

**THE INTERNATIONAL BIOETHICS GROUP
ON THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS IN THE CHURCH:
A STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF POPE FRANCIS**

Introduction

We, the members of the International Bioethics Group (IBG), meet annually to discuss bioethical issues from the broader perspective of the Catholic philosophical and theological tradition. The group decided to reflect on the crimes of sexual abuse of minors, i.e., children and adolescents, and other vulnerable people in the church, a topic of much discussion over the past years.

As members of the people of God we want to share our reflections in support of Pope Francis, who is not only listening attentively and compassionately to “the cry of the little ones seeking justice,” but also committed to take clear, decisive, and appropriate actions to clean the ecclesial community from this structural sin, and to care for the wounds and suffering of victims and survivors.

We decided to look at the anthropological and theological roots of the problem, as it has been typical of our foundational approach to various themes, over the years. Historical statements of the Church on the issue, including more recent texts of Pope Francis, guided our thinking, together with presentations by professional experts in the field, and scholarly publications by various members of our group, in particular, the important book of one of our members, Marie-Jo Thiel, *L'Église catholique face aux abus sexuels sur mineurs* (Bayard, 2019).

In our conversation, we addressed the scandal with openness and honesty, beyond the false promise of easy solutions and taking into account the systemic dimension of the current crisis. Overwhelmed by the extent of the phenomenon and the depth of its ramifications, we felt the urgent call to pray for the victims of the abuse, whose post-traumatic suffering was thrown into relief for us by the contribution of experts in counseling. The evidence they submitted to our group showed that many of the victims can no longer reconcile with a notion of God who is loving, having forever lost trust in the Christian message itself, and in the signs of its credibility.

Confronted with the victims' narratives, we felt like staring, in mute silence, into the depth of the *mysterium iniquitatis*, realizing how powerful its grip had been in the life of so many priests and religious within the Church. Still, given our sense of responsibility as Catholic scholars, we want to overcome the sense of despair that shatters all words, and speak our mind with a statement of support for Pope Francis' call to pastoral renewal, a call that is, unfortunately, under constant attack.

What follows are only succinct points, rather than a complete summary of our reflections at the meeting. We offer them humbly to the pastors for further reflection and as a declaration of our availability to future theological articulation on their behalf. Taking Pope Francis' own analyses as our starting point, we note that the sexual abuse of minors and the vulnerable is a *symptom* of underlying issues that contributed to its acute explosion. We suggest paying attention to the following three.

Sexual Anthropology and Ethics

The first concerns sexual anthropology and the moral reasoning on human actions. We ask: what cognitive and psychological distortions could build in the abusers such habits of deviant sexuality, which, eventually, make them into predators? What understanding of the moral culpability of their acts? And what of their conscience, so obviously incapable of recognizing the vulnerability of the victims?

We feel that a certain way of understanding the morality of actions might be partly responsible for the abusers' inability to perceive the seriousness of their misconduct, together with the devastating psychological, emotional, and spiritual consequences on their victims. We are referring here to a conception of morality that judges the ethical quality of sexual acts in *objectivist* terms, an objectivism not entirely alien to the traditional understanding of lack of *parvitas materiae in sexto*. If everything in the sexual sphere is *equally* a sin, i.e., an infraction against the sixth commandment, then, is molesting a minor necessarily more serious than an act of sexual self-gratification, or other violations of chastity?

Such an objectivist, i.e. abstract, mindset encourages the perpetrator to "disengage" from his very actions, to "suspend" his own moral agency, and to forfeit full responsibility for the consequences of his acts. The abuser ends up looking at his crime from a distance, so to speak, rather than in a "first person" perspective. He judges his deeds as *objectively* sinful, but silences

his conscience, never fully exploring the condition of moral immaturity that have led him to such actions in the first place. Failure to recognize the centrality of conscience as a personal call to responsible actions, and a lack of sensitivity for the consequences of one's actions on the victims, are the inevitable shortcomings of an objectivist perspective in ethics.

We think of the immense strive of moral theology, in recent decades, to come to terms with a comprehensive understanding of the morality of human actions (*fontes moralitatis*); the attempt to overcome a restrictive hermeneutics, in favor of a conception that is more hospitable to the importance of conscience and the attentive consideration of consequences. We hope this renewal, so obviously rich in practical implications, will not be thwarted, but rather encouraged to further articulate the conditions for a deeper definition of moral maturity.

We also hope in a sustained support for the work of those involved in the field of marital spirituality, sexual anthropology, and pastoral work. The portrayal of sexual anthropology in Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, gives us courage: building on phenomenological attentiveness to the nuances of human experience, it conveys a picture of the person mindful of the complexity of self-appropriation, the centrality of growth, and the importance of development in the definition of sexual identity. Also, a more concrete picture of the moral subject emerges from such anthropology: not an abstract agent, but an incarnate actor, not an appendix in the description of the moral event, but a central point of reference in the formulation of moral judgment.

The Theology of Ordained Priesthood and the Common Priesthood of the Baptized

A second point to consider is the theology of the priesthood informing the priest-abuser during his seminary formation. For if the latter is driven by a sense of power over the vulnerable, what feeds such a consciousness of superiority? What perception of identity could have turned a ministry of service within the church into one of exploitative prevarication? Could it be that a theology of radical, i.e., ontological, difference between the priesthood conferred through the sacrament of ordination, and the one to which all faithful participate on account of their baptism, might have occasioned a perception of separation between the *sacred* identity of the ordained priest and the *common* priesthood of the laity? And isn't this sense of separation further enhanced by a promise of celibacy, which, when resting on an immature sexuality, keeps the priest away from regular interaction with others (especially women!), and provides him with

an excuse for self-justificatory behavior? In this context, children and other vulnerable people become an easy prey: easily accessible and trusting, and, thus, easily exploitable.

We feel it is time to reconsider more forcefully the theology of the priesthood brought about by the Second Vatican Council, and to overcome any ideological mystification entailed by hierarchism and clericalism. We return with confidence to the words of Pope Francis himself: “It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People. Indeed, whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives. This is clearly seen in a peculiar way of understanding the Church’s authority, one common in many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred. Such is the case with clericalism, an approach that “not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people”. Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say “no” to abuse is to say an emphatic “no” to all forms of clericalism.” (*Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to The People of God*, August 20th, 2018, at 2).

A proper formation of men for the priesthood needs a paradigm shift from a clerical culture, which arises from an elitist and exclusive vision of priestly vocation, to a mentality that promotes the priestly ministry not as a power to be exercised, but rather as a free and generous service for others. Candidates for the priesthood need to be formed to become servant priests for the protection of the vulnerable and the safeguarding of minors.

Ecclesiological Structures and the Position of Women in the Church

A third important element in understanding the current crisis is the recognition of its *systemic* character. The pervasiveness of abuse speaks to an imbalance of power within the church, which, coupled with the sense of clerical entitlement and separation, nourishes a culture of secrecy: protecting the church takes precedence over bringing to light the abuse, saving the appearance of integrity becomes an obstacle to heeding the cry of the victims. What institutional setting could have aided such a state of affairs?

We welcome Pope Francis' attempts to reform the curia and to make church structures more transparent and open. His commitment to an ecclesiology of communion, deeply rooted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, throws into relief the centrality of baptism and the common priesthood of the faithful, thus opening the way for a different relation between clergy and laity. The people of God in their entirety are entrusted with the mission of evangelization and with the responsibility to face the challenges of the day with creativity and without fear. In particular, the rehabilitation of the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, coupled with the recognition of past failures, invites the church to rethink the place of women, making possible a structural reform that is consistent with Pope Francis' emphasis on synodality and participation. To stress the dynamic character of the church, its journeying through history (*syn-odos*), is to remain alert to the movements of the Spirit, in attentive discernment of "the signs of the times," including the active role of women in the world, the recovery of their dignity as persons, and the recognition of their contribution to all spheres of society.

Synodality and participation stand in stark opposition to a notion of the church defined by an overly abstract sense of its nature, one that betrays the *incarnational* character of Christian revelation, and thus, *a fortiori* of the church itself. We need to recognize that, though not *of* this world, the church is *in* this world, thus inevitably exposed to the risk of institutional rigidity and lack of prophetic vision.

In summary, with our statement, we call attention to three problems made evident by the abuse crisis:

1. The limits of a sexual anthropology supported by an objectivist understanding of moral actions resulting in an operative understanding that is abstract and which implicitly feeds into the abuser's undermining of his conscience and the responsibility for the consequences of his actions on the victims.
2. How, all too often, a seminary-based formation program for priests separates candidates for priesthood from those preparing for other ministries in the Church. Furthermore, priestly formation can be underpinned by an inadequate understanding of how all ministry flows from baptism. Thus, there is a failure to inculcate sufficiently the essential complementarity of ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of all the faithful in

the life and mission of the Church. A proper formation of men for the priesthood needs to move away from any form of clericalism.

3. An ecclesiology of clerical power that nourishes a culture of secrecy and undermines the *sensus fidei* of all people of God, especially women, their right to participation and the exercise of responsibility within the church.

These points only indicate a direction for what we feel is a much needed diagnosis. Without it, there is no chance of a promising therapy either. We hope our reflections, in all their brevity and limitations, will be helpful in charting a way through the thicket of the present predicament. With humility, we entrust them to those who, guided by the Spirit, can make a difference.

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About the International Bioethics Group

The *International Bioethics Group* (IBG) is composed of Catholic scholars working in the field of bioethics. The group meets on a yearly basis outside Brussels, at the home of Aldegonde and (the late) Hubert Brenninkmeijer, to discuss ethical questions triggered by advances in medicine and the life-sciences. The Brenninkmeijers have supported reflection in bioethics since the early ‘80s, when a first incarnation of the IBG began under the auspices of the late Card. Martini of Milan, Card. Daneels of Brussels, and the late Klaus Demmer, a Professor of Moral Theology at Gregorian University in Rome. The group’s discussions take place in an atmosphere of freedom and friendship, and in a seminar-style conversation. The seminars of IBG have included topics like stem-cell research, cloning, genetics, synthetic biology, assisted suicide and euthanasia, to

name but a few. The purpose of IBG, over the many years of collaboration, has been to address various issues with a threefold perspective: (1) *foundational* -- i.e., anthropologically rich, rather than simply normative; (2) *international*, integrating especially European and American voices; and (3) *dialogical*, with respect to the broad Catholic philosophical and theological tradition. In its conversation, the group relies upon the multidisciplinary expertise of its members, which includes philosophy, theology, medicine, and the law.

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