

Theological and moral reflections on sexual child abuse in the Catholic Church

JOSEPH CAROLA, S.J., MARK ROTSAERT, S.J., MICHELINA TENACE, H. MIGUEL YÁÑEZ, S. J.

Foreword

The analysis of cases of abuse shows that the link between pedophilia and celibacy is less significant than the link between pedophilia and deterioration of the family environment. In cases of abuse, a primary role is played by the male/female, father/mother relationship, one with the other and with the other members of the family and the child. The crisis of the family debates the exclusive character of marriage between man and woman and, consequently, the principle of fecundity as well. The *gender* theory (negation of the male/female duality as characterising element of the identity and of the maturity of a person), abortion (negation of the child's life via his/her violent elimination after conception), and pedophilia (abuse of power over a weaker individual, a child, triggered by a sexual life disorder), all have in common the falsification of the meaning of sexuality that leads to a systematic refusal of paternity, of maternity and of filiation.

To this one must add the fact that religious celibacy has been commonly interpreted as the negation of sexuality. At training level, therefore, the aspect of affective sexual life has been overlooked and the signs of deviancy in the candidates and in their instructors have been underestimated.

Male and Female¹

If God represents the communion of persons, the humanity created in his image and likeness holds within it the signs of the same vocation for the communion of persons. God created man as “male and female” (*Gen* 1:27). The human being finds in God himself the origin of his masculinity and femininity, destined to come together in married love².

Sexual difference has been inserted also into the economics of salvation, namely in vocation (*Gaudium et spes* 11). Love is *divine* to the extent that it is the force that unites people, it is an element that makes them similar (from the viewpoint of human nature) and different (as unique and unrepeatable persons). Sexual difference routes love towards unity in otherness, it makes love a

¹ SAGRADA CONGREGACIÓN PARA LA EDUCACIÓN CATÓLICA, *Orientaciones educativas sobre el amor humano. Pautas sobre educación sexual*, Cf. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19831101_sexual-education_sp.html

² SAGRADA CONGREGACIÓN PARA LA EDUCACIÓN CATÓLICA, *Orientaciones educativas sobre el amor humano*. n.26.

force capable of winning over the egotism of considering one's self unique. Thus, according to God the symbol of love is communion, a union of flesh without the fusion of persons, without possession and therefore without death, based on mutual respect.

The fact of being born male or female, therefore, implies being called to become a person capable of loving the other and of being loved as "other", being called to seek the other, being called to have faith in the other ... the prefiguration of faith in God, the Totally Other.

Deep is the Christian's responsibility in testifying today for the strength of the love that allows the body to participate in the grace of salvation, preventing him from identifying sexuality as that part of us left at the exclusive mercy of seduction and of dominance, which do not exactly derive from sex but rather from the diseased heart and from sin.

Everything, except for the Other

But what is sin? That which is considered the origin of all sins and is the first one mentioned in the Bible is not connected to sexuality. It is described in the first chapters of Genesis as abuse of freedom, as loss of the paradise of relationship³. In a relationship, the other is the limit to my freedom that can do anything except annul otherness. In abuse, freedom intends to annul the otherness so as to possess all, so as to be at the same time the one to the other, the totality of being. It is an idea of freedom as mere expansion of the Ego, that does not consider the relational context from which it originates.

God is the Other with respect to humanity that can do everything except be God; that can possess everything except the totality of being that only God possesses; that can know everything except what only God knows, namely creation and time; and this is the greatness and the limitation of human freedom. This is the meaning of the command imparted by God to the human being in *Genesis 2:16-17*. The tree of life cannot be reached except via the path of communion, of free love, of faith in the freedom of the other and of obedience to His will, because God is the principle of all that is good and of life. After the fall, the knowledge of evil (of doing evil) is added on to the knowledge of good (familiarity with God). Evil is perpetrated through the rejection of the Other and the desire to possess totality, without any limits whatsoever.

"The knowledge of good and evil" (*Gen 2:17*) will be therefore the condition of the human being always faced with the failure of a knowledge that does not bring him Goodness (of God, eternal life) or love.

³ Cfr. A. WENIN, *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain: lecture de Genèse 1,1-12-4*, Paris 2007.

After sin, the creature commits evil in the frantic search for life, using and abusing the creation and the creatures, in order to fill the ontological vacuum of love produced by sin. This search for life, through abuse and not through communion, aims at death, which in fact is the wages of sin (*Rom 6:23*).

Divine life is reached through He who is the door to the Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, He who did not want anything for himself, He who did not seek privilege or power, He who did not wish to use creatures to have them serve him, He who knew and loved Goodness, the Holy Father, He who did the good he knew, namely the will of God, obeying him to the point of giving his life for the sinners, thus becoming Himself the new tree of eternal life from which to take nourishment. He suffered sin, he took on evil in order to heal it, and with his death he indicated a shortcut towards eternal life.

In the sexual deviance typical of sexual child abuse, the evil caused is complex: the adult does not make the child grow, but rather does violence to him; the believer does not communicate his faith, but rather his immaturity; sexual life does not witness the dignity of the person and his vocation towards life, but rather follows the deviances of seduction and of dominion typical of sin that leads to psychic, physical and spiritual death, since will is stimulated by the *passions* (that are uncontrollable), and the *pathology* can become the justification of scandalous violence and injustice.

The reality of sin

When theology speaks of sin, it does so to indicate, using terms typical of faith and of revelation, the remote roots of evil acts, connecting them to the first moral perversion and ontologic deviance, i.e. the perversion of the friendship between humanity and God, from which stem all the other perversions. There are at least two principles that accompany faith: without the inclusion of sexuality in human life, we do not have access to the meaning of vocation; one must also consider however that sexuality outside the vocation to the communion of love deprives the person of that code that makes him/her more human to the extent to which he/she is more open to the mystery of divine life.

A sin is a personal and free answer to the Creator and Saviour that occurs by means of the conscious choice of evil, motivated by personal egotism. A pertinent question relating to the imputability of an act consists precisely in what capacity of freedom a person can exercise in a given situation. Moral theology can speak out about the free act, but it has no elements by which to judge when a person is operating freely or is himself a victim of a given internal coercion that

prevents him from realizing good or from avoiding evil. This, however, does not justify the thoughtless assumption of lack of freedom, which is itself a gift and a personal achievement. Thus, the “voluntarium in causa” principle indicates the importance of personal responsibility beyond the contingent moment, allowing to take into consideration the causes of a person’s condition or of a specific situation at a given time. Intra-disciplinary dialogue will contribute to defining in a concrete way the situation of a specific individual or of given categories of persons affected by psychological personality disorders which limit or decrease their freedom. Notwithstanding, one should remember that, whereas subjective responsibility stretches as far as the individual is capable of self-determining his/her actions in favour of good or of evil, personal freedom must always be cultivated with as many tools as possible so as to overcome whatever obstacles they can, in the attempt to achieve greater self-dominance and a growing awareness of the values and duties a person has.

A sin is an interpersonal action since it is done to say the least before God, and more in general against a person or a group of human beings who are damaged by it. Conversely, human action is part of a process in which the person realizes his/herself before God and in relation to the others, thus weaving his/her personal and common story in which take place sin and grace, virtue and vice, moral good and moral evil. For this reason, good and evil alike tend to diffuse through the relational fabric. In this way structures of good or of sin are created (*Reconciliatio et Poenitentia*, 16; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 16c) within which the individual is driven to act, adjusting to them or resisting them or ultimately firmly rejecting them. The presence of evil within the clergy has led the Holy Fathers to state that the Church consists of "saints and sinners", aware as they are of the presence of the Spirit of its Founder that in it and through it realizes the redemption ("the sacrament of salvation") but, at the same time, also of the presence of sin, the work of its children seduced by the spirit of evil.

Thus, unlike Christ, the only and sinless Supreme Priest, no Christian can say he/she is without sin. Saint John warns us: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 *Jn* 1:8). The pilgrim Church is a mixed society of saints and of sinners, the members of which are reconciled with the mercy of Christ. It is the field in which wheat and tares grow together until the final harvest at the end of the world (see *Mt* 13:24-30, 36-43). It is the net that catches both good and bad fish that will be separated only when the net is pulled up onto shore on the Last Day (see *Mt* 13:47-50). Although the aim of the Church is to be always without stain or wrinkle (see *Eph* 5:27), It admits that this vocation can be fully achieved only in the afterlife. Each faithful Christian needs to pray every day: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (*Mt* 6:12). Faithful Catholics, as members of the ecclesial Body of Christ, are summoned to

imitate Christ in the mutual administration of His mercy which they have previously received. So the first step towards healing and renewal begins with the sincere acknowledgement of our sins, of our need of mercy and of our common mission of accompanying each other towards the acknowledgement of our sins for our mutual salvation – the salvation that Christ has gained on our behalf, by carrying onto the cross the sins of humanity. Thus the mercy of Christ the Lord blossoms for the live members of the ecclesial Body with the aim of healing those members who have been injured or have died due to sin. His mercy is what sanctifies us.

During his voyage on earth, the Christian must keep focused on his/her situation in the fight between flesh and spirit (*Rom 8*), in which he/she is seriously invited to be wise and stay alert (*Mt 25:4*; *1 Thes 5:6*).

David's sin

King David's sin (*2 Sm 11*) presents a set of elements that illustrate and inspire our reflection. Firstly, the change in attitude of a believer who, by disregarding his vocation as mediator of the presence of *Yhwh* among his people, shifts his attention onto his own whim to the disadvantage of the loyalty and respect due to a faithful subject. Most probably, the thirst for power had blinded King David's heart. By going against the divine command he caused an effect that he didn't dare accept in the appropriate manner, i.e. via the acknowledgement of his own sin. The sinful act not considered as such leads him to commit other sins such as the hypocrisy during his conversation with Uriah, that he tends to deceive to seduce his heart, driving him to disobey the rule of ritual purity so as to hide the evidence of his adultery. The fable antithetically presents the possibility of the loss of piety on behalf of "*Yhwh's* anointed", in contrast with the piety of the foreign mercenary who, with his behaviour, unveils the king's attitude. Faced with Uriah's refusal to follow his plan, David decides to kill him by availing himself of the courage of his faithful soldier. The fable counterposes Uriah's valor with the cowardliness of *Yhwh's* anointed. David's inner process is that of obstinate evil in order to hide his sin and to save his reputation, at all costs. The sin as such does not remain circumscribed to a mere act, but derives from a previously existing attitude. It enters a personal process that, as appropriately indicated by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises, goes "from (mortal) sin to (mortal) sin" (*Exercises*, §314). The king's basic attitude has changed and his actions lead him to sink in evil and to depart from *Yhwh*, forgetting Him.

Sin also seduces and stimulates the complicity of others, first of all of Uriah's wife, followed by the attempt to induce her husband to disobey the rules on ritual purity, then by making Uriah's general an accomplice in his death, and even by telling the messenger to manipulate the facts to

please the king. There will certainly have been others who saw, there will certainly have been rumours, all in all a bad example that, coming from *Yhwh's* anointed, was amplified to the utmost. This is the social dimension of sin that is often created by asking for the direct or indirect cooperation of others and for conspiratorial silence, the bad example assimilated by the others.

The Bible, however, does not hide these sins committed by men elected by God, in order to carry out its plan of salvation. The story we have chosen is not the only one that abounds in details that reveal the evilness of David's attitude. Tradition too doesn't beat around the bush when it relates, in Jesus' genealogy, the appearance of "Uriah's wife" as the mother of Solomon (*Mt* 1:6). The transparency with which these scandals are narrated is based on the faith in God's work in history, present in the genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew (1:2-17). The same tale of king David's sin ends with his conversion, by means of which David returns to being what he was, experiencing the reprimand of the prophet and the mercy of his Lord (1 *Kgs* 12), although the evil committed will proceed its course in a cascade of effects represented by the calamities announced by the prophet (1 *Sam* 12, 10-12).

Sin and sexuality

A hasty analysis would configure David's sin as adultery and consequent murder of Uriah. However, we have seen how the tale suggests a change upstream in the king's attitude, which would represent the source from which flow forth the sins that with a cascade effect culminate in murder. The type of sin is that of "omission" rather than of "commission". In other words, any sin of "commission" implies a previous "omission", at the deep level of that freedom that one is not always aware of.

By means of its narration, the text indicates the aim of the sin which is the death of a fellow man. That is where the seriousness of the sin resides: it leads to death via the murder of the victim and via the spiritual death of the murderer. It generates the rupture of the communion, it implies the loss of the sense of existence.

Sexual sin, in this case, evidently is based on the fulfillment of a disordered passion but, by means of it, the king changes the aim of his sexuality, making it not an instrument of love but an instrument of egotism that expresses itself through violence and at the same time attacks the relational dimension of his own person, thus breaking the relationship that, in his capacity as *Yhwh's* anointed, binds him to his subjects and to the people as a whole.

In this case, sexuality is the expression of absolute power that transforms into violence instead of into service. We're not attempting to exculpate Bathsheba here, but certainly the fact that

it was the king who stimulated a woman, within the scheme of power of those times, may bear the features of abuse. Sexuality goes beyond genitality. It expresses the totality of the person in his/her interpersonal and social relations. But that is not all; as a complex reality, it configures the person and is at the same time defined by the latter.

Educating the person in his/her sexed dimension

The education of a person in his/her sexual dimension requires instruments suitable for the human reality of sexuality. First of all: education in affectivity that expresses itself also sexually at the various levels implied by sexuality. This envisages comprehending affectivity in its totality and its potentiality, in order to experience sexuality in an intelligent, creative manner, by grouping its various aspects and overcoming the tendency to split them up. Sexuality is experienced within a context of values that envelops and expresses all of its forms of manifestation⁴. Of fundamental importance therefore will be the valorization of the person and of the other, the atmosphere of trust that boosts interpersonal communication, education in dialogue in all of its forms, gratuity and altruism, solidarity and the sense of justice.

This is how personal education should take place in a healthy educational environment, in which each person learns to relate and cultivate personal friendships within a context of values embodied in institutions and groups animated by the mystique of communion advocated by the Gospel of Jesus⁵. The importance of the other, who must never be used as a means, and the free dimension of personal friendship, are values to be learned precisely through the experience of interpersonal rationality, a privileged location of which is the family.

The education of personal conscience should necessarily be accompanied by suitable information regarding sexuality, appropriate for the age group, that illustrates the path of authentic freedom achieved through love (*Gal 5:1*). In actual fact, only through the experience of the gratuity of love can one manage to understand the importance of the obligation of fidelity that entirely commits a person, in its every single dimension, thought and activity.

Mediation of power at the service of the common good

The first commandment of the First Alliance contemporarily proclaims the uniqueness of *Jhwh* as the only Lord and the rejection of idols, namely the carrying to extremes of every intra-

⁴ SAGRADA CONGREGACIÓN PARA LA EDUCACIÓN CATÓLICA, *Orientaciones educativas sobre el amor humano*, n.35-37.

⁵ SAGRADA CONGREGACIÓN PARA LA EDUCACIÓN CATÓLICA, *Orientaciones educativas sobre el amor humano*, n.90-93.

mundane reality accepted as God in place of *Jhwh* (*Ex* 20:2-3; *Dt* 5:6-7). This principle, key to the theological interpretation of human or intra-mundane reality, was the reason why Israel understood the mission of the King as *Jhwh's* anointed, i.e. as the mediator of His presence among His people and brother among brothers (*Dt* 17:20). The theology of regality did not attribute to the King any trait of deification, as with neighbouring civilizations. However, it did attribute to him a close bond through the figure of affiliation, mediator of the presence of *Yhwh* among his people.

In the light of the mystery of Incarnation, any human mediation of the presence of God in the history of mankind is relativized, i.e. placed at the service of God and of man's progress. In these terms, any human authority is relative inasmuch as it is established by God and called to mediate His presence among His people. The theological principles that legitimize the divine origin of human authority are at the same time an exact limitation that allows for their exercise with the clear intent to mediate the presence of Christ and to serve the common good (*Rom* 13:1; *Jn* 19:11).

Abuse of power

God did not pose any limits to Adam with regard to his power to dominate Nature, but did pose them with regard to the dominance and submission of his own kind. The genesitic temptation to "be as god" occurs in any human being, especially when the circumstances lead him/her to take on a role of authority in which he/she is "protected" by the very same theological principles that limit him/her. Anyone taking on a role of legitimate authority is called to take charge of the close dependence from the Creator who has placed him/her in that position of authority but that limits him/her even in his/her role legitimated by the service for the common good, especially for the weak, fully complying with the will of God, expressed in a special manner in the "Ten Commandments" of the Torah (*Ex* 20:2-17; *Dt* 5:6-21).

The theological principle of the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God limits the domination of the ones over the others. On the other hand, the creature-like dimension requires a degree of regulation of interpersonal and social relationships, as well as the reality of lust that lurks in the human heart as a result of sin and leads to forms of interpersonal relationships in which the self is privileged at the expense of the other, establishing forms of relational nature that reduce the other to a certain form of submission contrary to his/her vocation. The exercise of power is legitimized by the moral necessity to preserve and promote the common good in a given society and, from a religious perspective, by the need to mediate the presence of God according to the principle of the Incarnation.

The Christian primacy

The Christian primacy, as Jesus defines and illustrates it, is diametrically opposed to the primacy of the secular world. “You know” Jesus explains to his disciples, “that those who are regarded as rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you...” (*Mk* 10:42-43). Jesus teaches instead that those who exercise authority within the Christian Community must serve the others. He who is first shall become everyone’s servant. Christ himself exemplifies this concept. First he underlines he has not come amongst us to be served by us but to serve - “and to give his life as a ransom for many” (*Mk* 10:45). During the Last Supper he humiliates himself before his disciples and washes their feet. Then he explains his gesture: “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (*Jn* 13:14-15). On the next day, Jesus reveals all of the implications of his primacy through service, offering his life on the cross. When the Christians who exercise their primacy through service look upon their Lord on the Cross, they must remember that “no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him” (*Jn* 13:16). They must do as Jesus did before them.

Bishops and priests participate in a unique way in the significance of the Sacrament of the Holy Order in the primacy of Christ. They are amongst us and serve *in persona Christi capitis* (see *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica* §1548). In describing the headship of Christ over His Body (the Church), St. Paul refers to the love of Christ for his Church, a love that purifies it making it holy and without blemish (*Eph* 5:25-27). Christ wanted to share in a special way his mission of salvation with his ordained ministers who exercise primacy through service. With the Holy Orders they receive the triple task of governing, teaching and sanctifying. To rule as Christ rules, participating in his authority in the Church, means to shake off all ambition in order to serve, giving themselves entirely, giving their life, becoming a vehicle of the sanctifying grace of Christ for those in whose service they operate. It means to be crucified with Christ so that His Bride may grow in true holiness. The failure of selfless service in imitation of Christ - failure of the exercise of authority in the Christian community as Christ did himself - has negative consequences for the entire Christian community. History offers us many examples, unfortunately. But when priests and bishops serve as Christ did, they give their lives for their flock, they give credible proof of their sanctifying mission, building up the Church in this way. Today more than ever we need a service like this.

Power, sex and money

Sin, on the contrary, expresses a desire for dominion and uses all possible means at its disposal to assert its own interests, its privilege, to the detriment of others considered as an extra means and thus deprived of fraternity.

Money, as an expression of power, is seen as a chance to rule over all the relational universe. Temptation leads one to believe that with money one can obtain everything, including the will of others, and even love, contrary to what the Song of Songs says (*Song of Songs* 8:7). What a person is not able to win through the gift of self becomes palatable through the power of attraction of money, which knows no limits.

Sex, as the expression of one's affection, fails every time it expresses the desire to dominate rather than donation of one's self and the acceptance of others. Temptation leads us to consider the other as an object to be used and not as the individual/neighbour with whom to come into communion. Freedom itself is interpreted as an arbitrary expansion of the Ego in search of satisfaction of passions rooted in personal egotism. The pursuit of happiness is often associated with obtaining and enjoying pleasure, while forgetting the spiritual dimension of the person that can be fulfilled in love.

Only the authentic experience of the love of God can cleanse us from the dross of human selfishness that leads us to manipulate the other with behaviours, gestures and words that have no purpose other than to expand the domain and the privilege of the self over others.

Abuse and abuses

Any type of abuse is contrary to human dignity. The abuse of power, of knowledge, of possession, of seduction are all perversions found in a given style of living, of behaviour, of thoughts that are all deviations within which child sexual abuse can be located. It is precisely within a vast range of deviances that others reflecting the same mentality can be placed: hypocrisy as a life system, the lust for a career, the aspiration to positions of prestige, the pleasure of exercising power over others, the mentality of privileges, which is one of the most pernicious poisons of spiritual life because it gives rise to dangerous compromises within relationships and tasks.

As psychologists say, child abusers have within themselves also other signs of imbalance. The crime is the tip of a complex and deep-going iceberg, affecting the abuser's personal and family history. A social and cultural iceberg that reveals in all its fullness the many responsibilities involved. All of the evil has fallen on the victim, and all of the evil finds an accomplice in the abuser. From the victim's perspective, this crime is a horror that has no justification. From the

abuser's viewpoint, in the case of a Christian with responsibilities within the Church, we must try to understand the reason for such a failure of freedom, the reason for such a denial of the Christian vocation. When evil expands, when sin attacks the Church from within, through scandal, as they ask themselves why, Christians should pray: *Lord, have mercy on us! Lord, what are you trying to tell us? Which message of life and of truth do your justice and your mercy hold?*

Education in personal responsibility

Faced with the dramatic situation of cases of child abuse and other sex scandals by ministers of the Catholic Church, a transparent legislation that allows to proceed quickly and effectively in these unfortunate situations is key. The urgency of these indications, however, should not divert attention from the need to educate in the indispensable personal responsibility of the Christian community at all levels, in a climate of mutual trust. We must understand that the responsibility falls not only on the ecclesiastical authority. The fact that it represents the community does not mean that we should not allow its necessary participation, at various levels of involvement, in the same educational responsibility, in a spirit of communion.

Especially within the educational communities of future priests, the candidates must be aware of the responsibility that they themselves have in their own training. One must create a climate of trust and responsibility to ensure that the trainee may expose his problems without too much difficulty before his educators, asking for their help. The trainee must also recognize what are the limits that prevent or that make it seriously difficult to properly conduct his future ministry, so as to assess his own aptitude with insight, together with his educators. A severe shortage at psychological level can be a clear signal that the Lord is not calling him for that task. To face with sincerity and realism his own limitations makes the path towards healing less difficult, thus also enabling the grace to work in a heart and a mind in need of understanding, compassion and, yes, forgiveness.

To proceed with a personal project through celibacy presupposes a degree of affective and sexual maturity such as to be able to persevere in the grace of God, which always implies the nature of man. He who can really open up to love, will live his sexuality as an expression of his *altruism*.⁶ Renunciation is not an ancillary component of love, but is its direct consequence, such that the more it is determined the more it is strengthened by it. The more intense the love, the more effective the renunciation. He who truly loves does not care about renouncing that which opposes the object of his love. And vice versa, the more feeble the love, the less firm the renunciation, the more difficult

⁶ SAGRADA CONGREGACIÓN PARA LA EDUCACIÓN CATÓLICA, *Orientaciones educativas sobre el amor humano*, n.36.

it is when the time comes to sacrifice that which is incompatible with the beloved. In other words, renunciation strengthens the love at the same time in which the love motivates the renunciation.

The great mystics, masters of the love of God, were also masters of ascetism. Growth in mysticism is impossible without adequate ascetism. So, true ascetism, one that enables and promotes the love of God, is not opposed to freedom, and indeed makes it possible and promotes it. The term "ascetism" means "practice", "training"⁷. Just as athletes train hard in order to acquire skill in their sport, so in all areas of human life we need some training to achieve the goals we have set ourselves.

Having defined ascetism as a means to enable and encourage mysticism, as a discipline of love, it is necessary to creatively rethink the practical aspects of ascetism that, far from coercing our freedom, enhances its deepest ability: love.

The personal cultivation of an embodied spirituality will be crucial in living a deep spiritual life dedicated to Jesus and to his Church. In fact, all that is human has to do with the humanity of Christ, and it is in the light of His person that we can find authentic humanity (*GS 22*). Even the deepest wounds of a person find their meaning in Christ and their path to healing. It is therefore necessary to accept them with trust in the grace of Christ and in the ministry of his Church, which is a service of reconciliation and of communion.

Where was God?

The victims of abuse usually pose a burning question of a theological nature: Where was God while I was being abused by an adult? Obviously, the question becomes even more dramatic when the abuser is a minister of the Church, or an educator or even a close family member. The question arises not only in situations of abuse, but also in any other situation in which evil manifests itself, a sign of the non-presence of God. In the case of sexual child abuse, in most cases of a homosexual nature, scandal adds to the suffering. How can God allow such a thing? It is the mystery of human freedom, capable of choosing alone between good and evil, between love and hate, between the giving of oneself or the exploitation of others. The Bible not only transmits the Word of God, but His silence too.

The traumatic experience of the exile of the people of Israel, the situation of putting the just to the test and, finally, the experience of the passion and death of Jesus on the cross, place us before

⁷ A. CENCINI, *Por amor, con amor, en el amor. Libertad y madurez afectiva en el celibato consagrado*. Atenas, Madrid 1996, 594.

the mystery of unjust suffering permitted by God, which is also an instrument of purification and of growth in faith and hope and love; in short, an instrument of salvation. God does not want the suffering of man, but gave him the gift of free will, through which he is free to choose evil, and thus attack someone's dignity, causing him or her undue suffering. God gives the gift of freedom to do good, to love Him through our fellow beings, to be fulfilled in the world and create occasions for communion. But whenever man does not answer to his original vocation, God is there on the victim's side, although working silently through the Spirit of love to transform evil into good, into opportunities for personal growth and social trust in God and not in humans, opening to the transcendent by means of forgiveness. The Bible expresses God's deep and profound solidarity with the victims. If evil exists as a consequence of the denial of God, the victims, especially those of injustice, are the target of God's predilection.

The Church, as sacrament of the active presence of God in history, follows God's own behavioural model, showing its solidarity with the victims and engaging in the fight against child abuse, in the fight against all kinds of evil present in human history, and therefore sympathizing with any victim of any type of evil, to whom it offers words of comfort and relief based on the word/promise of God in Jesus Christ.

What does God want?

God manifests himself in human history, and it is in this way, through his experience in good and in evil, that God has words for man that leads him to a deeper understanding of himself and of his will.

This is how the Church, while cultivating its vocation to listening to the Word of God, must also cultivate its ability to listen to its members, especially those who have directly or indirectly suffered sexual abuse by its ministers or educators. The Christian community, through its intermediate layers, families, educators, schools, must pronounce words which encompass what God today wishes to say to His Church. Sincere and open dialogue is a necessary path towards the discernment of God's will.

Today, one of the aspects most felt by the Christian community is the need for greater or complete transparency in everything that has to do with the exercise of authority experienced during service, which implies responsibility for the individuals and for the resources available to fulfill the mission.

Although it is certain that the sin of members of the Church, and especially of its ministers, offends those members and the public, it is also certain that its concealment may lead to suspect or actually involve a type of hypocrisy that, in the end, would cause an even greater scandal when what was to be concealed comes to light.

The Church must be close to the victims of abuse, but can not fail to be close to the abusers too, now judged without mercy and in many cases considered as "scapegoats". The ecclesial community can not be guided simply by the adverse publicity campaigns that amplify its wrongdoings and conceal its positive aspects. The Church must always proclaim the infinite mercy of its Lord, especially towards those who repent of their sins and open up to the gift of conversion. In the grace of Christ the sinner always finds a new chance for life, reconciliation and peace. The emergency of the problem of child abuse at the hands of Catholic Church ministers can not remain at the mercy of exploitation that sows division and enmity in the community. The Church is challenged with facing the scorn with sincerity and with remedying it effectively, reaching an agreement among its members to tackle with spiritual maturity a delicate issue that makes clear the Spirit's invitation to authentic renewal.

The brave attitude of Pope Benedict XVI inspires this reflection, which intends to stimulate a renewed commitment to serving the Church, so that it may be always and every day more the mirror-image of the Heavenly Church (*Rv 21*) in the midst of the vicissitudes of this transient world. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (*Mt 24:35*).

Summary

Theological and moral reflections on sexual child abuse in the Catholic Church	1
Foreword	1
Male and Female	1
Everything, except for the Other	2
The reality of sin	3
David's sin	5
Sin and sexuality	6
Educating the person in his/her sexed dimension	7
Mediation of power at the service of the common good.....	7
Abuse of power	8
The Christian primacy	9
Power, sex and money.....	10
Abuse and abuses	10
Education in personal responsibility	11
Where was God?	12
What does God want?	13