

Why the Catholic Church needs a Eucharistic response to the sex abuse scandals



“The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church.” With these words of the Lord, stalwart Catholics have sought to dissuade brothers and sisters alienated by the sex abuse scandals from exiting the fold.

While it is good to be reminded that insolvency is not the church’s destiny, such words alone will not assuage today’s disillusioned laity. This past summer’s new revelations of priestly abuses and episcopal failures in Pennsylvania, along with prospective revelations from many other states, combined with a new face of the scandals—the silence of some prelates toward the abuses of other prelates like those of former archbishop Theodore McCarrick—leave the laity seeking not salve, comfort and piety but rather

reform, repentance and truth: in a word, justice. Absent justice, many will leave the church.

Can we expect the Body of Christ to deliver justice? Many Catholics, perceiving corporate evasion and bureaucratic torpor on the part of the church's bishops, will say no and instead favor turning matters over to the district attorney, the journalist and the therapist. While these responses have elicited benefits over the past couple of decades, they follow secular scripts and again raise the question: Does the Body of Christ—*qua* the Body of Christ—offer a response to the sex abuse scandals? Or does it offer only creeds, catechesis and suburban Sunday school sapience that must be laid aside until this enormity is dealt with?

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Catholics encounter the Body of Christ directly in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. What we have here is not an inert cosmic substance that perdures despite the sins of the church's members but rather the action of a God who ventured into the mud to do battle with these very sins. Christ, too, faced a scandalous abuse crisis, surrounded by violence between a brutal empire and restive separatists, persecuted at birth by the local king and ultimately executed. Through the Eucharist, Jesus makes his victory over these—and all—sins available to us, here and now, in our crisis.

The Eucharist holds out an integrated response to the wounds that priestly sex abuse has wrought: the broken lives of victims; indifference to their suffering on the part of fellow members of the church; a dearth of accountability for priests and bishops involved or complicit in abuse; an occlusion of the full truth about abuses; a deficit of apology, penance and reparation; and the persistent need of reform. Jesus' cross and resurrection—that which the Eucharist re-enacts—also overcome evil and restore goodness in multiple ways, including solidarity with every victim, a vindication of truth,

satisfaction of the demands of punishment, the inauguration of a kingdom of justice, healing, an invitation to penance and forgiveness.

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Reconciliation and Justice

Is a Eucharistic response to the evil of sexual abuse realistic? Christian churches have promoted one over the past generation in a different milieu—that of countries facing the past enormities of war, genocide and dictatorship, whose victims are numbered in commas and zeros. From South Africa to Sierra Leone, East Timor to East Germany, Chile to Canada, churches have taken part in debates about the meaning of justice in the wake of massive injustice.

Their message has been reconciliation, which they pose as an alternative to the dream of reviving the Nuremberg Trials for architects of atrocity that international lawyers and human rights activists have pursued. While churches do not reject accountability, their vision of reconciliation centers on the recognition of victims, repentance by perpetrators, healing and forgiveness, reflecting, in turn, the comprehensive reconciliation that God achieved through Jesus Christ, which the New Testament describes as justice.

What churches have done for broken political orders is what I hope the Catholic Church would do in response to its sex abuse crisis: tap its founding events for a genuinely Christian response to evil rather than acting at the behest of secular experts and authorities. If the church wishes to be credible as the Body of Christ, it cannot ignore the potential of reconciling, eucharistic justice. If Jesus is not relevant here, when is he ever relevant? And if Jesus is not relevant, then why should a disgruntled Catholic remain in the church?

Reconciliation prescribes an integrated portfolio of restorative practices. These carry legitimate roles for the prosecutor, the reporter and the therapist.

But just as grace builds on nature, each bears an evangelical dimension as well.

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Restoring Credibility

The first practice is the telling of truth. The past generation's political transitions teach that only if the truth about past violence and injustice is aired can a new democracy or peace settlement attain legitimacy and transparency. Lay Catholics today across the political and ecclesiological spectrum are demanding that the church's hierarchy, including the Vatican, reduce secrecy surrounding its knowledge of abuses, including those committed by Mr. McCarrick and potentially other prelates, and bring the full truth to the light of public discourse. Public truth-telling likewise exonerates the innocent and illuminates virtue: the progress of the U.S. church since the Dallas reforms of 2002, the many bishops who responded to abuse uprightly, and the scale and proportion of abuses in the church in comparison to other social institutions. The church must welcome a full revelation of the truth, in all of its valences, if it is to restore the credibility of its shepherds and its witness as the Body of Christ.

The truth of the Eucharist involves something more, though. Jesus' cross and resurrection vindicate the truth about injustices committed by political and religious authorities but also involve loving, intimate solidarity with victims. Analogously, truth commissions in recent years delivered not only forensic knowledge of crimes but also empathetic recognition of the suffering of victims. Hearings of South Africa's [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), for instance, featured victims' testimonies about the human rights abuses they suffered, which were followed by prayerful silence, the singing of hymns and the embrace of loved ones—a healing solidarity, not just the facts.

The church ought to think more creatively about how to acknowledge survivors of sex abuse. Journalists have performed an essential, at times heroic, service in unearthing their stories, yet front-page stories alone do not confer loving recognition. Popes and bishops have met with survivors but only a small portion of the total. One innovation that reflects the restorative justice of the Eucharist, documented in [America](#) by Boston College theologian Stephen J. Pope, has been the healing circles pioneered by Wisconsin judge Janine Geske. The circles bring survivors of abuse together with relevant “stakeholders”—fellow parishioners, (non-offender) priests, representative offenders, sometimes bishops and others—and allow survivors to tell their story, be heard empathetically, and thereby overcome shame and isolation.

A closely related practice is the healing of memories. Survivors’ memories of sexual abuse have resulted in failed marriages, derailed careers, alcoholism, depression and even suicide. To some, it will seem cruelly absurd that victims of abuse at the hands of priests of the church would find healing in that same church. Again, though, what is overlooked is the healing power of the cross, resurrection and Eucharist, which Jesus demonstrated and augured through his many healings of people who everyone thought were beyond help, including lepers, paralytics, the blind, a woman suffering years of menstrual bleeding and even a dead man. Catholic theologian and popular writer Dawn Eden recounts in her book *My Peace I Give You* how she had suffered sexual abuse as a child and found healing as an adult in the Catholic Church. She learned through the examples of saints to join her wounds to the wounds of Christ, who would purify her memories and give her the grace to experience his intimate love for her. Her healing was gradual, unfolded through new stages of uncovering past wounds and was assisted by a Catholic therapist but was animated by God’s reconciling grace.

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Repentance

Next, other practices directly address the perpetrator's role in abuse: reparations, apologies, penance and punishment. The law has spoken loudest. Courts have ordered the U.S. Catholic Church to pay over \$3 billion in reparations thus far and frequently have provided the necessary impetus for church leaders to confront abuses. Law is essential to justice.

But legal measures alone do not achieve God's healing grace. Sinners access this grace through the sacrament of reconciliation, which absolves them of guilt and beckons them to participate in their redemption through penance, which might in turn involve apology, restitution, amends toward those they have hurt and judicial punishment in the case of crimes. Accordingly, churches in political transitions during the past generation have encouraged perpetrators to repent for their injustices and to undertake restorative forms of punishment.

In response to the sex abuse scandals, popes and numerous bishops have voiced apology, held Masses of reparation and led dioceses in a day (or year) of repentance. In three respects, though, penance has been paltry. First, as theologian Michael Griffin argues in his 2016 book, *The Politics of Penance*, too few bishops have apologized for their own acquiescence in these abuses and in the misdeeds of other bishops, as has become evident in the case of Mr. McCarrick. Second, as Griffin also points out, the U.S. bishops never followed up on Pope St. John Paul II's call for a national day of repentance, an event through which the entire U.S. Catholic Church could unite in lament and solidarity with victims.

A third dimension of penance does not elicit our natural sympathies but is hard to ignore in light of Jesus' intense love for sinners, including some of his era's leading pariahs: that which is performed by priests found guilty of abuse. Such penance should not be confused with the therapeutic optimism that led some bishops to rehabilitate and relocate abusive priests prior to 2002. Zero tolerance is non-negotiable. Rather, restorative penance might

involve perpetrators examining their consciences and apologizing to survivors and wounded communities, and parishes petitioning at Mass for perpetrators' repentance and return to friendship with God.

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The hard work of forgiveness

A final practice will also be surprising: forgiveness. I do mean victims and other laity forgiving abusive priests and complicit bishops. When I have raised this idea with friends, including priests, they have demurred: Only a victim could propose forgiveness credibly, and now is not the time. There is insight in these answers. Yet, a victim has already proposed and practiced forgiveness: Jesus. And, over 17 years of the roiling crisis and counting, virtually nobody in the U.S. Catholic Church has raised the idea.

Jesus tells his followers to forgive "seventy times seven." Catholics ask for forgiveness and the grace to forgive every time they recite the Our Father in Mass. A friend who is a refugee of the Rwandan genocide recounted to me that she would remain silent when the Mass came to the line "as we forgive..." for many years after her father had been killed until the day came when she was ready to forgive—an admirable honesty. Why does Jesus tell us to forgive? Because God mercifully has forgiven our sins. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus illustrates with a parable of an unmerciful servant whose debt is forgiven by a king yet who refuses to forgive his own debtor and is punished severely for it. Jesus forgave his murderers from the cross.

How can a survivor forgive something as heinous as sex abuse? Not alone but in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who becomes a victim in solidarity with all victims, forgives sinners on behalf of all victims, and thus enables victims to forgive. In forgiving, survivors might further become liberated from anger, revenge, and the woundedness of their shattered lives.

Does forgiveness of the heinous really take place? Sometimes, yes. When a man shot 10 Amish girls in a school room before killing himself in Nickel Mines, Pa., in 2006, members of the Amish community forgave him and comforted his widow at her home that very evening. When Dylann Roof murdered members of an African-American church in Charleston, S.C., their relatives forgave him.

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Is forgiveness possible?

In political transitions in South Africa, Sierra Leone, Northern Ireland, Chile, El Salvador, Uganda and Timor Leste, Christian churches raised the idea of forgiveness and many victims of violence practiced it. In 2014, I conducted a survey of 640 victims of war in five regions of Uganda and discovered that 68 percent of them reported having practiced forgiveness and that 86 percent favored the practice of forgiveness even in settings of nightmarish violence. The vast majority of respondents were Christian, and they most commonly cited their faith as the reason why they forgave.

One woman in Northern Uganda, Angelina Atyam, forgave the soldiers in the rebel Lord's Resistance Army who abducted her daughter along with 130 other girls from a Catholic boarding school in 1996. Like my Rwandan friend, Atyam was challenged by the words of the Our Father, which she prayed weekly with other parents of the abducted girls. She sensed and followed a call to forgive, advocated forgiveness widely and even located the mother of her daughter's abductor, through whom she forgave the abductor, his family, and his clan. When this soldier later died in combat, Atyam wept and consoled his mother.

Like Jesus' resurrection, forgiveness does not merely relinquish claims but also builds right relationship and peace in settings where violence and conflict have been widespread. Far from burdening Atyam, forgiveness strengthened her by enabling her to shape the world around her for the

better. She became the leader of a group of parents who advocated for the girls' release. When Joseph Kony, the notorious leader of the L.R.A., offered to free her daughter if she would cease her international advocacy against the L.R.A., she refused, insisting that all of the girls must be released first. Eventually, her daughter was freed and she was reunited with her.

In the setting of the sex abuse crisis, one of the most severe trials that the Catholic Church has faced in many years, forgiveness can work in tandem with other practices to bring about the healing justice of the Eucharist. If the church can look to its founding events not just for hope and reassurance but also for guidance for action, it can offer dispirited Catholics compelling testimony that its founder is alive, at work and not to be left aside in dark times.