

Questioning God in the Wake of Sexual Abuse: A Political Theology of Healing

Federico Cinocca

Boston College School of Theology and Ministry (Brighton, Massachusetts)

Abstract

This paper considers the engagement of Christian communities in the healing process of the victims after cases of sexual abuse. Over the last fifty years, restorative justice has emerged to respond to the harm inflicted on individuals by abusive behaviors. However, restorative justice alone, focusing on restoring the relationship between the victim and the aggressor, leaves many social and institutional mechanisms unchallenged. Drawing on Johann B. Metz's political theology, I claim that three aspects must be taken into account by Christian communities to show solidarity with the victims and facilitate their spiritual healing: the necessity of structural change through serious consideration of social sin in the Church; the importance of parrhesia (open and honest speech) through peaceful public protests where survivors and their allies manifest their discontent and ask for accountability; listening to the marginalized as a priority that re-educates the Church to pay attention to those who suffer.

This paper considers the engagement of Christian communities in the healing process of the victims after cases of sexual abuse. Psychologists and theologians have studied, through different categories, the consequences of abuses perpetrated by clergy and religious ministers on the lives of their victims and the larger community. Victims of abuse were left in a time of despair and desolation, often questioning the loving character of God and severing their relationship with the Church. Over the last fifty years, restorative justice has emerged to respond to the harm inflicted on individuals by abusive behaviors. In this paper, I claim that for a full recovery to take place, the institutional failures of the Church must also be

addressed. For this reason, restorative justice practices must be complemented by serious consideration of social sin in the Church, the importance of *parrhesia*, and a priority given to the voices of the marginalized. I will first consider recent research in theology and psychology on the categories of “divine struggle” and “sacred moral injury;” second, I will mention the contribution made by restorative justice practices in cases of sexual abuse by clergy and religious; third, I will analyze Metz’s political theology; finally, I will propose a political theology of healing for victims and survivors of sexual abuse in the Church.

Spiritual struggle

Sexual abuses perpetrated by clergy have been analyzed by psychologists and theologians through different categories to highlight that besides physical and psychological harm, sexual abuse leaves the victims in a time of spiritual struggle and desolation. Psychologist Julie Exline and colleagues studied the phenomenon of “divine struggle,” which they define as “negative thoughts or feelings focused on beliefs about God or one’s perceived relationship with God.”¹ Divine struggle can manifest itself in different forms: anger towards God, fear or guilt that God disapproves of one’s conduct, and doubt about the existence of God. Traumatic experiences change how a victim/survivor sees God and God’s relationship with the world. As shown by Jennifer E. Beste, reflecting on the appropriation of God’s Grace in the life of the believer, and by recent studies on liturgy and trauma, overwhelming violence may hinder the ability to respond to God’s Grace and even fruitful participation in the liturgical life of the community.² Victims may start to think that not only the abuser bears responsibility for what happened but also that God is not protecting them, is indifferent, or

¹ Julie Juola Exline, Joshua B. Grubbs, and Steffany J. Homolka, "Seeing God as Cruel or Distant: Links with Divine Struggles Involving Anger, Doubt, and Fear of God's Disapproval," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 25, no. 1 (2015): 30.

² See Jennifer Erin Beste, "Receiving and Responding to God's Grace: A Re-Examination in Light of Trauma Theory," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003); David Farina Turnbloom et al., "Liturgy in the Shadow of Trauma," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022).

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even cruel.³ Analogously to what Bryan Massingale writes about the traumatic experience of racism for the Black Community, sexual abuse can lead victims and their allies to a “dark night of the soul.”⁴ As Church leaders scrambled to protect the institution, victims were left in a time of physical and psychological distress and spiritual desolation. One of the survivors told the Jurors of the Philadelphia Grand Jury: “I had no God to turn to, no family, and it just went from having one person in me to having two people inside me. This nice [Billy] that used to live, and then this evil, this darkness [Billy] that had to have no morals and no conscience in order to get by day by day [...].”⁵

The tragic experience of Billy shows that the moral and spiritual compass of many victims has been damaged, leaving them with what some psychologists, and more recently some theologians, started to call moral injury. This category was initially coined to address veterans’ experiences of moral distress but developed to describe other situations in business and healthcare settings. Recent examples may include healthcare workers who had to make delicate decisions about allocating the scant resources available during the Covid-19 pandemic. Psychotherapist Len Sperry recognizes similarities between moral injuries, PTSD, betrayal trauma, and moral injury. However, to better address the experience of people that suffered sexual abuse by priests and religious, he develops the category of “sacred moral injury,” which he defines as “a trauma syndrome with lasting biological, psychological, social, organizational, and spiritual effects which emerges from the experience of betrayal of a sacred trust by a perpetrator of a religious organization whom the victim perceives as

³ See Julia A. Feder, "Edward Schillebeeckx and Sexual Trauma: Salvation as Healing," in *Salvation in the World: The Crossroads of Public Theology*, ed. Stephan van Erp, Christiane Alpers, and Christopher Cimorelli (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 217-18; Bradford E. Hinze, *Confronting a Church in Controversy* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), 8.

⁴ See Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 104-16.

⁵ County Investigation Grand Jury, *Report of the Grand Jury*, Ct. Common Pleas (Philadelphia City, PA, September 15, 2005), 180.

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representing God”⁶ Through this category, Sperry highlights that, in the experience of the clergy sexual abuse, there is both an individual failure (of the abuser) and a systemic moral failure (of the institution). In too many instances, religious organizations supported the perpetrators by covering up their misconduct and dismissing victims’ claims. Because it is both an individual and an organizational failure, recovery from abuse by a clergy or religious minister requires that both elements be addressed.

The victims/survivors are certainly those who suffered the most, but the misconduct of the Church’s leaders damaged the faith of the whole community. As Catholic leaders wrestle to handle more and more allegations, an increasing percentage of Catholics is re-examining their belonging to the Church. In 2019, 37% of U.S. Catholics, up from 22% in 2002, say that news of sexual abuse has led them to question whether or not they will remain members of a Catholic community, as a Gallup poll shows.⁷

A recent pilot study published by Marcus Mescher and Kandi Stinson at Xavier University highlights the consequences of moral injury resulting from a betrayal of trust and disrupting one’s moral compass and ability to trust an individual or an institution’s authority and credibility.⁸ The study shows that although moral injury was higher among people directly connected to experiences of abuse, the impact of the crisis extends further to those with varying degrees of affiliation with the Catholic Church, in most cases breaking their relationship with God and the Church.

Sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy and members of religious communities is a delict against the faith of the Church. In the bodies of those abused, as members of the Church, the Body of Christ is damaged. This is the rationale behind the request moved by then Card.

⁶ Len Sperry, "Moral Injury in Christian Settings: Sacred Moral Injury," in *Christianity and Psychiatry*, ed. John R. Peteet, et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 117.

⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones and Lydia Saad, *Many U.S. Catholics Question Their Membership Amid Scandal*, Gallup (2019), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247571/catholics-question-membership-amid-scandal.aspx>.

⁸ Marcus Mescher et al., "Measuring & Exploring Moral Injury Caused by Clergy Sexual Abuse," Xavier University, <https://www.xavier.edu/moral-injury-report/documents/xu-report-on-moral-injury.pdf>.

Ratzinger to transfer the competence for these *delicta graviora* from various congregations to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.⁹ Notwithstanding the legislation, responses by Catholic leaders have been scattered and not as decisive as they should have been, at least until more recent years.¹⁰

Restorative Justice

To repair the wrong done, some communities started to apply restorative justice to cases of sexual abuse by clergy. Janine Geske and Daniel Griffith were pioneers in promoting restorative justice and restorative practices in a wide range of legal and nonlegal settings, from bullying in school to violence in war, including sexual abuse by members of the Catholic Church.¹¹ Griffith claims that restorative justice is not only consonant with the biblical revelation, Catholic social teaching, and Pope Francis' insistence on accompanying the marginalized but is also effective.¹² As practiced today, restorative justice focuses on three questions: who has been harmed, what was the nature of the harm, and how can damage be repaired? It allows for a proper expression of anger and facilitates a possible path toward reconciliation and forgiveness. At times, forgiveness and reconciliation may be understandably difficult, if not impossible, to desire or achieve; therefore, they are never assumed nor required.

⁹ See John Paul II, Apostolic Letter issued "motu proprio" *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela* (30 April 2001), at The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_20020110_sacramentorum-sanctitatis-tutela.html; Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. Letter Explains New Norms for Church Handling of Certain Grave Offenses (18 May 2001), at the Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010518_epistula-graviora-delicta_en.html.

¹⁰ See Hinze, *Confronting a Church in Controversy*, 84-113.

¹¹ See Janine Geske, "Restorative Justice and the Sexual Abuse Scandal in the Catholic Church," *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8.2, no. Spring (2007); Stephen J. Pope and Janine P. Geske, "Anger, Forgiveness, and Restorative Justice in Light of Clerical Sexual Abuse and Its Cover-Up," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019); Daniel Griffith, "Healing the Harm: The Effectiveness of Restorative Justice in Response to Clergy Abuse," *University of St Thomas Law Journal* 17, no. 1 (2020).

¹² See Griffith, "Healing the Harm: The Effectiveness of Restorative Justice in Response to Clergy Abuse," 18-19.

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Three characters are the recipients of restorative practices: the victim-survivors, the offenders, and the community. Bishops and hierarchy members have been notably absent from restorative justice processes, emphasizing the accused priest' or layperson's individual responsibility while resisting institutional change. Restorative justice may profoundly impact the lives of victims, aggressors, and even small communities. Still, these practices must be expanded and complemented to address broader structural changes.¹³ As the category of "sacred moral injury" has shown, the trauma suffered by victims and survivors of abuse is more than a medical or psychological condition. For the abused person, recovering entails a journey that requires institutional accountability. Full recovery demands addressing personal and organizational failures. As Sperry argues, "offending religious organizations must do more than listen, apologize, and provide therapy and compensation."¹⁴ These are all necessary steps, but systemic organizational changes cannot be avoided. Towards this end, I argue that restorative justice practices must be complemented by a political theology of healing. Healing from sexual trauma must also consider the institutional and social structures that allowed or enabled this to happen and promote the social change necessary for similar abuses not to happen again. Healing is a political as well as a personal process.

I now turn to Metz, who pioneered the construct of political theology in recent theology; I will then draw on him to offer a political theology of healing that responds not just to personal but also institutional failures of the Church and its representatives, to facilitate healing for victims and survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

Metz's Political Theology

¹³ See Hinze, *Confronting a Church in Controversy*, 153.

¹⁴ Len Sperry, "Psychotherapy Alone Is Insufficient: Treating Clergy Sexual Abuse and Sacred Moral Injury," 3.

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John B. Metz's political theology offers us some tools to think about implementing restorative practices to address the institutional changes that need to occur. In his *Theology of the World*, Metz writes, "The deprivatizing of theology is the primary critical task of political theology."¹⁵ Criticism, including self-criticism, is an essential task that the Church, as an institution, should exercise toward society and itself. It can only be credible if it does not appear in the accouterments of power.¹⁶ Metz says that the Church is a "second order institution" and derives its mission from the eschatological *proviso* under which the Church lives.

Secondly, the Church's responsibility to criticize injustice leads Christians to see love as the "unconditional determination to freedom and justice for the others."¹⁷ Christian love has a critical potency. It goes beyond the relationship I-Thou and even beyond charitable work within a neighborhood. If love is this radical determination to seek justice and liberation for the sake of the other, Metz recognizes that there may be circumstances when love requires "actions of a revolutionary character."¹⁸ Metz writes, "If the status quo of a society contains as much injustice as would probably be caused by a revolutionary upheaval, a revolution in favor of freedom and justice for the sake of 'the least of our brothers' would be permissible even in the name of love."¹⁹

Third, as Metz pointed out, these actions must be done for the sake "of the least of our brothers." The task of the criticism that the Church advances is not for its own sake but for the sake of the other. The Church is not for itself; it does not serve its self-affirmation but the affirmation of salvation for all people, and among them, those most marginalized and excluded need to be heard first.

¹⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 110.

¹⁶ Metz, *Theology of the World*, 119.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 120

¹⁹ Ibid.

A Political Theology of Healing

As shown in Metz's account, political theology gives us a portrait of the Church as an institution less idealized and more marked by the signs of its history. Moreover, it attends not only to the personal but also to the political dimension of our lives. A serious consideration of social sin in the Church is essential to recognize that our institutions may be less ideal than we thought. When, on March 12, 2000, Pope John Paul II announced a universal "Day of Pardon" for the sins committed throughout the history of the Church, *The New York Times* welcomed this event as "the most sweeping papal apology ever;"²⁰ in reality, it fell short from a genuine apology. The Pope was also careful in attributing these faults and sins not to the Church itself but to its individuals. Similar criticism has been addressed to Pope Francis regarding his recent visit to Canada.²¹ As Michael McCarthy noted, separating a sinless Church from its sinful members "not only underplays the full symbolic reality of the Church but invites idealization, and in doing so also reinscribes the conditions of disillusionment."²² We flourish in a social environment but also harm each other relationally. Healing from sexual trauma must consider the structural change needed to convert our institutions and their members.

Second, *parrhesia* (open and honest speech)—a word particularly dear to Pope Francis—even through peaceful protests, may raise solidarity with the victims and drive healthy structural change in the Church. Some victims/survivors of abuses and their allies

²⁰ Alessandra Stanley, "Pope Asks Forgiveness for Errors Of the Church Over 2,000 Years," *The New York Times* (New York), March 13, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/13/world/pope-asks-forgiveness-for-errors-of-the-church-over-2000-years.html>.

²¹ See Ricardo Da Silva, "Analysis: Pope Francis apologized to the Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Was it enough?," *America. The Jesuit Review*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/07/25/pope-francis-canada-apology-indigenous-243414>.

²² Michael Cornelius McCarthy, "Religious Disillusionment and the Cross: An Augustinian Reflection," *Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 4 (2007): 584.

started public protest movements. *Voice of the Faithful*, the *Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests* (SNAP) in the United States, and *Rete l'abuso* in Italy are examples of groups that support the survivors while asking for structural change in the public square and Saint Peter's. This kind of public manifestation resonates with Metz's idea of the revolutionary character that Christians' actions could take for the sake of the most marginalized of our brothers and sisters. Open and honest discussion should be allowed in Catholic schools, seminaries, and church squares. Particular attention should be given to those topics that are more controversial.

Finally, the abuse crisis showed that in many instances, the Church, with its bishops and leaders, has been more concerned about protecting itself rather than reaching out to the victims left alone to deal with their suffering.²³ It is easy to see how these practices contradict Metz's claim that the Church lives for others, not for itself. Victims have been, in many instances, re-victimized because they were not heard or believed by their families, communities, and Church authorities. The victims' speech has been perceived as distorted or false, deepening a wound created by the abuse. If the Church wants to respond to the crisis, it must re-educate itself, listening carefully to the stories of those that have been senselessly abused.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that healing for victims of abuse is also a spiritual process, but not in the sense of an inward process; instead, it has a fundamental political nature. Political and personal healing go together, implementing restorative practices. Personal healing alone would miss the structural change needed to prevent harm from happening in the future, and

²³ See James F. Keenan, "Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism," *Melita Theologica Journal of the Faculty of Theology University of Malta* 68, no. 2 (2018): 131.

political healing alone would miss the individuals with their struggles. Healing from trauma entails a personal healing experience, an individual enterprise, and a restoration of social elements and relations. We are responsible for protecting each other's sexual integrity and promoting those changes that will prevent harm from occurring in the future.

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