

MARCUS MESCHER*

CONFRONTING ECCLESIAL SIN AND GALVANIZING A SHARED PROJECT FOR MORAL REPAIR

Fecha de recepción: 17 de octubre de 2024

Fecha de aceptación: 20 de diciembre de 2024

ABSTRACT: The Church presents itself as the visible presence of God in the world, a holy institution, and a place of sanctification. The Church is also a locus of sin, both through individual acts and through structures that resist transparency, accountability, and equitable power-sharing in the Church. If we are to respond to the new challenges of our time, then we need theological ethics to confront the moral harm caused by these sinful actions and structures as well as map out pathways toward moral repair. This essay proposes a category of «ecclesial sin» to identify the dimensions of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional damage caused by a betrayal of sacred trust and sacred power vested in Church leaders as ordained *in persona Christi*. It then explores how to deliver moral repair through seven commitments: reckoning, repentance, repairing relationships, restorative justice, reparations, reclaiming prophetic voice, and reforming structures.

KEY WORDS: moral authority; moral injury; moral repair; clergy sexual abuse; sin.

* XIM University: mescherm@xavier.edu; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1655-4091>

Enfrentar el pecado eclesial y galvanizar un proyecto compartido de reparación moral

RESUMEN: La Iglesia se presenta como la presencia visible de Dios, una institución santa y un lugar de santificación. La Iglesia también es lugar de pecado, tanto a través de actos individuales como estructuras que se resisten a la transparencia y distribución equitativa del poder en la Iglesia. Para responder a los nuevos desafíos de nuestro tiempo, necesitamos una ética teológica para enfrentar el daño moral causado por estas acciones y estructuras pecaminosas, así como trazar caminos hacia la reparación moral. Este ensayo propone la categoría de «pecado eclesial» para identificar las dimensiones del daño intrapersonal, interpersonal e institucional causado por una traición a la confianza sagrada y al poder sagrado conferido a los líderes eclesiales que fueron ordenados *in persona Christi*. Luego explora cómo brindar reparación moral a través de siete compromisos: reconocimiento, arrepentimiento, reparación de relaciones, justicia restaurativa, reparaciones, recuperación de voz profética y reforma de estructuras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: autoridad moral; daño moral; reparación moral; abusos sexuales clericales; pecado.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the church presents itself as «indefectibly holy», brought «to perfection» through union with Christ and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, even maintaining a «virginal purity» in imitation of Mary¹. This vision of the church makes it difficult if not impossible to conceive of the church as fully human, that is to say, a church that is also a place of suffering and sinfulness, a church in need of purification and reform. Today there can be no discussion of ecclesiology without referencing Pope Francis' call for a synod on synodality, which has sparked global conversations orbiting around ecclesial reform and renewal. Many theologians have reflected on related practices of listening, discernment, cooperative decision-making, and remodeling structures. However, there has been much less attention directed toward how these and other practices relate to individual or collective moral formation. As the church redoubles its commitment to mission, participation, and communion it must also fully acknowledge its failures to be a faithful witness to the Gospel, especially through wounds caused

¹ *Lumen gentium*, nn. 39, 64.

by its members. To respond to the challenges of our time, those of us working in the field of theological ethics should embrace synodality as a pathway to better understand these wounds in their fullness and map out what is necessary to advance moral repair. To this end, this essay moves forward in three steps: first, to examine how synodality can help the church move from listening to conscientization; second, to recognize the reality of «ecclesial sin» as a betrayal by some members of the Body of Christ of other members; and third, how synodality can provide a pathway toward moral repair by adopting seven commitments: reckoning, repentance, repairing relationships, restorative justice, reparations, reclaiming prophetic voice, and reforming structures.

2. TO SYNODALIZE AND CONSCIENTIZE THE CHURCH

The synod on synodality has generated considerable discussion on what it means to journey together in a new way of proceeding as church. Understandably, the initial focus was on foundational practices —like listening, discernment, participation, etc.— for how synodality could shape the church for its third millennium². Since then, attention has shifted from individual outlooks or actions to the creation of synodal structures³. Theologians continue to explore the possibilities and limits for ecclesial reform as part of the ongoing reception of Vatican II. For example, *Unitatis redintegratio* (“The Decree on Ecumenism”) claims, «Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth» (§6). In the spirit of a church always in the process of being reformed, synodality aligns with the description of church as the pilgrim «People of God»⁴, which Venezuelan theologian Rafael Luciani cites to propose how it might be possible to «*synodalize* the whole Church and

² Francis. “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops”. (October 17, 2015). https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

³ International Theological Commission. “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” (March 2, 2018), nn. 71-93; https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html.

⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, n. 45.

create new structures for this process»⁵. To accomplish this task, Italian theologian Serena Noceti asserts that synodality presents a challenge to not only identify proper processes for inclusive participation and co-responsibility between laity and clergy, but a shared project of reform to «distinguish between the different powers» between laity and clergy and «create synodal structures and discernment practices that make clear the specific roles» for the respective persons and groups⁶. These synodal structures and discernment practices will help the whole church read the «signs of the times» (Matthew 16:3) together.

Reading the «signs of the times» requires a capacity for accurate perception. No one is free from bias or blind spots, a reminder that each person is called to ongoing conversion as part of the practices of «listening, discerning, and joint decision-making to accurately express the *sensus ecclesiae totius populi*»⁷. What we see depends on where we stand and with whom. When only clergy take part in discernment or decision-making, their presuppositions and conclusions can be influenced by clerical privilege and power. For this reason, the synodal process has to include a dismantling of clericalism and the creation of «a new ecclesial culture characterized by dialogue, mutual listening, consulting, consensus building, and accountability at all levels» of the church⁸. If clericalism can be considered an «anti-synodal logic», then it is necessary to identify the beliefs and practices that confer superiority to some members of the church and inferiority to others⁹. Obstacles to synodality are not simply a matter of ecclesiology, but also raise important moral questions about how power is exercised, who benefits, and who suffers as a result.

For this reason, synodality requires more than a conversion from the beliefs and practices that impair the church's fidelity to its mission and communion. There is also a moral dimension to the conversion from sin that implicates the whole Body of Christ. The Latin American Bishops Conference articulated this insight during their 1992 meeting in Santo

⁵ Rafael Luciani. *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*. Mahwah (NJ): Paulist Press, 2022, 140.

⁶ Serena Noceti. *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding*. Mahwah (NJ): Paulist Press, 2023, 66.

⁷ Luciani. *Synodality*, 140.

⁸ Luciani. *Synodality*, 142-143.

⁹ Noceti. *Reforming the Church*, 79.

Domingo when they highlighted the need for a «pastoral conversion» that comprised four areas: conscience; personal and communal practice; relationships of equality and authority; ecclesial structures and dynamics¹⁰. However, it has been rare for church leaders to connect ecclesial renewal to the moral conscience. For example, by the time the Latin American bishops met again in Aparecida in 2007, they reigned in their focus to «ecclesial renewal that entails spiritual, pastoral, and institutional reforms», dropping their focus on the conversion of conscience or the moral reforms necessary to maintain the church’s missionary credibility¹¹. Catechesis and discipleship will remain incomplete unless and until they embrace the process of conscientization.

Etymologically, conscience means «to know together», a reminder that growth in moral wisdom depends on prayer and dialogue in order to learn from and with one another. This also means that individual moral consciences are impacted by surrounding contexts, both social and ecclesial. Where the church needs reform—whether to be freed from clericalism or moral failures like hypocrisy, corruption, and abuse of power—this entails moral conversion. If synodality entails a «conversion of mentalities», then it must include a more robust consideration of the moral dimensions of existing beliefs, values, and methods of reasoning¹². While church leaders and theologians writing about synodality have dedicated substantial consideration to the discernment of spirits, exercise of power, and co-responsibility for the church’s mission, these proposals have largely ignored consideration of ecclesial ethics, conscience-formation, or the moral repair necessary to make amends for abuse of power in the church¹³. For this reason, those working in the field of theological

¹⁰ Latin American Episcopal Conference. “Documento de Santo Domingo”, n. 30: https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Santo_Domingo.pdf. Translation of this and other texts in Spanish are mine.

¹¹ Latin American Episcopal Conference. “Documento de Aparecida”, n. 367: <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Espanol.pdf>.

¹² Cf. Rafael Luciani, y Carlos Schickendantz, eds. *Reforma de estructuras y conversión de mentalidades: Retos y desafíos para una Iglesia Sinodal*. Madrid: Khaf, 2020.

¹³ As one example, these topics are absent in a recent issue of *Teología* focusing on synodality. See: *Teología: Revista de la Facultad de Teología de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina* LXI, no. 143 (Abril 2024): <https://revistas.uca.edu.ar/index.php/TEO/issue/view/517>. Or, where synodality is considered through the lens of ecclesial ethics, the focus is more on organizational ethics than moral formation and the role of conscience, as is the case in Ethna Regan. “Toward Ecclesial

ethics should engage synodality as a moment of conscientization: moving from critical awareness toward transformative action in the pursuit of what is right, true, good, and just¹⁴.

As a human institution, the church inevitably falls short of its aspirations to extend God's welcome to all, to «enlarge the space of your tent» (Isaiah 54:2) by expanding «space for communion, a place of participation, and a foundation for mission»¹⁵. At various points in the synodal process, participants have acknowledged the abuse by clergy and other church leaders as an «open wound that continues to inflict pain on victims and survivors, on their families, and on their communities»¹⁶. It is an important first step to acknowledge the wounds caused by abuse, but this falls short of conscientization, which also requires taking responsibility for the full extent of the damage caused by the patterns of concealment that routinely shielded perpetrators, silenced victims, and distorted the scale of the problem. If, as Congar insisted, «the first service that the Church gives to the world is to tell the truth», then still more work must be done to rid the church of what gets in the way of knowing and telling the truth¹⁷. Conscientization implies full recognition

Ethics: A Reforming God, a Just Church, and Reformed Subjectivity". In *Reforming the Church: Global Perspectives*, edited by Declan Marmion and Salvador Ryan, 167-179. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2023. One exception might be the discussion of reforming «consciencia colectiva» in Carlos Schickendantz. "Estándares contemporáneos de buena gobernanza. Hacia una sinodalidad estructural". In *La sinodalidad en la vida de la Iglesia: Reflexiones para contribuir a la reforma eclesial*, edited by Rafael Luciani, and María del Pilar Silveira, 67-92, at 86. Madrid: San Pablo, 2020.

¹⁴ For the purposes of this essay, by conscientization I mean consciousness of wounds caused by the church and what is needed for moral repair. I also acknowledge that «conscientization» is the English translation of Paulo Freire's term, *conscientização*, meaning «the process by which human beings participate critically in a transforming act». See: Paulo Freire. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, trans. Donald Macedo. Westport (CT): Bergin and Garvey, 1985, 106.

¹⁵ General Secretariat of the Synod. "Working Document for the Continental Stage". (2022), n. 11; <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continental-EN.pdf>.

¹⁶ Cf. "Working Document for the Continental Stage", n. 20.

¹⁷ Yves Congar. "Propositions en vue de la révision demandée du schéma XVII [*Gaudium et spes*]", September 1963, 2 (YC 1564 pro 1716, Yves Congar papers, Saulchoir library, Paris). Quoted by Agnès Desmazières. "A Conversion to Dialogue: The Church's Dialogical Reform in the Light of *Gaudium et Spes*". In *Reforming the*

of historical failures, reforming «sinful structures»¹⁸, and eliminating «clerical domination»¹⁹ that has made lay people susceptible to deception, manipulation, and abuse. Psychologists examine the fallout from «institutional suffering», both in terms of individual beliefs and values as well as the damage to social bonds²⁰. However, institutional suffering takes on a spiritual and religious dimension when abuse of sacred trust and power occur in an ecclesial context. These betrayals also damage the moral authority of the church, leading to extensive moral confusion. Insofar as these wounds are caused by representatives of the church—especially in light of the fact that priests are ordained *in persona Christi*—these betrayals implicate the Divine, what is sacred and safe. Instead of being a font of grace, or leading people into a deeper relationship with Holy Mystery, the church has been complicit in patterns of behavior that «wage war against the soul» (1Peter 2:11). When the church refuses to acknowledge the extent of the harm it has caused, then it is more like a «whitewashed tomb» (Matthew 23:27) than a living witness to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The church fails to witness the whole truth about its influence on the human condition when it presents itself as the «spotless spouse of the spotless Lamb», a «sign and safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person», or an «expert on humanity»²¹. One may be tempted to think that confessing the church's historical failures (like the Crusades, legacy of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, the ravages unleashed upon Indigenous persons through colonialism and imperialism, in addition to the ways church leaders ignored, defended, and benefitted from the atrocities of slavery) will jeopardize its moral authority. However, the church has yet to make amends for its role in moral malformation, since to rob people of the truth «only leads to the deadening of conscience»²².

Church: Global Perspectives, edited by Declan Marmion and Salvador Ryan, 153-166, p. 159. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2023.

¹⁸ Yves Congar. *True and False Reform in the Church*. Translated by Paul Philibert. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2010, 61-62.

¹⁹ Congar. "Propositions en vue de la révision", 3.

²⁰ Cf. René Kaës. *Sufrimiento y psicopatología de los vínculos institucionales*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2005.

²¹ *Lumen gentium*, n. 6; *Gaudium et spes*, n. 76; Paul VI. "Address to the United Nations".

²² John F. Kavanaugh. *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*. New York: Orbis Books, 2006 [1981], 29.

To conceal or manipulate the truth is to intentionally misguide, sowing confusion and unreliability in the Catholic moral tradition. It is like placing a magnet near a compass, distorting True North. It is an abuse of conscience, both as an individual and communal «knowing together»²³. The church's struggle to «tell the truth» leads individuals and entire communities astray, causing lasting harm that ripple outward beyond measure.

As part of the church's efforts to conscientize the faithful, the canon of Catholic social thought draws on a long history of denouncing sin in the world and announcing an alternative vision of what is possible when people affirm the inherent and infinite value of the human person, deliver on human rights and responsibilities, promote the common good, adopt solidarity as covenantal right-relationship and an expression of social holiness, and care for creation in reverence and awe for the Creator (Genesis 9:9-13). In his most recent encyclical, Pope Francis appeals to the spirit of fraternity to call on Christians and all people of good will to help «rebuild our wounded world»²⁴. The pope highlights numerous wounds to human dignity and right-relationship, including hatred, xenophobia, and violence. He laments political polarization, social and economic exclusion, and environmental degradation²⁵. But the pope fails to acknowledge how the church's witness to fraternity, peace, and the global common good is undermined by its abuses of power, its responsibility for causing wounds, or its contributions to degradation or alienation²⁶. Gerhard Lohfink described those who followed Jesus as a «contrast society» for standing in opposition to the Roman Empire (see Mark 10:42-45), which he defined as a «community in which one lives in a different way and treats others in a different way than is usual

²³ Cf. Samuel Fernández. «Towards a Definition of Abuse of Conscience in the Catholic Setting». *Gregorianum* 102, no. 3 (2021): 557-574.

²⁴ Francis. *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 67.

²⁵ Cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, nn. 156, 188, and 257.

²⁶ A possible exception might be where Francis reflects, «I sometimes wonder why, in light of this, it took so long for the Church unequivocally to condemn slavery and various forms of violence. Today, with our developed spirituality and theology, we have no excuses. Still, there are those who appear to feel encouraged or at least permitted by their faith to support varieties of narrow and violent nationalism, xenophobia and contempt, and even the mistreatment of those who are different» (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 86).

elsewhere in the world»²⁷. Lohfink observed that in contrast to the oppressive and violent exercise of power by the Roman Empire, Jesus inaugurated a community marked by reconciliation and solidarity. Citing Galatians 6:2, Lohfink explained that this is a community that bears each other's burdens: «where the Christian community is a true community, where it sticks together, and where everyone helps one another, the “law of Christ” can be fulfilled»²⁸. It is worth noting that for Lohfink, what differentiates the Christian community is not a difference of virtue, love, or truth, but primarily a difference in how power is exercised. To Congar's proposal that «the first service that the Church gives to the world is to tell the truth», Lohfink might add that the church's first service to the world is to model right-relationship without being elitist, triumphalist, or exclusionary. The church «transforms the world» not as a perfect representation of the reign of God, but in forging inclusive communities of belonging, «just like the family Jesus had gathered in his circle of disciples» without any retribution or «structures of domination»²⁹. The church, then, is not just a witness to the truth about God but provides a «contrast experience» in how to treat human beings with respect, inclusion, and tenderness in fidelity to the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus Christ³⁰. However, the «open wounds» caused by abuse of power in the church reveal how much trust has been broken and how much moral repair is needed across the Body of Christ.

3. CONFRONTING THE REALITY OF ECCLESIAL SIN

Over the last several decades, Christian ethicists have developed the category of sin so that it reaches beyond the universally inherited condition of original sin or the individual failures to properly love God, others, and oneself. Initially, social sin was presented as a form of «blindness» where social norms train individuals to unwittingly accept a «false

²⁷ Gerhard Lohfink. *Jesus and Community*, trans. John P. Galvin. Minneapolis (MN): Fortress Press, 1984, 56.

²⁸ Lohfink. *Jesus and Community*, 63.

²⁹ Lohfink. *Jesus and Community*, 66, 72.

³⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx describes the church as a «contrast experience» in comparison with secular society. Cf. *God the Future of Man*. Translated by N. D. Smith. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969, 153.

consciousness»³¹ and, through their support or participation in these social customs, act «to maintain social sin»³². This means that individuals are liable for «indirect complicity in social injustice» and have a moral responsibility to «combat social sin by attacking our ideological blindness»³³. More recently, Catholic ethicists have elaborated on how sin is institutionalized in public life. For example, Julie Rubio applies social sin as the «social forms» that oppose the reign of God³⁴. It is also important to make the connection between social sin and culture, given that cultures are systems of meaning, learned formally and informally, creating shared realities, shaping moral agents, and fostering individual and community values³⁵. A «culture of sin» reflects the «on the ground reality» wherein members of the church are implicated in this «formation by sin and the ongoing participation and perpetuation of this sin» that causes suffering³⁶. The church describes itself as a sacrament of Christ's saving presence and power, but as a human institution, the church is susceptible to sin. While it is inevitable that the church will fall short in being a faithful witness to the Gospel, resignation to harm caused by the church risks callous indifference. Romano Guardini describes the church as the cross on which Christ is crucified, adding that these defects «purify our faith»³⁷. This suggestion could be interpreted by some that such defects should be welcomed as gifts rather than lamented as profound psychological, spiritual, moral, and social wounds. At the very least it risks

³¹ Gregory Baum proposed several dimensions of social sin, including as a «false consciousness», wherein self-delusion or flattery leads to an inability to recognize the humanity of others or one's duty to others, especially those in great need. Cf. Baum. *Essays in Critical Theology*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1994, 201.

³² Kenneth R. Himes. "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual". *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986): 183-218, at 192.

³³ Himes. "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual", 213-214.

³⁴ Julie Hanlon Rubio. "Moral Cooperation with Evil and Social Ethics". *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 103-122, at 110.

³⁵ Bryan Massingale. *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. New York: Orbis Books, 2010, 16-17.

³⁶ Karen Ross, Megan K. McCabe, and Sara Wilhelm Garbers. "Christian Sexual Ethics and the #MeToo Movement: Three Moments of Reflection on Sexual Violence and Women's Bodies". *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 2 (2019): 339-356, at 349.

³⁷ Romano Guardini. *The Meaning of the Church*, trans. Ada Lane. Providence (RI): Cluny Media, 2021, 56-57.

trivializing the suffering caused by abuse of sacred power or the misuse of religious authority.

The field of Christian ethics has yielded important work to examine the moral fallout resulting from failures within religious communities, including the tainted legacies of religious leaders³⁸ and damaged Christian rituals like liturgy and prayer³⁹. It is essential to denounce the ways that church policies can become a barrier or obstacle to the faith⁴⁰. Given that churches are sacred spaces and provide access to the Holy, sin in church settings wounds the deepest part of the human person and carries extra weight in comparison to harm caused by social sin or secular «structures of vice»⁴¹. For example, spiritual abuse (resulting from dogmatism, bad teaching, poor leadership, or manipulation by a member of the church) is not experienced like other betrayals; those who suffer from spiritual abuse describe it like the rape or murder of their soul⁴². A soul wound comprises both spiritual and moral dimensions, reaching the deepest part of the human person. It damages what Augustine described as the *capax dei*, the ability to reach out and relate to what is Absolute and Infinite⁴³. The church has a long history of condemning sin in the

³⁸ Karen V. Guth. *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies: Human Flourishing after Traumatic Pasts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

³⁹ Lauren F. Winner. *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press, 2018.

⁴⁰ It is worth noting that «scandal» comes from the word «stumbling block», which Jesus uses to describe Peter in Matthew 16:23. Legalism in the church can turn the law into an idol that kills or subjugates instead of setting people free to love (see Galatians 4:8-11).

⁴¹ Daniel Daly defines «structures of vice» as those that «contain social relations that enable and facilitate the acquisition of vicious traits by those who participate in the structure. Vicious structures include positions in which persons are constrained in their ability to recognize and promote the dignity of others, especially the poor and marginalized». They are «webs of relations that consistently harm normative personal dignity, human well-being, and happiness, especially that of the vulnerable» and «promote social injustice and undermine the common good». Cf. Daniel J. Daly. *The Structures of Virtue and Vice*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021, 169. Daly does not address «structures of vice» in church settings, even in the wake of revelations about widespread clergy sexual abuse and concealment in Christian churches.

⁴² Barbara M. Orlowski. *Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness*. Eugene (OR): Wipf and Stock, 2010, 78-80.

⁴³ Augustine. *De Trinitate* XIV, 8, 11.

world, but there has not been sufficient emphasis on confronting and repenting how religious authority or sacred power can be abused and the intrapersonal and interpersonal harm that results.

In Catholic theology, more attention has been dedicated to the impact of sin on the sinner than those who have been harmed by the sinful action. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes sin as an «offense against God», that causes a «rupture» in one's relationship with God and the church (§1440). Since «only God forgives sins», to be healed from the defilement of sin, one must show contrition, confess the sin, and do penance to be «re-established in ecclesial communion» (§§1441, 1448). Concentrating on the «satisfaction» of the sinner confines attention to restoring one's relationship with God, but there is only passing mention that one «must do what is possible in order to repair the harm» to others as a matter of justice (§1459). The official moral teaching of the Catholic Church does not adequately account for how sin—especially harm done in an ecclesial context—damages the humanity of the self and others or how it functions as a desecration and dismemberment of the Body of Christ.

While the *Catechism* acknowledges sin as an original or inherited condition, a personal misuse of free will, and as a social violation of justice, there is no category of ecclesial sin to acknowledge the shame caused by certain church teachings, the abuse of sacred trust in ecclesial contexts, or a vicious culture in the church that can damage human dignity, the *capax dei*, moral conscience, moral agency, and relationships with others and the church. Ecclesial sin includes but reaches beyond specific instances of spiritual abuse or sexual abuse, which are often private or at least concealed at some level⁴⁴. Ecclesial sin occurs in church teachings and contexts that leave people feeling ashamed, guilty, fearful, anxious, isolated or excluded, dependent on clergy (e.g., to make moral choices), dreading the threat of hell, unworthy of participating in the sacramental life, coerced to give of their time, talent, or treasure, or forced to abandon their deepest desires in order to fulfill a religious obligation. Ecclesial sin can be caused by the elitism and exclusivism of clericalism (that subjugates and disempowers lay people while ascribing disproportionate

⁴⁴ Vincent Lloyd observes that abuse is often private whereas domination is public. Cf. Lloyd. «Politics of Abuse, Abuse of Politics». *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 1 (2022): 27-31, at 30-31.

power to ordained ministers) and hierarchicalism (where bishops exercise power without transparency, accountability, or justice)⁴⁵. A sinful ecclesial culture is not restricted to the beliefs, actions, or policies of clergy. Church teaching and policies shape all members, resulting in individuals being shunned and rejected by friends, family members, and other members of their religious community.

As one illustration of ecclesial sin, consider how mental illness can be viewed with suspicion or as a spiritual deficiency by some members of the church. This can leave those who struggle with mental illness feeling disbelieved, uncared for, and completely alone. In the words of one theologian, feeling the «stigma of being mentally ill was... inseparable from knowing I was shamefully wrong at the core of my existence. That was my experience of what the tradition I was raised in called total depravity»⁴⁶. Those who experience depressive suffering may be told that if they had more faith, they would be liberated from their condition, or conversely, their pain brings them closer to the suffering of Christ Crucified⁴⁷. Here the church is responsible for causing shame and self-doubt, psychological distress, spiritual torment, and moral emptiness. Being subject to religious shame can make it significantly more difficult to recognize one's unconditional value, activate their agency, meaningfully connect with others who can offer support or encouragement, or make use of resources to ensure their wellbeing. This ecclesial sin can spread like an infection or disease, akin to a spiritual and moral blight that threatens life everywhere it reaches. Pope John Paul II observed the multifarious effects of personal sin when he lamented, «one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world... every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole

⁴⁵ James F. Keenan. "Hierarchicalism". *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (2022): 84-108.

⁴⁶ Alison Downie. "The Sin of Being Human? Christian Theological Response to Mental Illness". *Feminist Theology* 31, no. 2 (2023): 181-196, at 186.

⁴⁷ Jessica Coblenz. *Dust in the Blood: A Theology of Life with Depression*. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2022. Cf. Catherine Yanko. "Investigating Moral Injury: Thinking Beyond the Law-Conscience Binary". *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 1 (2025): 59-73; Stephanie C. Edwards. "Christian Ethics, Trauma, and *Dust in the Blood*: Moving Toward Enfleshed Counter-Memory". *Journal of Moral Theology* 14, no. 1 (2025): 74-88.

human family... every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin»⁴⁸. What is missing is the particular stain of sin that takes place within religious settings, when religious authority or sacred power is used to degrade, disempower, or isolate. Other examples of ecclesial sin include the divorced and remarried who are barred from the Eucharistic feast, children of annulled marriages pained by the church's ruling that their parents' marriage was «invalid», or queer Catholics who have been fired from their jobs or coerced to leave their positions in Catholic education or ministry.

The distinct category of ecclesial sin is most pernicious in the sinful ecclesial culture that allowed, ignored, concealed, and still enables sexual abuse by clergy. Survivors describe feeling completely devastated by this betrayal of sacred trust since they were raised to respect if not revere priests, since they were presented as holy, trustworthy, and in some cases, incapable of sinning. As a result, survivors' moral identity, reasoning, and agency are profoundly damaged. Their relationship with individuals and institutions is shattered. «Moral injury» describes the dimensions of harm caused by this grave betrayal of sacred trust and power, comprising the psychological, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of the human person⁴⁹. These wounds are most acute in survivors, but they extend across the whole church⁵⁰. As another example of ecclesial sin, we can blame poor conscience-formation for all the individuals who were aware of abuse but failed to report it, hold perpetrators accountable, protect vulnerable individuals or communities, or prevent abuse from happening again. As proof of poor conscience-formation, we might cite the insufficient compassion and solidarity of non-survivors across the church; many survivors report that while being abused by clergy was traumatizing, when they summoned the courage to tell someone else in their faith community, they were often met with denial, minimization, or outright blame. In fact, some survivors recount that the harm caused by other lay

⁴⁸ John Paul II. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, n. 16.

⁴⁹ Marcus Mescher. "Clergy Sexual Abuse as Moral Injury: Confronting a Wounded and Wounding Church". In *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis*, edited by Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner, 122-139. Eugene (OR): Pickwick, 2023.

⁵⁰ Marcus Mescher, Kandi Stinson, Anne Fuller, and Ashley Theuring. "Measuring and Exploring Moral Injury Caused By Clergy Sexual Abuse". 2022, <https://www.xavier.edu/moral-injury-report/>.

people who ignored or trivialized their abuse was even «more traumatic» than the original abuse. In the words of one survivor, «If the church is one Body and survivors are part of that body, the rest of the church wants to amputate us... What do I have to do for the church to accept me?»⁵¹. When the church is presented as the Body of Christ or a communion of love and it leaves its own members feeling isolated, excluded, or unworthy, it not only fails to deliver on its ecclesiology, but on its moral duties to love others as oneself, to say nothing of prioritizing care for the most vulnerable among us. Disregard for the most vulnerable is demonstrated by cases where serial clergy perpetrators were moved to locations where they preyed on people of color, indigenous persons, and undocumented immigrants who could be threatened with deportation⁵².

Ecclesial sin occurs when members of the church—as representatives of the church—act in counter-testimony to Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry. Jesus’ actions modeled tenderness to all and a special priority for the outcasts: those treated as insignificant and unworthy, the ones who were judged and mocked with scorn, the ones made to feel empty, alone, and powerless. For the church to rid itself of the moral blight of ecclesial sin, it must, «like Jesus... be willing to risk fortune and future for the sake of those who are abandoned to the scrap heap of history»⁵³. It is a scandalous betrayal of the Gospel when the church fails to stand with the discarded, those tossed to the «scrap heap of history». When members of the church are shamed, shunned, or silenced by other members of the church—ordained, vowed, or lay—they are disconnected from their innate goodness and the God who created them in God’s own image and likeness. Ecclesial sin expresses the damage the church can do—or permit to be done—to the *capax dei*.

⁵¹ Marcus Mescher. “Walking with Survivors: What Are We to Do with this Pain?”. In *Accountability, Healing, and Trust: Interdisciplinary Reflections for Ministry in the Midst of the Catholic Sex Abuse Crisis*, edited by Kimberly Hope Belcher, and David A. Clairmont, 51-61, at 55. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical, 2024.

⁵² Susan Bigelow Reynolds. “‘I Will Surely Have You Deported’: Undocumenting Clergy Sexual Abuse in an Immigrant Community”. *Religion and American Culture* 33, no. 1 (2023): 1-34.

⁵³ M. Shawn Copeland. “The Church is Marked by Suffering”. In *The Many Marks of the Church*, edited by William Madges, and Michael J. Daley. New London (CT): Twenty-Third Publications, 2006, 215.

This ecclesial sin, as a grave abuse of sacred power, is responsible for profound intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional wounds in need of healing. Ecclesial sin jeopardizes the moral credibility of the church. This is not simply the result of specific failures, but part of the cumulative effects of the distress caused by these betrayals. Ecclesial sin causes «spiritual struggle», defined as «experiences of tension, conflict, or strain that center on whatever people view as sacred», whether that is God, a religious community, or one's spiritual beliefs⁵⁴. This spiritual anguish can lead to a profound questioning of one's identity, sense of meaning or purpose, and values. It overlaps with moral confusion that results when religious principles are betrayed, leaving individuals to endure a moral distrust for religious individuals and communities. Spiritual struggle often leads individuals to question if not reject religion, the church and its authority over their lives, and even belief in God⁵⁵. Symptoms include poorer physical health, and traits of negative coping with stress, including depression, anxiety, apathy, and a diminished sense of spirituality or vitality.

«Spiritual struggle» is observed in rising rates of young people who are «pulling away» or already «done» with religion⁵⁶. When people leave the faith they were raised in, it can «fuel more guilt and fear» that they have «lost their moral compass by turning away from religion»⁵⁷. Many church leaders lament that more people are becoming disengaged or disillusioned with organized religion, but not enough seek to understand why, or how this may be a symptom of spiritual struggle or moral injury. In fact, those who study «spiritual struggle» conclude that religious disaffiliation is an indicator of ongoing spiritual anguish, leaving them

⁵⁴ Kenneth I. Pargament, and Julie J. Exline. *Working with Spiritual Struggles in Psychology: From Research to Practice*. New York: Guilford Press, 2022, 6.

⁵⁵ Cf. Julie J. Exline, Joshua A. Wilt, Nick Stauner, and Kenneth I. Pargament. «Approach, Disengagement, Protest, and Suppression: Four Behaviors Toward God in the Context of Religious/Spiritual Struggle». *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2021). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/rel0000445>

⁵⁶ Julie J. Exline, et al. «Pulling Away from Religion: Religious/Spiritual Struggles and Religious Disengagement Among College Students». *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 14, no. 3 (2022): 300-311.

⁵⁷ Exline, et al. «Pulling Away from Religion», 303. Exline and her colleagues find that moral struggles are more common among the religiously devout college students.

conflicted about their relationship with God and the demands of the moral life⁵⁸. Ecclesial sin names the church practices that do damage to a person's conscience, their relationship with God, and their relationship to their faith community.

Catholic moral theologians should leverage the conversations orbiting around synodalizing the church to highlight the spiritual wounds and moral injury that threaten individual and collective moral conscience and how it may be possible to repair the conscience as an innate capacity for moral discernment. In too many cases, lay Catholics do not accurately grasp how ecclesial moral authority should inform but not replace the moral conscience. While church teachings should be given the presumption of truth, there are different levels of authority that carry different weight⁵⁹. Even when a person withholds assent from a particular moral teaching of the church, it does not remove them from full participation in the faith community⁶⁰. Insofar as the church's moral tradition is «developmental and dynamic rather than unchanging», Catholic moral theology invites all members of the church to receive teachings *and* respond to them⁶¹. In participating in a synodal church, all baptized Catholics share responsibilities as teachers and learners about what is right, true, good, and just. To construct a more generative moral theology, we must make more room to explore effective moral pedagogy, evaluate what is and is not received, and then dialogically come to terms with what God is requiring and empowering us to be and do. In the face of ecclesial sin, all Catholics must become ever-vigilant against the impulse—especially by church leaders or other beneficiaries of ecclesial power—to ignore, minimize, or deny the church's moral failures. Whether due to hubris or any other sin, if members of the church fall short in their individual or institutional examination of conscience, or propose «false and flattering accounts» of institutional authority without adequately recognizing and repenting for their sinfulness, then we need to participate in a «renewed

⁵⁸ Exline, et al. "Pulling Away from Religion", 309.

⁵⁹ Cf. Richard R. Gaillardetz. *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church*. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical, 1997, 101-127.

⁶⁰ Gaillardetz. *Teaching with Authority*, 263-270.

⁶¹ Linda Hogan. *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*. Mahwah (NJ): Paulist Press, 2000, 178.

theology of conscience» that better honors human dignity, agency, and right-relationships⁶².

4. FROM MORAL INJURY TO MORAL REPAIR

Since the early days of his pontificate, Pope Francis has shown great sensitivity to the wounds people carry. He has appealed to a vision of the church less like a fortress and more like a «field hospital» after battle⁶³. Francis highlighted mercy as the core of who God is and what God wants for and from God's people; he describes mercy as «God's identity card», the «divine attitude which embraces, it is God's giving himself to us, accepting us, and bowing to forgive»⁶⁴. Francis envisions mercy less as a noun than as a verb: «mercifying», doing mercy⁶⁵. Mercy inspires loving action in the spirit of solidarity, especially with the marginalized, vulnerable, and all who suffer. Mercy is the beating heart of Francis' vision of the church as «the home of communion» enlivened by the Holy Spirit «who creates unity in diversity, because the Holy Spirit is harmony and always creates harmony in the Church»⁶⁶. He called on Christians to join a «revolution of tenderness» as agents of a «culture of encounter» that involves a «slow and arduous effort» to build peace and promote the common good⁶⁷.

Pope Francis also identifies himself «as a man from the global periphery», as the first pope from the Global South⁶⁸. Francis' pontificate has expanded the circle of influence shaping the agenda for the church's role as a moral teacher and guide. In a tenure marked by both continuity and innovation, Francis has prioritized «an agenda of reconciliation»

⁶² Hogan. *Confronting the Truth*, 188-189.

⁶³ Interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro. "A Big Heart Open to God". *America* (September 30, 2013). <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

⁶⁴ Francis. *The Name of God is Mercy*. Translated by Oonagh Stransky. New York: Random House, 2016, 8-9.

⁶⁵ Francis. *The Name of God is Mercy*, 12.

⁶⁶ Francis. *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014, 28-29.

⁶⁷ Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*, nn. 88, 220.

⁶⁸ Thomas Massaro. *Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis*. Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 20.

that focuses on the task of «overcoming the marginalization of many and discovering creative ways for the church to reach out to millions with credibility and sensitivity congruent with the gospel»⁶⁹. Aware of the absence of mercy in the world, Pope Francis petitions, «Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all»⁷⁰. Yet it is not enough to dream of what more God's mercy might make possible in the world; in the face of ecclesial sin and the wounds that mark the Body of Christ, the church must shift its focus from dreaming or dialoging to doing. The church needs transformative leadership to model together a «tender commitment to the healing of pain and suffering and the transformation of unjust structures»⁷¹. Only then will it be possible to build a church that listens and mediates love in such a way that it «excludes no one» and is «open to all»⁷².

Amid conversations orbiting around ecclesial reform —spiritually, pastorally, and structurally— Catholic moral theologians should use their expertise to construct a comprehensive vision for moral repair. Lamenting that clergy sexual abuse has devastated the church or critiquing the «model of the church based on clerical hegemony» and the «patriarchal and monarchical structures» that are «incapable of helping us to meet the needs of the world and the culture in which we live» does not necessarily lead to healing⁷³. It is only the first step to denounce the «toxic impact» of «self-enclosed clerical power structure» and the «sacralization of the institution» even after revelations of widespread abuse by clergy⁷⁴. Catholic moral theologians have to identify how ecclesial sin has

⁶⁹ Thomas Massaro. *Pope Francis as Moral Leader*. Mahwah (NJ): Paulist Press, 2023, 14.

⁷⁰ Pope Francis. *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 8.

⁷¹ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator. *The Pope and the Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis*. New York: Orbis Books, 2021, 15.

⁷² Francis. *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 94.

⁷³ Bishop Vincent Long. «Reforming the Church in the Era of Synodality». *Reforming the Church: Global Perspectives*, edited by Declan Marmion, and Salvador Ryan, 84-97, at 89. Collegeville (MN): Liturgical Press, 2023.

⁷⁴ Julia Knop. «Between Crisis and Renewal: The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany». *Reforming the Church: Global Perspectives*, 135-152, at 139.

malformed individual and collective moral conscience and envision effective avenues toward redressing and preventing moral injury.

Moral repair begins by acknowledging the ecclesial sin that has damaged or destroyed the moral credibility of the Catholic Church in the eyes of many people around the globe. This has caused a great loss, including undercutting the church's ability to serve as a persuasive social critic⁷⁵. The church cannot be heard as a prophet to the public order when it ignores its own internal failures or when it is guilty of the «cheap grace» that demands forgiveness without repentance or reparation⁷⁶. When people feel betrayed by the church—whether by particular members or the institution as a whole—this likely indicates an intact conscience. It would be callous and cruel to ignore, minimize, or justify ecclesial failures in fidelity to God and all God's people. If Catholic moral theologians can facilitate individual and collective examination of conscience, then we can identify where the work of moral repair must begin. For this reason, the moral conscience plays a vital role in the church's project of moral repair, despite the fact that some argue that conscience has played an «exaggerated» role in Catholic moral theology, especially in the last century⁷⁷. In view of ecclesial sin, it would be prudent to avoid the conclusion that focusing on conscience places too much emphasis on freedom, when it should more accurately directed toward charity⁷⁸. If one assumes that the church is the «pillar and bulwark of the truth» (1Tim 3:15), then obedience becomes the greatest good⁷⁹. Such a position

⁷⁵ Here Rahner's words are salient: «the task of the Church as critic of society is still to a large extent neglected and remains unfulfilled... [the Church] is still far from having fulfilled in sufficient measure what she herself declares to be her mission... we have pronounced judgment upon ourselves in saying that the Church is not yet that which the present and the future require her to be». Karl Rahner. "The Function of the Church as Critic of Society". *Theological Investigations* 12, translated by David Bourke. New York: Seabury, 1974, 229-249, at 249.

⁷⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Discipleship*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly, and John D. Godsey. Translated by Barbara Green, and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis (MN): Fortress, 2001, 44.

⁷⁷ Matthew Levering. *The Abuse of Conscience: A Century of Catholic Moral Theology*. Grand Rapids (MI): Eerdmans, 2021, 13.

⁷⁸ Levering. *The Abuse of Conscience*, 35.

⁷⁹ Levering. *The Abuse of Conscience*, 49. Here Levering states directly that «conscience is not the center of Christian moral life» or «the main way in which Christians know what is right to do, let alone determinative of what it means to be the church».

casts doubt on the moral intuition of the human person, their fundamental *capax dei*, to say nothing of the «sanctuary» of one's conscience, where each person can be «alone with God»⁸⁰. While no one can escape the effects of sin—whether personal, social, or ecclesial—authentic synodal renewal relies on a theological renovation of conscience to better promote human dignity, the common good, and the reign of God.

This means that Catholic moral theologians cannot be tentative or reluctant to confront past and present failures in the church. Failing to confront ecclesial sin only contributes to the malformation of conscience on both the individual and communal levels. In the face of specific controversial church teachings, some Catholic moral theologians focus on licit dissent, but this individualistic paradigm—where a person chooses between assent or dissent to a particular moral claim—does nothing to protect others from harm, especially those who may be vulnerable to stigma, shame, or isolation⁸¹. After trust has been broken, there is no guarantee that it can be restored. Harm cannot be fully made right, just as «no bell can be unring», although reparative gestures «work on the moral plane to relieve suffering, disillusionment, isolation, and despair»⁸². Even small gestures to acknowledge one's responsibility for harm, to offer an apology, and to express remorse can be a starting point to renew or transform relationships. To acknowledge moral injury and advance moral repair, Catholic moral theologians should identify for adoption symbolic gestures and rituals that confess, lament, and pledge to atone for the ways the church has betrayed the Gospel and wounded the Body of Christ, a suffering endured by all members (1Corinthians 12:26).

⁸⁰ *Gaudium et spes*, n. 16.

⁸¹ It is worth noting that in the past, clergy (including bishops) explicitly honored licit dissent among lay people. For example, in 1968 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter, "Human Life in Our Day", to address the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, including its prohibition on using artificial contraception (with the intention to prevent conception during intercourse). Paragraphs 37-45 focus on how this encyclical can be used to inform the moral conscience, followed by paragraphs 49-54 outlining norms of licit dissent. Today, only a handful of paragraphs from the entire document can be found on the USCCB website, and none include any mention of licit dissent. See, for example: <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/abortion/excerpts-from-human-life-in-our-day>.

⁸² Margaret Urban Walker. *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 37.

As theologians and church leaders work to synodalize the church, they must confront the abuse of sacred power and moral teachings that degrade, disempower, and exclude. Ecclesial sin is like an autoimmune disease that inflicts self-imposed harm on the Body of Christ. This not only threatens the bodily integrity of the church, but in some cases, contributes to loss of faith in God⁸³. But this does not mean that these wounds are permanent or that moral renewal is beyond our reach. Harm done to the *capax dei* can be repaired through cultivating an interior relationship with God, since this capacity is innately human and not dependent on one's relationship with the church or its moral teachings. Sin cannot eclipse the presence and power of grace, including as it is expressed in God's redemptive work in the world. As Paul observed, «where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more» (Romans 5:20). In the face of widespread ecclesial sin, synodality presents an opportunity to witness to the truth that «belief in God is the basis of a prophetic praxis which renews the world»⁸⁴. Renewal of any broken tradition does not find traction in a posture of defensiveness, or embracing silence or secrecy to protect others from a truth that may be difficult to bear. Renewal is possible not through coercion but through authentic invitation and radical self-gift. Here, Catholic moral theologians ought to explore the moral implications of Pope Francis' ecclesiology of an «inverted pyramid», where the «only authority is the authority of service»⁸⁵.

To deliver on this vision, we need to explore an «ethics of extirpation» to root out the beliefs, practices, and structures that thwart «the authority of service» in the promotion of human dignity, agency, and right-relationships. To advance moral repair in the church, I propose the following seven tasks:

Reckoning: before anything else, we must openly, honestly, and comprehensively acknowledge the abuses of power in the church, the beliefs and practices that cause spiritual abuse and moral injury, shame and isolation.

⁸³ Schillebeeckx forewarned, «For many people, the official morality of the church hierarchy is thus the first stimulus towards a rejection of the church and in some cases, via this first step, towards abandoning all belief in God». Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx. *Church: The Human Story of God* trans. John Bowden. New York: Crossroad, 1990, 61.

⁸⁴ Schillebeeckx. *Church*, 99.

⁸⁵ Ormond Rush. «Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church.» *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 299-325, at 307.

It is not enough to reveal the idolatrous desire for status and security or the self-deception that masks the sacrifices necessary for justice and peace. It means reflecting with the insightful words of Henri Nouwen: «What makes the temptation to power so irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love»⁸⁶. As part of this reckoning process, every effort must be made to center the voices of those who feel neglected, abused, or excluded by church leaders. Solidarity with the wounded involves a «preferential option for survivors», where those who have been hurt by the church can be recognized, believed, and supported⁸⁷. It can be both illuminating and sobering for those quick to defend the church or minimize its sinfulness (from the past or in the present) to listen to the narratives of those who feel profound betrayal, a sense of shame, confusion, futility, or isolation⁸⁸. This is how we re-make knowledge in seeking a fuller grasp of the truth and its moral claims on us⁸⁹.

Repentance: moving beyond lamentation or expressing sorrow, repentance also requires «works giving evidence» of remorse (Acts 26:20). When the church has broken sacred trust with its members, its leaders can never exhaust the repentance necessary to atone for what is lost. If rituals express the core identity and values of a community, then repentance must be ritualized in every faith community. One possibility would be for parishes to organize an annual liturgical service akin to Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, to acknowledge and make amends for how the community experiences ecclesial sin. Adding on to this ritual, church leaders can demonstrate repentance by surrendering power and ensuring greater transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. For example, in the Catholic Church, lay people do not have much real power in church governance, as parish council and financial

⁸⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen. *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. New York: Crossroad, 1989, 59.

⁸⁷ I borrow this term from Jaisy A. Joseph; see her article, “Responding to Shame with Solidarity: Sex Abuse Crisis in the Indian Catholic Church”. *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 2 (2020): 381-392, at 389.

⁸⁸ As a possible template for these efforts, consider the project, “Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries” as organized by the Dicastery for Integral Human Development: <https://migrants-refugees.va/theology-from-the-peripheries/>.

⁸⁹ Katie Wright. “Remaking Collective Knowledge: An Analysis of the Complex and Multiple Effects of Inquiries into Historical Institutional Child Abuse”. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 74 (2017): 10-22, at 14.

committees are «consultative», with the pastor presiding over them. Lay people do not have the power to select or expel a pastor, and their views or votes on any committees are not binding⁹⁰. Adopting more inclusive and egalitarian relationships and power-sharing policies is not just one way to surrender clerical privilege and power, but also a potential way to prevent unchecked power from being abused in the future⁹¹.

Repair relationships: Spiritual and moral repair is essentially interpersonal. Reconciliation is a defining characteristic of Christian discipleship (1Corinthians 5:18-20). The work to restore dignity and activate agency proceeds at the speed of mending relationships. In a synodal process where lay people do not set the agenda or have a guarantee of participating in decision-making processes, we fall short of genuine power-sharing in the spirit of co-responsibility⁹². If we know that the church has been susceptible to «a failure of leadership and of the relational governance that went right to the top», then we have to acknowledge the ripple effects of this broken trust⁹³. Ecclesial ethics is not only a matter of policies, procedures, and structures; it is primarily a matter of how we treat one another in the context of being church together. Relationships are a source of the «soft power» that makes it possible to dialogue, rebuild trust, model mercy, and build capacity for moral growth. Relationships are home to our deepest moral formation; the only solution to the moral emptiness and loneliness of ecclesial sin is to rekindle relationships marked by mutual respect, sincere concern, authenticity, vulnerability, and compassion, as well as energetic co-responsibility.

Restorative justice: Insofar as ecclesial sin harms the whole church community, not just specific individuals, then all Catholics must share in the process of advancing restorative justice. This not only helps heal the social harm caused by moral violation, but it proactively dismantles the attitudes and practices that enabled perpetrators and made others

⁹⁰ Canon law §536 reads, “A pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop”.

⁹¹ Cf. Nicholas Hayes-Mota. “An Accountable Church? Broad-Based Community Organizing and Ecclesial Ethics”. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 43, no. 1 (2023): 111-128.

⁹² Nathalie Becquart. “The Role of Women in Repairing the Church”. *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 27, 2019.

⁹³ Marie Keenan. *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 214.

vulnerable to harm. Iris Marion Young notes, «This Christian responsibility is shared responsibility toward the morally harmed for moral repair. Within this shared responsibility, the dominant ideology of personal responsibility is directly challenged, and its symbolic power to disguise the structural inequalities, constrain an individual's actions, and stigmatize an individual's identity is nullified»⁹⁴. To this end, moral repair means practicing how to express and receive narrative as truth-telling, consider the ripple effects of harm, and what it takes to restore dignity and agency in relationship with one another. It is not enough to help individual Catholics become more aware of sin or injustice; we must also equip each person to be a «repairer of the breach» caused by sin (Isaiah 58:12).

Reparations: Given the psychological, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of harm caused by church failures, the church should use its considerable resources to provide material assistance to the wounded. A financial offering is not to buy absolution but to «tell the truth» in public —just like Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8— as a pledge to «make amends to those who suffer harms from these original sins»⁹⁵. This is meant to be a concrete expression of repentance, atonement, and «doing dignity» to redress harm from experiences of humiliation, deprivation, coercion, or other violations of psychological or spiritual well-being, bodily autonomy or integrity⁹⁶. While many wounds cannot be healed by financial assistance, they can provide sufficient funds for counseling, compensate for lost wages or other missed opportunities. Funds should be collected as part of annual tithing by clergy and other church leaders, a sign of collective responsibility and remorse for ecclesial sin. First priority should go to those who are harmed most acutely. However, in light of the ways that trauma is passed down intergenerationally, these reparations should include a longitudinal dimension to compensate for the time it takes these wounds to heal⁹⁷. In those instances when people prefer not

⁹⁴ Iris Marion Young. *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 165.

⁹⁵ Michael Banner. «Telling Lies, Telling Tales and Telling (and Doing) the Truth: Racism, Moral Repair and the Case for Reparations». *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35, no. 1 (2022): 41-62, at 52-53.

⁹⁶ Clemens Sedmak. *Enacting Catholic Social Teaching: The Deep Practice of Human Dignity*. New York: Orbis Books, 2022, 11.

⁹⁷ Resmaa Menakem observes how «soul wounds» can be integrated into someone's personality and influence their relationships, including family systems. When

to receive monetary compensation for past or present ecclesial failures, those funds can be directed toward prevention efforts, including more robust training for church leaders and all pastoral ministers, so they can be more aware of and anticipate conditions where sacred trust or moral authority might be misused.

Reclaim prophetic voice: Catholics know that following Jesus requires *metanoia*, a conversion not just of heart or mind, but an entire way of life. It is not enough to turn away from sin or pledge fidelity to the Gospel. Emphasis on conversion in Christian communities must be coupled with subversion because sin is not just a mere transgression, it is an injustice. The church has used its prophetic voice to serve its «critical liberating function» in denouncing the prevalence of sin in the world⁹⁸. Catholic moral theologians must employ this prophetic tradition to confront harmful beliefs and practices in the church. Without being heavy-handed, we cannot shy away from the reality of sin, «not only in its subjective dimension, which demands conversion, but also in its objective dimension, which demands subversion» because sin is primarily «the negation of love» that «should orient all action in favor of justice»⁹⁹. A central task in building a synodal church is creating the conditions for all members to embrace their own dignity and rights while also defending the dignity and rights of others. This means helping each member of the faith community find and raise their voice, both to denounce what should not be and to announce what we can make possible, with God's help.

Reform structures: The church's moral authority is not simply lost in a way that can be found, retrieved, or reasserted. It must be reconstituted through the «authority of service» by providing evidence of moral wisdom, delivering genuine care for every human person, and accountability

trauma is normalized across numerous families and generations, «it can start to look like culture» even when it's not. Instead, it is «traumatic retention that has lost its context over time» still exercising power over individuals and groups, unleashing «a profound effect on what we do, think, feel, believe, experience, and find meaningful». Cf. Menakem. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017, 10, 39.

⁹⁸ Johann Baptist Metz. *Theology of the World*. Translated by William Glen-Doeppel. New York: Herder and Herder, 1969, 117.

⁹⁹ Ignacio Ellacuría. «Conclusiones sobre la teología de la liberación». *Escritos Teológicos*. Vol. 4. San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2000, 292. Translation mine.

for the actions of its members. Insofar as moral agency is both shaped by surrounding culture and structures and also contributes to the surrounding culture and structures, it is not enough to promote human dignity, activate moral agency, or heal relationships. Spiritual and moral repair must include structural reform that corrects power differentials, especially those that subjugate or exclude. Steps to reform structures to ensure more inclusion, equality, and co-responsibility show the church is both a moral teacher and a moral learner. Authority is not persuasive when it is invoked by virtue of an office; it is constructed through a shared sense, stemming from respect and rapport of a community (Matthew 18:18-20). It is one thing to assert the equality of all the baptized or the universal call to holiness; it is quite another to create channels for all to participate in discernment, dialogue, and decision-making. In their 1983 Pastoral Letter on «The Challenge of Peace», the U.S. Catholic Bishops wrote, «The words of Jesus would remain an impossible, abstract ideal were it not for two things: the actions of Jesus and his gift of the spirit. In his actions, Jesus... made the tender mercy of God present in a world which knew violence, oppression, and injustice. Jesus pointed out the injustices of his time and opposed those who laid burdens upon the people or defiled true worship. He acted aggressively and dramatically at times, as when he cleansed the temple of those who had made God's house into a "den of robbers" (Matt 21:12-17 and parallel texts; John 3:13-25)»¹⁰⁰. All church leaders ought to emulate Jesus' protest of customs that cause shame and suffering, including by reforming the structures that impede integral moral repair.

5. CONCLUSION

To be a synodal church is to be a church that is «an undreamed of possibility for love» as a community that models love of God, neighbor, and creation¹⁰¹. In the face of fear or humiliation caused by eccle-

¹⁰⁰ National Conference of Catholic Bishops. "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response". n. 48; <https://www.usccb.org/upload/challenge-peace-gods-promise-our-response-1983.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Juan Luis Segundo. *The Community Called Church*, trans. John Drury. New York: Orbis Books, 1980, 83.

sial sin, Pope Francis' attention to mercy reminds us that «God never tires of forgiving us», and that through «mercy and forgiveness, God goes beyond justice» so we can «experience love, which is at the root of true justice»¹⁰². While the church is sacred and sanctifying, it is also imperfect and in need of purification, including from ecclesial sin. Ecclesial reform requires moral repair at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels of the church. In the face of spiritual wounds and moral injury caused by betrayals in an ecclesial context, an «ethics of extirpation» can bring the truth to light, acknowledge ecclesial sin and uproot it, as well as make amends. The church cannot claim moral authority when it denounces sin in the world but ignores, minimizes, or fails to atone for the harm it causes. Moral repair finds traction through conscience-formation that will better honor human dignity, agency, and right-relationships. The future of theological ethics must include finding more effective ways to be attentive and responsive to the wounds that mark the Body of Christ and improving moral formation to empower disciples to answer their vocation as Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation (2Corinthians 5:18-20).

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¹⁰² Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 3; *The Name of God is Mercy*, 78.

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