imprison but only liberates.

In their status as recipients of the gift, children are gratuitously open to closeness with the giver—the priest or bishop or friend of the family—and often trust in him as the second most important person that loves him and cares for him after parents and family members.

The Lasting Impact of Childhood

As Karl Rahner wrote, childhood is not a temporary and perishable thing, but rather pertains to remains within the individual for life.²³ He explains:

Childhood does not constitute past time, time that has eroded away, but rather that which remains, that which is coming to meet us in an intrinsic element in the single and enduring completeness of the time of our existence, considered as a unity . . . We do not lose childhood as that which recedes ever further into our past, that which remains behind as we advance forward in time, but rather we go towards it as that which has been achieved in time and redeemed forever in time. We only *become* the children whom we *were* because we gather up time—and in this our childhood too—into eternity. Throughout our entire life-span, and because of the decision which is required of us and which bears upon our lives as a whole, childhood may always remain open. And we may still have to go on living through our own childhood in our life taken as a whole because it always remains an open question for us.²⁴

What Rahner says here is confirmed by contemporary studies of psychology. What happens in childhood marks us for all of life. Until death we will bring with us the marks, good or bad, traumatic or productive, of what was lived in our childhood. Even though we make an effort to forget them, even though we hide them in some fold very deep in our heart and our memory, the experiences that take place in childhood accompany us throughout life. Because of all of this, a relationship with a child or an adolescent is seriously charged, marking them for the rest of their lives.

The Child in regard to Human Mystery and Dignity

Rahner further stresses that the child is a human being. Apart from Christianity, it could be said that no religion or philosophical anthropology has insisted so much, nor has given so much clarity to the presupposition, that the child is a person, a human

23. Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 33–50. [Translator's note: The author here cites a Spanish translation: Rahner, "Pensamientos para una teología de la infancia," trans. Victor Codina, *Selecciones de Teología* 3 (1964), http://www.selecciones-deteologia.net/selecciones/lilib/vol3/10/010_rahner.pdf.]

24. Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 36.

being from conception. And this implies that he or she has that dignity and profound mystery contained within their humanity.²⁵ Faith tells us, besides, that the child comes from God and that their story, despite being connected with the cosmos and the life of the universe, has an immediate relationship with God, their creator. Each child, by their personhood, is unique, created by love and called by God by their name.²⁶

Childhood in Relation to Grace

The love which God directs to each individual is not offered to an innocent human being, but rather to a human being who is intertwined with the pain, guilt, suffering, death, and grief, wrapped in the history of sin, but also of grace. The Christian knows that guilt and pain are experienced in the blessedness of both an original grace and later of a redeeming grace, and that God allows for human freedom. The human being is born with a promise which, actuated in freedom, is in living tension with this history of guilt from the beginning of one's life.²⁷ In addition to the positive characterizations of children in the teaching of Jesus, Scripture also speaks of a child in the imperfect and inferior sense (cf. 1 Cor 3:1; 13:11; 14:20a; Gal 4:1–3; Eph 4:14; Heb 5:13). These portrayals are not intended merely to present negative traits, but rather a sense of promise and an opening to the future. While, as noted earlier, children are examples of gratuitousness, lack of ambition, and absence of pretense (Matt 18:2–5; 19:13–15), this does not mean that Jesus makes them the prototype of the kingdom of heaven solely by virtue of their innocence. What the gospels want to emphasize and value is their openness and trust, which involves risk. In their freedom, they are vulnerable and exposed. Yet “all of this remains within the compass of God, of his great grace and his greater compassion.”²⁸

Childhood is Vulnerability

We have seen that in the Hebrew Bible vulnerability appears in the category of the orphan, the fatherless child. The absence of the father maximizes the vulnerability of the child, since they do not have someone to defend them; their mothers, too, are vulnerable. Yet this vulnerability is in itself a priority in the kingdom. Jürgen Moltmann discusses the identification of the child with the poor:

The kingdom of God doesn't come to the higher echelons of human society and at the spearhead of progress, among the achievers and the powerful. It comes to the unimportant people at the bottom of this world's social ladder. That turns our normal human scale of values upside down: the last shall be first. But if the kingdom of God comes to the people

25. Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 37.

26. Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 37.

27. Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 39–40.

28. Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” 40.

“down there” in the world, then the people “at the top” lose their religious legitimation. The “woe” to the rich belongs to the beatitude which calls the poor blessed; and similarly the beatitude calling the children blessed goes on to curse the people who hurt or violate them.²⁹

It is this vulnerability of the child—being someone already in formation and in tension with the future, being a promise that has yet to be realized, being constituted of trust and the absence of wickedness and suspicion toward others, being someone who does not nest in ambitions and expectations made by self-interest—that makes them more exposed to being the object of abuse. That which constitutes the charm of the child reveals equally the threat that permanently weighs on them. And this threat has sadly been ratified by all that the abuse crisis has revealed about the church in recent years.

Anthropological-Theological Elements and Priestly Formation

After lifting up some theological elements that support and deepen biblical approaches to the identity of the human child, we now turn to three anthropological factors that are fundamental to understanding the crux of the sexual abuse crisis: These are how we view the crisis from the standpoint of sexuality, of power, and spirituality, understood here as one’s relationship with God. All of these factors pertain to priestly formation.

When we speak of *sexuality* we refer to that deep and vital core of the person that, intimately connected to their affectivity, is capable of giving flavor and force to the most important experiences and decisions of life. Sexuality is not synonymous with genitality, but rather the fruit of the desire and the vital impulse present in all human beings.³⁰ So while it can safely inform a person and help them grow in all dimensions of their personality, nevertheless, sexuality should be integrated with the other characteristics that form the personality. And this should hold in whatever stage of life one assumes, not excluding the celibate state of those who embrace the vocation to priestly ministry. Thus, the goal of the priestly formation should not exclude sexuality, much less repress it, but rather should raise awareness of its potentiality with the objective of preparing one to enter into healthy, affective relationships.³¹

Lamentably, avoidance of the discussion of health sexuality has really been a fact in seminaries and houses of formation. For many candidates to the ordained priestly ministry, the possibility has not been provided of exploring thoroughly their own sexuality, much less of learning how to accept themselves as sexual beings, called to manage correctly desires, emotions, and behaviors related to their sexuality. More seriously still, formation programs have not provided paths to living celibate commitment in a non-repressive way, stressing instead the avoidance of potential temptation in the area of sexuality. Rather

29. Jurgen Moltmann, *In the End, the Beginning: The Life of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2004), 13.

30. Piero Gambini, Giuseppe M. Roggia, and Mario Oscar Llanos, *Formazione affettivo-sessuale: Itinerario per seminaristi e giovani consacrati e consacrate* (Bologna: EDB, 2017).

31. Gambini, Roggia, and Llanos, *Formazione affettivo-sessuale*.

than integrating sexuality into one's celibate life, candidates are taught to voluntarily resist desires and their own impulses without surrendering to them, in a form of violence against themselves, frustrating an authentic integration.³²

When sexual abuses are addressed—including their entanglement with sexual issues and their insufficient resolution in ecclesial life, above all in seminary and priestly formation—they are found to be intimately connected with *power*. Many authors think that the issue of abuse of minors should be studied in relation to the abuse of power. Before being considered as a physical, sexual, or issue for moral theology, the power at issue in this scandal is at its crux an ethical matter for priestly formation.³³

In addition to the exercise of power to abuse children, another way in which the issue of power appears is the cover-up and the obfuscation of the truth on the part of those that know what happened and who hide the abuser, protecting him. This continues to harm victims and encourages the abusers to continue with their predations. It prioritizes the institution and renders the pain and trauma of the victims of secondary importance.³⁴

This trauma and problem of clerical sexual abuse is not only a physical, organizational, or political issue. At the source it is a deeply spiritual problem—primarily because the abuse is not only physical, but rather also *spiritual*.³⁵ Clerical sexual abuse can affect one's very faith in God, which is another reason why sexual abuse committed by members of the clergy is so grave. To the victim, the perpetrator is someone who by their office (power) represents Christ, an *alter Christus*. When such a person commits abusive sexual behavior, the very image of God for the victim is tarnished and the victim can fall into darkness and a terrible and abysmal loneliness.³⁶ The heart of the matter lies in this assault against the victim's sacred relationship with God.

These three factors—sex, power, and the spiritual dimension—have conspired to create a crisis of major proportions. And each of these factors raises concerns about priestly formation. Failure to address these factors adequately is one reason why the victims have been the most vulnerable members of the Body of Christ.

Conclusion: Healing the Church

The sexual abuse crisis is a deep wound in the heart of the church. Pope Francis is facing the problem with truth and showing himself to be on the side of the victims. But a

32. It can be argued that such frustration of integration of a healthy sexuality into one's celibate life can exacerbate the priest's desire for the child, with the abusive exercise of power over them. See Gambini, Roggia, and Llanos, *Formazione affettivo-sessuale*; see also Amedeo Cencini, *È cambiato qualcosa? La Chiesa dopo gli abusi sessuali* (Bologna: EDB, 2015).

33. See Angela Rinaldi, *Dalla parte dei piccoli: Chiesa e abusi sessuali* (Molfetta: La Meridiana, 2018).

34. Rinaldi, *Dalla parte dei piccoli*; Cencini, *È cambiato qualcosa?*

35. Cf. Cencini, *È cambiato qualcosa?*, esp. ch. 4. See also Hervé Legrand, "Francesco—Clericalismo e violenze sessuali: perché non abbiamo agito?," *Il Regno*, February 2019, 3–8 at 3, <http://www.ilregno.it/attualita/2019/2/francesco-clericalismo-e-violenze-sessuali-perche-non-abbiamo-agito-herve-legrand>.

36. See Hans Zollner, "Las heridas espirituales causadas por abusos sexuales," *Civiltà Cattolica*, January 18, 2018, 51–61, <https://www.civiltacattolica-ib.com/las-heridas-espirituales-causadas-abusos-sexuales/>.

crisis of this magnitude cannot heal if the whole ecclesial body does not insist in giving its best to do so. All the pain caused by clerical sexual abuse in the church can offer a unique opportunity for the ecclesial community to seek a real change, and to focus not on external institutions but rather on the cornerstone of faithful life: Jesus Christ and his Gospel of life and fulfillment. Considering the abuse crisis as not only the responsibility of individuals, but rather of the ecclesial community, could also be part of this change.³⁷ A process of transformation could produce from the church a community more faithful to their identity and their ecclesial mission: serving the mission of Christ, not serving those who possess or “own” that mission.

In Latin America in particular, the abuse crisis cannot be separated from the crisis that the church universal is living through. Therefore, as with any local church, there must unfold an examination of its context and characteristics.

In 1979—forty years ago—the third Latin American Episcopal Conference was held in Puebla de los Ángeles, México. It was a rich and dynamic moment for the Latin American church, which was understood to be designated as the voice of those without voice, a defense of the poor and oppressed, finding in them that priority of the face of Christ who was called to serve.

One of the most characteristic texts of Puebla is the *Final Document*,³⁸ which describes in strong words the cruel poverty encountered throughout the continent: “This situation of pervasive extreme poverty takes on very concrete faces in real life. In these faces we ought to recognize the suffering features of Christ the Lord, who questions and challenges us” (*ELA* 31). The first group of faces that the document mentions, at the beginning of the series that follows, are those of the children: “—the faces of young children, struck down by poverty before they are born, their chance for self-development blocked by irreparable mental and physical deficiencies; and of the vagrant children in our cities who are so often exploited, products of poverty and the moral disorganization of the family” (*ELA* 32).

Almost thirty years later, CELAM’s 2007 *Concluding Document* from Aparecida would mention the danger of what new cultural changes bring to children: “The greed of the market unleashes the desires of children, youth, and adults.”³⁹ And more: “boys and girls subjected to child prostitution, often linked to sex tourism; also children victims of abortion” (*CD* 65).

37. This is the central thesis of Cencini, *É cambiato qualcosa?*

38. Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), *La evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de América Latina* [Evangelization in the Present and Future of Latin America] (1979), https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Puebla.pdf (hereafter cited as *ELA*); trans. as John Eagleson and Philip J. Scharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

39. Latin American Episcopal Council, *Documento Conclusivo* (August 2007), 50, http://www.celam.org/doc_conferencias/Documento_Conclusivo_Aparecida.pdf; an uncredited translation is available from CELAM at <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf> (hereafter cited as *CD*).

Forty years since the Puebla conference, the temptation toward discouragement can still haunt us. Our children still sadly reveal the face of the Crucified, by being subjugated by poverty, economic and cultural oppression, and violence of every type—even including this monstrous violence of sexual abuse perpetrated within the same church that proposes to defend them. Nevertheless, hope cannot cease that we might see the church finally show itself before the world in all truth and transparency. If the truth alone sets us free, we may rejoice because that truth starts to shine indeed, even though it necessarily reveals shadows and darkness.

The same document from Aparecida affirms: “Our hope is stirred by the multitude of our children” (*CD 127*). We continue being the “continent of hope” because life here continues conquering death. And in each child that is born one can see the face of Jesus. These innocent lives that survive misery and violence are living testaments of the power of God in life.

The *Final Document* from Puebla had already stated that “in being born, Christ assumed the condition of the child: he was born poor, subject to his parents. Every child—an image of Jesus being born—ought to be welcomed with affection and kindness” (*ELA 584*). And we add: these images of Jesus should be cared for with a love and attention that reflect and announce even more beautifully the ministry of Jesus incarnate, alive, crucified, and risen. Before the child, the only proper attitude must be one of devotion and love for this vulnerable and delicate life that so depends on adults to develop. This life equally has the right to hope from the church an attitude of true respect for its inviolable dignity as a creature of God.

Translated by Michelle Runyon

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