

Beyond Scandal and Shame? Ecclesiology and the Longing for a Transformed Church

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Abstract

The need for reform of the Catholic Church's structures features prominently in discussion of the clerical sexual abuse scandal. Less common has been reflection on the challenge that the crisis presents to ecclesiology, to considering the church theologically. This article addresses that challenge. It engages three tasks—facing the church's brokenness; understanding the church in terms of grace and human freedom; and facilitating the participation of all the church's members—that are necessary for an ecclesiology able to be both realistic and hopeful in the current circumstances.

Keywords

conversion, dialogue, freedom, grace, history, hope, mission, pilgrim, Pope Francis, synodality

Abraham Lincoln believed that “failed policies demand a change in direction.”¹ So committed was Lincoln to this principle that Doris Kearns Goodwin identifies it as integral to the “transformational leadership” he exercised during the American Civil War. Lincoln's stance, which would hardly be noteworthy if it were typical, contrasts with the approach so often prevalent among leaders of every stripe: refusals to acknowledge failure, and so to learn from it, litter the annals of manifold

1. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 213.

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human enterprises. The denial of failure can prolong innocent suffering, burden budgets, and undermine truth; for the practitioners of denial, these forms of “collateral damage” are preferable to the humiliation likely to accompany policy reversals and the confession of unmet goals. The immunity from embarrassment that denial promises is illusory, but compelling in the midst of a swirling controversy. Although the personal and professional costs of acknowledging failure can indeed be substantial, the willingness to meet them may open a portal to hope and transformation, both of which free the future from the futility of pretense. The refusal to admit failure and, a fortiori, all efforts to conceal it, foster no such possibilities.

“Change in direction,” the step that must follow the admission of failure if the future is to be different from the past, may be no less arduous than its predecessor. Effective replacements for flawed strategies do not materialize as if by magic, nor are they regularly identical with the first available option, especially if that option is plundered feverishly. Rather, the development of policies and practices that serve the well-being of communities and individuals requires creativity and imagination, time and patience, efforts to build reliable coalitions, and a willingness to grapple with questions that defy simple answers. Leaders, whether or not they are office-holders, must be especially adept at the practice and cultivation of these qualities. When change depends on community-wide investment, as is usually so, leaders must be able to listen and persuade, not impose their plans by dictates that alienate potential support. Courage and fortitude are also necessary qualities for visionary leaders, since pursuit of a vision can generate conflict with the perceived interests of one’s cohort, and even imperil self-interest, narrowly conceived.

Here too, Lincoln’s style of leadership stands out. His quest for national transformation embodied a range of virtues conducive to piloting positive change through adverse conditions. Lincoln valued accomplishments beyond the short-term and the expedient. In addition, “empathy, humility, consistency, self-awareness, self-discipline, and generosity of spirit” were hallmarks of his dealings with colleagues, critics, and the wider population.² These qualities may be dispensable when change requires a specific, limited action, but are essential when the goal is cultural conversion. For Lincoln, the former was so when dismissing an incompetent general, while the latter was preeminently true in his canvassing to secure support for emancipation.

“Failed policies” is inadequate shorthand for the criminality, deception, and injustice that are the constituents of the clerical sexual abuse scandal that has engulfed the Catholic Church in the last two decades. Despite the insufficiency of the description, it is surely incontestable that the scandal brings into stark relief the need for “a change in direction.” As revelations of priestly corruption and episcopal malfeasance have cascaded from country to country, uncovering the manifold losses that survivors have endured, and drenching the ecclesial community in sadness and shame, demands for change in the church have multiplied, as well as becoming more urgent and adamant.

The case for change is compelling and unifying, especially in light of the fact that the sexual abuse scandal has exacerbated other reasons, including the limitations of the

2. Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, 222.

church's ordained leaders in responding to contemporary culture, that have led many people to rank the church as little more than "a nuisance, even an irritant," as Pope Francis has recognized.³ There may be unanimity about the need for change, but a program for positive change, as well as the means to accomplish it, has not yet reached the same degree of agreement across the Catholic community. At least in part, this lack of consensus results from the large number of issues where change in the church seems to be not merely desirable, but long overdue. From lay participation in ecclesial governance to practices of formation for ordained ministry, and from the leadership of women to the church's learning from a socially and religiously pluralistic world, Catholics longing for a more transparent and accountable church have multiple options to canvas.

While it is conceivable that the members of the church could resolve that one or more of those proposals "has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28, NRSV throughout), another scenario is equally feasible: the devolution of the ecclesial community into competing interest groups, each lobbying for their preferred proposal to secure a healthier church. The latter outcome would reproduce the divisions that bedeviled the first-century Corinthian community—"I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ'" (1 Cor 1:12). The rising tide of polarization that already threatens the church in various parts of the world would then sweep unimpeded across the ecclesial landscape.⁴

Once again, Lincoln's dispositions can be helpful in considering how best to proceed. Lincoln's option for emancipation as the core of all possible reforms was not a random choice, but symbolized his conviction that slavery was an indefensible contradiction of America's founding inspirations: unless all people could be free, nobody could be truly free.⁵ Applied to the church, this need to align principle and action implies that a broad and deep appropriation of the church's identity and mission ought to inform decisions about the priority for changes in the church. Ecclesiology, as this article will argue, is central to this process.

The Project of Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology, through its engagement with the church's self-understanding expressed in its history, in official teaching, and in theological scholarship, articulates a vision for what it might mean to be a community of Christian faith in particular times and places. I focus here on the tasks of ecclesiology attuned to a church in crisis, a church in need of transformation. The goal here, as later sections will reinforce, is not to offer

3. Francis, *Christus Vivit* (March 25, 2019), 40, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

4. For a variety of issues and viewpoints on matters that divide today's Catholics in the United States, see Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles Camosy, and Tricia Bruce, eds., *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016).

5. Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, 242.

a recipe for a “perfect” church, but to promote greater faithfulness to all that the Christian community claims as its own sources, most especially God’s Holy Spirit.

Ecclesiology, like all forms of theology, draws its impetus from the God who is “the liberating freedom of our freedom.”⁶ This freedom is not injurious to the stability of the Christian community, but stimulates the emergence of forms of ecclesial life expressive of the creativity that God’s self-communication in history enables. For this reason, ecclesiology can illustrate how the church can differ legitimately from the “cramped religious life” that results from constrained depictions of God or from a failure to appreciate the freedom for change that is God’s gift to the ecclesial community.⁷ True, ecclesiology is not monolithic; its exponents neither employ a single, mandatory methodology nor possess immunity to the possibility of conscription by partisans from one camp or another. Still, a measure of the value, even legitimacy, of all ecclesiological reflection is its capacity to amplify the freedom of the church for transformation, a freedom connected intimately to God’s creative Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit who initiates, sustains, and guides the church’s pilgrimage in history, the pilgrimage towards the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.⁸ Ecclesiology develops the implications of the church’s existence as a pilgrim. One of those implications, one whose source is the fact that the church “has the appearance of this world which is passing,” is the need for greater integrity and transparency in the church’s life, rather than for a self-congratulatory complacency.⁹ A static church or, worse, one resistant to the possibility of transformation, would be in danger of stifling the Spirit, whose initiatives, importantly, can emerge “from below” rather than only through the channels of the church’s formal structures.¹⁰

A commitment to transformation, and even more the fact of transformation, will minimize the likelihood that the church will be an obstacle to the liberating presence of God that it exists to serve. Transformation requires ways of acting that differ from those of the past. By being an agent of what the Anglican theologian Paul Avis names “reasoned discourse concerning the church,” ecclesiology can affirm, challenge, and even be a catalyst for the renewal or reform of particular expressions of the church’s life.¹¹ This “big picture” function of ecclesiology is especially important today, when

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6. Karl Rahner, “Freedom in the Church,” *Theological Investigations* 2, trans. K-H. Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 89–107 at 94.
 7. Elizabeth Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness: Writings for the People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 31.
 8. For the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the church’s pilgrimage see Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid, “The Holy Spirit and the Pilgrimage of Faith,” in *The Holy Spirit: Setting the World on Fire*, Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid, eds. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2017), 44–59.
 9. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 48, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*).
 10. Karl Rahner, “Do Not Stifle the Spirit!” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 7, trans. D. Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1977), 72–87 at 82.
 11. Paul Avis, “Introduction to Ecclesiology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University, 2018), 1–30 at 2.

the attention of the Christian community often narrows to concentrate exclusively on those aspects of the church that are so obviously broken. An overarching vision for the church can illuminate the process of discerning which of the plethora of possible reforms sketched above will contribute most fruitfully to the realization of the church's mission.

Ecclesiology assists movement in the church not by acting as warehouse of suggestions for the church's future, but through its familiarity with the tradition of faith, with the church's history, and with the life of the church in the present moment. These resources all bring into relief the paradox that Serene Jones terms the church's "bounded openness": as the product of God's initiative through history, the church has an enduring identity, but the grounding of this identity in God means that the church is not a body with rigid boundaries, but one able to grow.¹² As a pilgrim in history, the church is unfinished, and even "unfinishable."¹³ God's initiative and human freedom, together with the church's orientation to mission in the world's ever-changing history and cultures, require the church in every time and place to discern the forms of discipleship that best witness to all that the Spirit enables for the Christian community as it "constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth."¹⁴ Ecclesiology, without offering a "how-to" guide for the Christian community to follow, supports this discernment.

At its best, ecclesiology combines in one commitment two emphases that may appear to be mutually contradictory: fidelity to "what was handed on by the apostles," and promotion of creative responses to present-day circumstances.¹⁵ The former requires constructive interpretation of the tradition of faith; the latter embraces critical sympathy for questions that may be unique to a particular moment in the life of the Christian community. Importantly for the present experience of the church, each of these emphases allows for the recognition that one or more aspects of the church's life may have become obstacles to the efficacy of the church's mission, and so stand in need of reform. Ecclesiological reflection underscores that reforming the church to eliminate dysfunction and promote transparency embodies the constructive reception of the tradition of faith, rather than its abrogation: "the paradox of an authentic creative fidelity is that its desire to bring the Gospel up-to-date responds to the desire to keep it intact."¹⁶

12. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 170; for a similar emphasis, see Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. P. Madigan and M. Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1995), 171–78.

13. For the notion of the "unfinished" church see Bernard Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004).

14. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), 8, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (hereafter cited as *DV*).

15. *DV* 8.

16. Bernard Sesboué, *Gospel and Tradition*, trans. P. Kelly (Miami: Convivium, 2012), 85.

To ensure that its considerations of the church's transformation are other than wishful thinking, ecclesiology—and so this article—must satisfy three interrelated requirements. First, it must begin with the reality of the church as it is in history, not with the church as a “Platonic fiction” divorced from history.¹⁷ Today, this means facing both the ravages that the sexual abuse scandal has caused and the barriers to reform in the church that exist presently. Second, it must make plain how God's relationship to the church, the relationship without which there would be no church, is reconcilable with the complexity and fallibility of its members. A particular corollary of this second requirement is that ecclesiology must address how descriptions of the church identifying it as the locus of God's ongoing presence in history are sustainable in light of existing scandals. Third, it must situate all proposals for change in relation to the whole body of baptized believers—“After all, if [descriptions of the church] are not true of anyone in the Church, what can it mean to say they are true of the Church?”¹⁸ Authentic transformation, in short, requires an appreciation that “the church” is other than an object, and particularly that it is never independent of God, history, and its members. In its endeavor to illustrate how ecclesiology might serve the project of transforming the church, I will be attentive to these three requirements.

“But we had hoped ...”

Few phrases in the New Testament ring more plaintively than this declaration of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus as they narrated the death of Jesus (Luke 24:21). Today's Catholics, contemplating the present situation of their church, could echo the sentiment of those disciples. Catholics had hoped that their church would be a locus for good in the world—had hoped that its leaders would lift burdens, not victimize the vulnerable. Since the abuse scandal has depicted a very different church, Catholics of all ages and backgrounds now question whether continued participation in the church is compatible with personal integrity. An affirmative response to that question is not to be lightly assumed.

Contemporary Catholics can only envy the revival of hope and evangelical fervor that the encounter with the risen Christ produced in the once-distraught disciples (Luke 24:32–33). Members of the church can desire such a transformation, while recognizing that the prospects for it seem remote in the midst of all that blights their community. This assessment could imply a lack of faith in the power of the risen Christ to overcome the “sting” of death in all of its appearances (1 Cor 15:55). After all, is not the heart of Christian faith the conviction that “neither death, nor life ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39)? Since the letter to the Romans lacks an asterisk identifying an exemption in relation to the present-day sexual abuse scandal, there would seem to be no grounds for the diminishment of hope.

17. Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Postmodern Context* (New York: Oxford University, 1999), 100–101.

18. Joseph Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2008), 10.

Nonetheless, the hope that does not “disappoint,” the hope that is the product of the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5), differs from a naïve optimism that is unable to confront reality or that proceeds as if acknowledgment of death and profession of hope are mutually exclusive. Genuine hope, grounded in Christ, is compatible with “obedience to what horrifies.”¹⁹ This obedience includes the willingness to face the truth of the church’s situation in all its grim details, to learn the lessons that must be learnt, and to make the changes that may enable the emergence of a more faithful church.²⁰ Hope is consistent with accepting that “events which constitute a counter-testimony to Christianity” not only arise from within the church itself, but are likely to be no less evident in our moment of history than they were in the past.²¹ If today’s Catholics are to retain hope for the future of their church, it will be hope exercised in the midst of what Constance Fitzgerald identifies as “the deconstruction of memory” proper to the experience of the dark night: “the certainties on which we have built our lives are seriously undermined or taken away—not only in prayer, but also in and by life and a profound disorientation results.”²² In this context, the sole basis for hope is “the power of God over the injustice that produces victims.”²³

A crisis can be the moment when hope achieves its fullest expression, empowering confrontation with the circumstances that assert death to be invincible. Alternatively, a crisis can relegate hope to the margins. The latter occurs if an all-devouring focus on survival monopolizes the spotlight. An obsession with survival, especially when it accompanies a determination to maintain the appearance of “business as usual,” can have a deleterious impact on clear thinking, wise decision-making, and, as is evident in the cover-up of clerical sexual abuse, on faithful discernment. There was a time when bishops could not have known the extent of clerical sexual abuse or understood the pathology of it, but if the intent of those bishops who withheld the truth concerning crimes by priests was to ensure a favorable public image for the church and its ordained ministry, theirs was an epic miscalculation. By privileging what the Australian Royal Commission into the sexual abuse of children named “a preoccupation with protecting the institution’s ‘good name’ and reputation,” the bishops facilitated the opposite effect.²⁴

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19. Paul Crowley, *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 61.
 20. For a discussion of hope in relation to the church see Richard Lennan, “The Church as a Sacrament of Hope,” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 247–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391107200201>.
 21. John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium* (November 29, 1998), 11, http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html.
 22. Constance Fitzgerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory,” *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009): 21–42 at 23.
 23. Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. P. Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 42.
 24. *Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, vol. 16, book 1 (December 2017), 28, <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/religious-institutions>.

Since the abuse scandal erupted in Boston in 2002, bishops have promised rigorous accountability and transparency. That new revelations of both clerical abuse and episcopal cover-up have consistently followed those promises has vitiated trust in the capacity and willingness of the church's leaders to protect children, to face the truth of all that has failed, and to accept the need to admit questions before hastening to answers. Two decades of relentless detection of all that was long hidden leaves no doubt that the public harvest of episcopal dishonesty has been opprobrium for the ordained priesthood and a portrayal of the bishops as merciless apparatchiks who defended the church's financial resources while abandoning children. Accordingly, the church's leaders appear as a group who curated the church's status while neglecting "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matt 23:23).

In a globalized and media-saturated world, the impact of the abuse scandal inevitably reaches beyond the confines of the church. Outrage at the fact that priests have raped children and bishops have maneuvered to avoid accountability to civil authority has rippled across many countries. Public reaction has been strongest when, as is most notable in Ireland and Australia, wide-ranging public and judicial inquiries have illuminated the extent of clerical crimes and of efforts to suppress their discovery or accept accountability. Consequently, the scandal in the church, like incidents extending from Watergate to Enron, and from the subprime mortgage collapse to rapacious pricing by pharmaceutical companies, has furthered the undermining of public trust in institutions and their leaders, who have consistently denied the truth until denial became unsustainable. The lack of compassion that the church's authorities have shown towards survivors has bolstered the cynicism of those who doubt every social endeavor that professes to promote and serve the common good.

The fact that journalists, public inquiries, and criminal trials were the instruments for uncovering the breadth and depth of the scandal has even cast doubt on whether the church is trustworthy enough to participate in civil society without strict external oversight. In a related way, the episcopal cover-up has fueled a perception that the sexual abuse of children is a specifically Catholic and clerical problem, rather than a society-wide affliction that requires a society-wide response. Consequently, the wisdom about the worth of each human being, wisdom that the church's various social agencies, drawing on Catholic social teaching, might offer to the task of addressing the problem of abuse, is unlikely to find a hearing in an environment where the Catholic "brand" has become toxic.

The actions and inactions of bishops have thus damaged the potential for the official Catholic voice to contribute to public discourse. While it is impossible to know at present whether such damage will be short- or long-term, the voices of bishops, who have become over several decades increasingly marginal to debates on policies in pluralist democracies, will be less welcome in the public sphere.²⁵ Those bishops who remain willing to risk engagement with contentious social issues will

25. For a critique of the ways in which bishops have operated in pluralist societies, see Ian Linden, *Global Catholicism: Diversity and Change Since Vatican II* (New York: Columbia University, 2009), 262–64.

be easily dismissed as representative of a disgraced sectional interest. Esteem for the self-sacrifice of individual Catholics, and even for identifiably Catholic groups that practice the preferential option for those on the underside of economic inequality, is unlikely to extend to “the church,” especially when the application of that label is coterminous with “the ordained.”

It is difficult, then, to imagine an immediate future free of suspicion towards ecclesial authorities. As Pope Francis acknowledges, “no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient.”²⁶ If nothing that the bishops might do will quickly procure their rehabilitation in the public mind or rebuild trust within the Catholic community, they still bear an obligation to indicate their acceptance of responsibility for inadequate oversight of provisions to ensure the safety of those in their care, a failure that contradicts the very task that defines *episcopus*. Now, fulfillment of this obligation requires that the church’s office-holders be scrupulous in applying measures to guard against potential abusers.²⁷ It requires too that the bishops are consistent in providing access to trauma-informed therapy and just forms of compensation for survivors.

The breach in the church’s relationship with the broader society is of great moment for the church’s ongoing mission. Even more portentous for the future of that mission, as noted earlier in the article, is the degree to which the scandal has led members of the church to reject, or at least to doubt, a future in which they could continue to identify with the ecclesial community as it is presently ordered.

Even in the midst of the general disgust at clergy abuse and episcopal cover-up, the scandal has afflicted Catholics in a unique manner. This is so because it is the leaders of *their* church who have been agents of all the harm that the scandal catalogues. Not surprisingly, the most vehement condemnation of what has occurred, no less than the most profound sense of shock and betrayal, emanates from within the ecclesial community.²⁸ These responses need not imply that Catholics were previously innocent

26. Francis, “Letter of his Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God” (August 20, 2018), opening paragraph, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html.

27. The “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young Adults,” the original “Dallas Charter,” adopted by the bishops of the United States, has been updated continually since 2002. For the 2018 iteration, see <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/Charter-for-the-Protection-of-Children-and-Young-People-2018-final.pdf>.

28. For examples of Catholic perceptions of the church in the light of clerical sexual abuse, see Alan Cooperman and Jessica Hamar Martinez, “U.S. Catholics See Sex Abuse as the Church’s Most Important Problem, Charity as Its Most Important Contribution” (March 6, 2013), <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/06/us-catholics-see-sex-abuse-as-the-churchs-most-important-problem-charity-as-its-most-important-contribution/>; and Julie Zauzmer et al., “‘Wasted our lives’: Catholic sex abuse scandals again prompt a crisis of faith” (August 19, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/08/19/wasted-our-lives-catholic-sex-abuse-scandals-again-prompt-a-crisis-of-faith/?utm_term=.a9d8316e8ce0.

about the limitations of bishops and priests, that they viewed them as people of unimpeachable virtue and as sterling leaders, or that the Catholic community in all of its manifestations was dependent on the empowerment and guidance that only the ordained could furnish. It is likely, however, that even those Catholics most on guard against the merest hint of clerical privilege or paternalism have been shocked by the nature and scope of the contemporary scandal.

The clerical sexual abuse scandal constitutes for Catholics an experience of “dislocation,” a notion that Paul Crowley equates with homelessness and loss of certainty.²⁹ At the heart of this dislocation is anxiety that “the God who was once familiar, because God was ‘locatable’ in a religious geography and scientific cosmology is no longer easily found.”³⁰ The seemingly endless cycle of revelations, raids and subpoenas, inquiries and shocking findings about the rape of minors, reinforces the perception that God is no longer identifiable with all that once had laid claim to represent God within the church. Different viewpoints within the church may interpret the scandal in contrasting ways, but the anguish that it has generated encompasses all members of the church.

The alienation from the church that is part of the fallout from the abuse crisis converges with a broader trend of spiritual dislocation that, as religious sociologists and cultural commentators observe, has already affected the Catholic Church in the United States and other countries. This trend is evident in the proliferation of the “nones,” those who profess no religious affiliation, but who may describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” or as “believing, but not belonging.”³¹ The number of people, of all ages, who regard traditional religious forms, and even the very notion of “God,” as irrelevant to their lives is on a rising trajectory, one that includes those baptized as Catholics. Among the causes of this alienation is the conviction that traditional communities are either inimical to spiritual development or do not foster it adequately and sensitively. This perception, which may arise especially in relation to sexuality and gender, coalesces with the revival of a supposed clash between faith and science, and the appeal of religious pluralism over the narrowness and exclusivism apparent at times in any one tradition of faith.³²

One stark illustration of the fracturing of the once-stable religious landscape is the option for “disaffiliation” and “deconversion.” These designations convey not a casual

29. Paul Crowley, *The Unmoored God: Believing in a Time of Dislocation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 2–4.

30. Crowley, *The Unmoored God*, 21.

31. For an overview of the “nones,” including the perspectives of those baptized as Catholics, see Kaya Oakes, *The Nones Are Alright: A New Generation of Believers, Seekers, and Those in between* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015).

32. J. Patrick Hornbeck, “Deconversion: What, Who, Why, How?” in Tom Beaudoin, Patrick Hornbeck, and William Portier, “Deconversion and Disaffiliation in Contemporary US Roman Catholicism,” *Horizons* 40 (2013): 255–92 at 267, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2013.76>; see also Tom Beaudoin and J. Patrick Hornbeck, “Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study,” in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis, eds. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 33–44.

drifting away from religious practice, but the deliberate choice to sever connection to a community of faith, sometimes for spiritual practices without community or for community without a spiritual grounding.³³ Catholics among the disaffiliated and deconverted are likely to be, argues Tom Beaudoin, “those with a Catholic heritage, however nominal, who cannot find Catholicism central to the everyday project of their lives and are in varying degrees of distance from what they take to be normative or prescribed Catholicism.”³⁴ When the official representatives of “normative or prescribed Catholicism” are guilty of crimes against children and of demonstrated dishonesty, the allure of a connection to the church diminishes accordingly.

The sociological significance of trends in religious belonging is easy to appreciate, but the anger, estrangement, and grief of Catholics stemming from the abuse scandal must also evoke explicit ecclesiological reflection. This theological reflection, which will illuminate the church’s need and capacity for reform, can begin with the truth that admits of no legitimate dilution: the parlous state of the Catholic Church has not arisen because “an enemy has done this” (Matt 13:28). The crisis that clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up have spawned does not result from the machinations of external actors who have waged a campaign against the church. The unvarnished truth is that the wounds of the church in relation to sexual abuse are the direct and explicit effect of destructive forms of behavior by those who are the consecrated representatives of the church. The incomprehensible tragedy of this crisis is that the church’s ordained ministers and leaders imitated the shepherds who failed to “care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy” (Zech 11:16). Compounding the shame of Catholics is the fact that the revelation of abuses required the efforts of survivors, journalists, and public authorities, while the church’s leaders often obstructed the path to truth. It is scarcely puzzling, then, when Catholics decide that they can neither maintain hope in their church nor justify for themselves a continued connection to it.

A different but no less influential obstacle to the appropriation of hope in the church’s capacity for transformation is that the church’s self-understanding expressed in doctrinal teaching can transmit contradictory messages about the likelihood of reform. Since the church that is the seat of the abuse crisis is also “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race,” the prospects for broad and deep change can evaporate quickly.³⁵ More specifically, how can bishops and priests be part of transformation for the better when, despite being those who were to “exercise a powerful influence for good ... by abstaining from all wrongdoing,”³⁶ and to cultivate “those qualities which are rightly held in high esteem in human relations,” respectively, they

33. For an analysis of “disaffiliation” see Robert McArdy and John Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: St Mary’s, 2017).

34. Tom Beaudoin, “Secular Catholicism and Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 15 (2011): 22–37 at 24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2011.024>.

35. *LG* 1.

36. *LG* 26.

have perpetrated actions that have so severely damaged children and vulnerable adults?³⁷

As a result of both the disillusionment that the abuse scandal has generated and the breadth and depth of the impediments that reform faces, the future of the church appears to be unrelievedly bleak. The church's future seems likely to be an inexorable, and probably ever-accelerating, decline towards becoming "a sort of atavistic remnant from the past."³⁸ This fate, which Karl Rahner envisaged as awaiting the Catholic Church in Europe in the 1950s if its leaders continued to retreat from history, would hardly represent the richest fulfillment of Jesus's promise to protect the church against "the gates of Hades" (Matt 16:18), as Rahner observed wryly.³⁹ The historical circumstances that gave rise to Rahner's prognostication no longer apply, but the description remains apt for what may lie ahead of the church whose ordained leaders have so undermined the mission of the church. In these circumstances, what basis is there for a constructive reappropriation of ecclesial faith?

Ecclesiology for a Graced and Human Church

The effort to present ecclesial faith favorably must not obscure the fact that faith in the church is distinguishable from faith in God. This distinction recognizes that faith draws its sustenance not primarily through the church, but from the God of Jesus Christ mediated through the Holy Spirit. God transcends the church. Likewise, it is the constancy of God's grace, rather than the actions of authorities in the church, or even of the Christian community as a whole, that is the substratum of the faith that the members of the church share. Thus, beyond the many historical and cultural reasons for the attractiveness of "Jesus: Yes; the Church: No," theological interpretation of the processes of God's self-revelation seems to lend weight to that stance.

On the other hand, God's relationship to the church is such that a neat delineation between the two, and certainly any sharp separation between them, can fail to present fully the dynamics of God's self-communication in grace. More precisely, a cleavage between God and the church can obscure the ways in which the experience of grace is an irreducibly human experience. For this reason, theological reflection that seeks to offer hope in the present crisis must do more than simply relativize the importance of the church.

The principal datum of the Christian understanding of God that illustrates the connection between God and the church as more than casual or accidental is what Rahner names "the incarnational tendency" proper to God's self-communication.⁴⁰ This tendency is clear when God forms a world of creatures, invites humanity into

37. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (December 7, 1965), 3, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html.

38. Karl Rahner, *Free Speech in the Church*, trans. G. R. Lamb (London: Sheed & Ward, 1959), 47.

39. Rahner, *Free Speech in the Church*, 47.

40. Karl Rahner, "Personal and Sacramental Piety," in *Theological Investigations 2* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 109–33 at 119–20.

relationship, initiates covenants with Israel, and attends to the maintenance of those covenants through laws and prophets, as well as through various rituals and forms of worship. The tendency is paradigmatically apparent when God enters into human history in Jesus—“as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). The fact that God’s revelation is to human beings implicates the communal dimension of being human, the dimension that is constitutive of ecclesial faith. As Pope Francis stresses, “faith is not simply an individual decision which takes place in the depths of the believer’s heart, nor a completely private relationship between the ‘I’ of the believer and the divine ‘Thou,’ between an autonomous subject and God. By its very nature, faith is open to the ‘We’ of the Church; it always takes place within her communion.”⁴¹

The Christian community and its authorities do not govern the movement of the Holy Spirit so as to initiate anyone’s encounter with the risen Jesus. Nonetheless, insight into that experience, including the recognition that it is indeed Jesus whom one has encountered, can never be a private intuition or the application of individual genius: “I heard of [Jesus] only through the Church, and not otherwise. Hence I cannot be content with a purely private Christianity that would repudiate its origins. Attachment to the Church is the price I pay for this historical origin.”⁴² Since the church’s “historical origin” is inseparable from God’s ongoing self-communication in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the role of the church in the process of encountering God in history extends beyond the church’s beginnings. The church’s relationship to God is theological, not simply historical, so “the things that maintain the Church today in its being the Church of God are precisely the same christological and pneumatological realities which gave it origin.”⁴³ Consequently, an irreducible aspect of the process by which the Holy Spirit accomplishes the mission to “guide you into all truth” (John 16:13) is the formation of a community of disciples, who are identifiable as “the body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27), the church.

The relationship to the Spirit establishes the sacramental identity of the church, the theme that pervades the opening chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s constitution on the church.⁴⁴ As Susan Wood expresses it, the church’s sacramentality is the product of “an intrinsic relationship between the historical Christ, the sacramental Christ of the Eucharist, and the ecclesial Christ. Church, sacrament, and historical person are different modes of existence of the same person seen through a theology of a real symbol or an efficacious sacramentality.”⁴⁵ While God could certainly have acted

41. Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, “The Light of Faith” (June 29, 2013), 39, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html

42. Karl Rahner, “Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity,” *Theological Investigations* 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 3–12 at 9.

43. Pedro Rodriguez, “Theological Method for Ecclesiology,” in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2000), 129–56 at 139.

44. *LG* 1: in expounding “the Mystery of the Church” in its first chapter, *LG*’s opening article describes the church as being “like a sacrament.”

45. Susan Wood, “Continuity and Development in Roman Catholic Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 7 (2011): 147–72 at 153, <https://doi.org/10.1163/174553111x559517>.

otherwise, while God may not “need” the church, the specifics of God’s self-revelation in human history and the constitution of the human receivers of divine self-communication indicate that the church is more than—and other than—an option that God could now easily discard as an experiment gone unfortunately awry.⁴⁶

Its theological fruitfulness notwithstanding, an account of the church that focuses on its sacramentality may sound like the prelude to asserting either the church’s perfection or its unchanging nature, while also drafting God to be the guarantor of those features. Even worse, the sacramental approach may seem to oblige the members of the church to enshrine the clerical caste on a pedestal because of its intimate connection to the sacramental worship of the community.

The Australian Royal Commission expressed succinctly the deleterious effects endemic to such portrayals of the church and the priesthood: an “idealisation of the priesthood, and by extension, the idealisation of the Catholic Church” fostered the long-prevailing culture of “deferential obedience” that allowed “poor responses” to sexual abuse to go unchallenged.⁴⁷ The ecclesiocentrism that is the corollary of such idealization tends towards a preoccupation with the church’s internal order, as well as breeding clericalism, and a general suspicion towards “the world” that eludes the church’s control. Taken together, these features are inimical to understanding the church’s mission as anything other than increasing its membership. Even more, as Pope Francis makes plain, forms of ecclesiocentrism in which officeholders in the church “speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God’s word,” prepare the ground for estrangement from the Catholic community.⁴⁸

Here, the two-sided dilemma that ecclesiology must address comes into focus: Is it possible to affirm that the church is more than an “optional extra” for God’s engagement with humanity without presenting the church as a timeless reality that is simultaneously abstracted from the vicissitudes of history and immune to the effects of the sinfulness of those who constitute the ecclesial community? Conversely, is it possible to develop an approach to the church that underscores the church’s ongoing need for reform without thereby suggesting that the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit in the church is contingent on exemplary human behavior from the community’s members, and especially from its ordained ministers?

In these questions is an echo of the challenge that Augustine faced in responding to the Donatists. Augustine argued, against the Donatists, that the grace of the sacraments was utterly and exclusively the grace of Christ: “when the baptizer is faithless without its being known, then the baptized person receives faith from Christ, then he derives his origin from Christ, then he is rooted in Christ, then he boasts in Christ as his

46. See the discussion throughout Gerhard Lohfink’s *Does God Need the Church?* trans. L. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999).

47. *Report of the Royal Commission* (vol. 16, book 1, recommendation 16.70), 43–44.

48. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 38, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

head.”⁴⁹ Equally, while insisting that unity with the church was a sure sign of unity with Christ, Augustine stressed that authentic unity with Christ required one’s membership of the church to be more than a matter of external conformity that did not touch one’s behavior:

And though they come to the churches, they cannot be numbered among the children of God; not to them belongs that Fountain of life. To have baptism is possible even for a bad man; to have prophecy is possible even for a bad man . . . To receive the sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord is possible even for a bad man: for of such it is said, He that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself (1 Cor 11:29). To have the name of Christ is possible even for a bad man; i.e. even a bad man can be called a Christian . . . But to have charity, and to be a bad man, is not possible.⁵⁰

Applying Augustine’s approach, *mutatis mutandis*, to consideration of the church’s sacramentality indicates both that this sacramentality is entirely the product of God’s grace and that the church’s “charity” can be authentic only when it flows from an ongoing conversion to the Holy Spirit. To view the church through the lens of sacramentality affirms the church as the product of God’s perduring grace, while simultaneously affirming the need for the church, understood as the whole community of the baptized, to align itself, in all of its activities and structures, on grace. For this reason, Vatican II’s declaration that the church is “at the same time holy and always in need of being purified” is distorted if the two halves of the description are separated.⁵¹ Similarly, each element of the creedal formula that identifies the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” testifies fundamentally to the presence of grace at work in the Christian community. In doing so, the formula establishes a never-ending project for the church: become what God enables. The abuse scandal has amplified the urgency of this project.

No ecclesiology will prevent the mystery of evil from having an impact even within the Christian community. What the abuse scandal has made unequivocally clear, however, is that when ecclesiology maintains a one-dimensional stress on grace at work in the church, the eclipse of transparency and the denial of accountability in the church are likely to follow. Similarly, concentration on the uniqueness of grace at work through the church’s ordained ministry separates the members of that group from the rest of the baptized. By doing so, it facilitates a failure to privilege the uniqueness of every person, who likewise exists because of grace.

Contemporary ecclesiology, both Protestant and Catholic, has reacted against “timeless” and “context-free” presentations of the church that imply the existence of a

49. Augustine, *Answer to Petilian the Donatist*, bk. 1, ch. 6, art. 7, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/14091.htm>.

50. Augustine, *Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John* (6), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170207.htm>. I am grateful to my colleague Brian Dunkle, SJ, for the references to Augustine.

51. LG 8. For a recent, detailed discussion of the tension inseparable from affirming both the church’s holiness and its sinfulness, see Brian Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2018).

“blueprint” for the church that Jesus drafted, the irrelevance of history to the church, or the seamless triumph of grace in the Christian community.⁵² Without prejudicing the connection between the mystery of God and the church, the current trend in ecclesiology highlights the fact that “the embodiments of Christ’s presence take different socio-cultural forms and communal practices, and do not exist merely in abstract space.”⁵³ This perspective reclaims the indissoluble link between the church and history, the link that God’s incarnational tendency, profiled above, makes indispensable to the life of faith.

The inflections of today’s ecclesiology resonate with Augustine’s recognition that an anti-Donatist focus on the gratuity of grace at work through the church does not buffer the church, in any of its expressions, against the possibility that the members of the church will fail in the practice of charity. Grace, then, does not ensure that the Christian community will be impervious to the values and attitudes of “this present age,” even as the community seeks to witness to the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴ As John O’Brien frames it, the fact that all “ecclesial narratives” are products of “their rootedness in or association with structures of oppression, exclusion and alienation, inculcated to a greater or lesser degree, results in many narratives also containing a form of systematically distorted communication.”⁵⁵ This limitation is unavoidable, as the church, and so too discourse about the church, is an inescapably human activity. This fact highlights the importance of remembering that “what Church is, unfolds in and through the drama of salvation mediated in lives of engaged individuals and communities.”⁵⁶ Grace certainly prompts faithfulness to the mission at the heart of the church’s self-understanding, but this faithfulness is inseparable from the need for the conversion of all the church’s members.

52. For the idea of a “blueprint” see Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), 38. See also Nicholas Healy, “Ordinary Theology, Theological Method and Constructive Ecclesiology,” in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis, eds. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 13–21; and Nicholas Healy, “Ecclesiology, Ethnography, and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 182–99.

53. Pascal Bazzell, “Towards an Empirical-ideal Ecclesiology: On the Dynamic Relation between Ecclesiality and Locality,” *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015): 219–35 at 224, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-01102006>; see also Michael Hjälms, “Systematic Ecclesiology as Primary Ecclesiology,” in *Ecclesiology in the Trenches: Theory and Method Under Construction*, Sune Fahlgren and Jonas Idestrom, eds. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 49–62; and Nicholas M. Healy, “Ecclesiology and Practical Theology,” in *Keeping Faith in Practice: Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology*, James Sweeney, Gemma Simmonds, and David Lonsdale, eds. (London: SCM, 2010), 117–30.

54. *LG* 48.

55. John O’Brien, “Ecclesiology as Narrative,” *Ecclesiology* 4 (2008): 148–65 at 162, <https://doi.org/10.1163/174413608x308591>.

56. O’Brien, “Ecclesiology as Narrative,” 151.

Since it is impossible to “failure-proof” the church, ecclesiology must not cease to endorse the need for what Rahner names “a critique from within,” one that acknowledges the church’s imperfections and vulnerability to what is not the Gospel.⁵⁷ While this self-critical attitude, the sensitivity to “the wooden beam” in one’s own eye (Luke 6:39), could appear to be simply assent to the truths of experience, it has a theological rationale. As Rahner presents it, self-criticism in the ecclesial community can arise from the realization that the church’s self-understanding “is always wider, freer, and more exalted than that which is de facto realized in the form which she assumes in history, and is in fact wider in scope than that which we have formulated to ourselves about her at the level of speculation and theory.”⁵⁸ The Spirit at work in all the baptized can ignite this self-criticism, directing it towards the constant conversion needed at every level of the church’s life.

While critiques of the church from within can fall prey to the virulence emblematic of “Twitter wars” and other less than edifying aspects of the digital age, they can derive from a commitment to the thriving of the church. As Yves Congar noted decades ago, the harshness of Catholic self-criticism can be the product of “a deep attachment and [a] desire to be able to trust, despite the disappointment of someone who loves and who expects a great deal from the church.”⁵⁹ In the same vein, Walter Kasper argues that “true love” for the church “is no dreaming enthusiasm; yet it is also not self-righteous or hard-hearted. It is realistic through and through and must stand the test in realism, faithful perseverance and constantly new forgiving.”⁶⁰ In other words, the demand for change in the church may represent the reception of grace, not an endeavor to expunge grace from the life of the Christian community or to deny any connection between the two. The distinction is an important one, especially since the church’s official teaching has often privileged the triumph of grace in the Christian community, while not making equally explicit the link between grace and the need for conversion.

Present-day scholarship promotes a way of proceeding that takes account of the gap between what Clare Watkins names the “espoused” and “operant” voices present in all talk about the church.⁶¹ Empirical studies of local communities, studies that feature increasingly in contemporary ecclesiology, showcase the difference between what members of the church, at every level, claim they are embodying—espoused—and what their actions show them to be embodying—operant. The goal of these studies is “a more accurate picture of the actual lived reality of the concrete church in relation to

57. Karl Rahner, “The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society,” in *Theological Investigations* 12 (New York: Seabury, 1974), 229–49 at 232.

58. Rahner, “The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society,” 233.

59. Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. P. Philibert (rev. 1968 ed.) (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2011), 36.

60. Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, trans. T. Hoebel (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 134.

61. Clare Watkins, “Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying the Church?” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 167–81 at 178–79.

which the explicit theological beliefs apply.”⁶² In providing this picture, empirical studies play a role in the articulation of what Watkins terms an “authentic” ecclesiology: “one that is able to speak truthfully about concrete realities and faithfully about the historical and present promise of the work of the Spirit, enlivening what we understand to be ‘the body of Christ,’ the church.”⁶³ By illuminating the gap between what is professed and what is actually practiced, ecclesiology promotes greater humility, transparency, and unity in the church; all of these qualities are ingredients for an atmosphere congenial to the transformation of the church.

The People of the Church and the Transformation of the Church

The third task identified earlier in this article as required of an ecclesiology supporting transformation in the church is that it must situate all proposals for change in relation to the whole body of baptized believers, rather than simply one or more subgroups. This means that the example of Abraham Lincoln’s commitment to change, his courage, and his willingness to privilege the well-being of others over his comfort, can be affirmed as instructive for the church without implying that liberating transformation in the ecclesial community will come through a single, great leader, whether it be a woman or man, an ordained person or someone holding no institutionalized office. The Catholic Church does need practices of leadership that are more creative and encouraging, but since the church is a “body,” no individual part of it can accomplish what requires the dedication of the whole.

Although opportunities for all parts of the body to serve its well-being and mission have not always loomed large in the history of the Catholic Church, Kasper categorizes the church as a “dialogistic sacrament,” a description that gives a mandate for something other than unilateralism, no matter what its source.⁶⁴ The realization of Kasper’s description requires the practice of what Watkins terms a “pedagogy of conversation,” rather than “the monologues of the academy, or of the magisterium, or of practice itself.”⁶⁵ Expressing the rationale for a “multivoiced” church is a specific way in which ecclesiology can support the transformation of the Catholic Church.

Conversation, no less than formal dialogue, requires a willingness both to listen and to speak. It is because dialogue is a communal project, not an activity for monads, that its participants must perform both functions: “attentive listening to the presence and voice of the other, receptivity to this presence and voice, and a response.”⁶⁶ Since the

62. Paul Murray, “Searching the Living Truth of the Church in Practice: On the Transformative Task of Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Modern Theology* 30 (2014): 252–81 at 269, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12081>; see also, Christian Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

63. Watkins, “Practical Ecclesiology,” 168.

64. Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church*, trans. M. Kohl (London: SCM, 1989), 140.

65. Watkins, “Practical Ecclesiology,” 180.

66. Bradford Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience: Ecclesiology for a Dialogical Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 92.

parties to a dialogue are not restricted to one or other of the two tasks, the outcomes of dialogue are unpredictable. Genuine dialogue, therefore, entails the possibility that “each person can be taken over by the subject matter transfixed in the movement of the dialogue. In the process deeper dimensions of the topic can be revealed and new courses of action and mission opened, and the very transfiguration of self, community, and God can occur.”⁶⁷

Nor is dialogue simply a useful activity for building cohesion in a community. A church defined by dialogue, both within and without, would be one that depends on the Spirit-formed wisdom of every member. Pope Francis’s oft-expressed desire for the expansion of synodal practices in the Catholic Church makes clear that the development of this feature requires “a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (John 14:17), in order to know what [the Spirit] ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”⁶⁸ The focus on synodality echoes the renewed interest in the *sensus fidei* of all the baptized, and in the necessity for the *sensus fidelium* of the whole church to be understood as radically other than the passive obedience of one section of the church’s membership to another.⁶⁹ These emphases witness to the conviction that “the church listens to the Spirit when all listen to one another.”⁷⁰

The likelihood that there might be effective horizontal dialogue in the church increases if there is a significant practice of a prior form of dialogue: that between God and the members of the church, individually and communally. For this reason, Paul Murray contends that reflection on the church, like all theology, must begin with listening to God; this disposition means that “good theology has something of the character associated with prayer about it.”⁷¹ The humility that prayer requires can help to establish a space for dialogue, especially for dialogue with the survivors of clerical sexual abuse whose stories about the church properly challenge any inclination for its members to downplay the gap between espoused and operant ecclesiologies. The rejection that survivors of abuse have often endured from officials in the church underscores the lessons of the Eucharist, in which the church “acknowledges its incompleteness, fracture and hope for a new time. It can do this precisely because the Eucharist

67. Bradford Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 54.

68. Francis, “Address of his Holiness Pope Francis” (October 17, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

69. See, for example, Bradford Hinze and Peter Phan, eds., *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016); and the International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

70. Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 299–325 at 321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917698561>.

71. Murray, “Searching the Living Truth of the Church,” 260–61.

bears witness to and embodies the true and abiding life of the ecclesia, which is Christ the Lord in the midst.” These are lessons to be continually appropriated.⁷²

In line with what the Eucharist confirms as the church’s sole treasure, a transformed church will be one that accepts that “racial/ethnic, gender, economic, and/or sexual bias in proclamation, polity, and other ecclesial practices typically invisibilize the crucified among us. They demonize the poor, and flatly reject confrontation with oppressive powers in ways that align the church with the arbiters of the status quo, all the while dangerously attributing such oppressive norms to the realm of God.”⁷³ The dialogue with God and the dialogue between members that affirms the truth of such insights serve to facilitate the emergence of a church that not only professes God’s liberating vision for all people, but “embodies mutuality and justice.”⁷⁴

As pilgrims, the members of the Christian community must continue to deepen their commitment to discernment in order to evaluate whether any specific proposal for change or reform in the church accords with the call of the Spirit. As Pope Francis describes it, discernment “is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God” for the sake of faithfulness to the mission of the church in the world.⁷⁵ Understood in this way, discernment is both demanding and significantly different from maneuvering to ensure one’s preferred result. Taxing it may be, but discernment is indispensable if “the newness of the Gospel [is to] emerge in another light.”⁷⁶

The damage inflicted on survivors by clerical sexual abuse and its related cover-up contradicts, as catastrophically as is imaginable, the hope and joy of the Spirit that the church is to represent. As members of the Catholic Church share the anguish over that damage, they also share the conviction that there must be change in their church. In support of the possibilities for change, ecclesiology affirms the church’s existence as a pilgrim in need of conversion, affirms the church’s God-given freedom to change, and affirms that the grace of God’s creative Spirit is at work in all of the baptized so that change can be the work of the whole people of God.

In these affirmations, and in clarifying the mission of the church in the world, ecclesiology seeks a more authentic ecclesial community, one willing not only to “rethink our usual way of doing things,” but to be “unsettled by the living and effective

72. Stephen Pickard, *Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2012), 228–29.

73. Eboni Marshall Turman, “The Holy Spirit and the Black Church Tradition: Womanist Considerations,” in *The Holy Spirit and the Church: Ecumenical Reflections with a Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Thomas Hughson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 99–112 at 100.


74. Elaine Graham, “Feminist Critiques, Visions, and Models of the Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University, 2018), 527–51 at 534.

75. Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (March 19, 2018), 175, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html (hereafter cited as *GE*).

76. *GE* 173.

word of the risen Lord.”⁷⁷ No less than the Gospel itself, ecclesiology is exhortatory: it invites rather than coerces. As such, it is, as Gerard Mannion argues, “aspirational”: “bound-up with trying to build that ideal community of justice and righteousness which Christians refer to as the Kingdom of God.”⁷⁸ Through the hope it thus promotes, and through its invitation to the ecclesial community to recognize anew the freedom that the Spirit offers, ecclesiology can be an instrument for the transformation of even a scandal-riddled church.⁷⁹

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77. *GE* 137.

78. Gerard Mannion, “Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: A New Paradigm for the Roman Catholic Church?” *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00033.x>.

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