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Justice-Abuse in the Catholic Church

Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, Creighton University

Abstract

We believe that the continuing emphasis on the *sexual-abuse* of minors in the Catholic Church, correct though it may be, helps to cover up the *justice-abuse* of both minors and adults, which is enabled by the exaggerated power and privilege presumed by and allowed to clerics that is rampant in the Church. This essay approaches the issue of justice-abuse from a perspective guided by the principle of faith that sees injustice and does justice and draws from scripture to explicitly challenge the use and abuse of power individually and institutionally that has led to sexual- and justice-abuse and its cover up in the Catholic Church.

Keywords: charity, clericalism, faith, justice-abuse, power, *scotosis*, scripture, sex-abuse

Introduction

We recently came across a powerful quote from Ronald Rolheiser. “To be connected with the Church is to be associated with scoundrels, warmongers, fakes, child-molesters, murderers, adulterers and hypocrites of every description. It also, at the same time, identifies you with the

saints and the finest persons of heroic soul within every time, country, race, and gender. To be a member of the Church is to carry the mantle of both the worst sin and the finest heroism of soul . . . *because the Church always looks exactly as it looked at the original crucifixion, God hung among thieves?* (Rolheiser 1999: 128, emphasis added). The past several years, from Pennsylvania and Washington in the U.S. to Wexford and Galway in Ireland to Melbourne and Adelaide in Australia, have demonstrated the truth of that quote in what the world media have chosen to call the clerical sexual abuse of minors. We are all shocked, ashamed, and angered that such evil could, first of all, be done by clerics and, then, be covered up by bishops in a church that claims to be the Body of Christ. The cover ups, we are told, were intended to prevent scandal in the Catholic Church, but they created an even greater scandal in which good, dedicated, chaste priests are damned by association with evil, abusive, and unchaste pedophiles and ephobophiles. While all of this is true, we believe the continuing emphasis on the *sexual-abuse* of minors covers up the *justice-abuse* of both minors and adults that is rampant in the Catholic Church, enabled by the exaggerated power and privilege presumed by and allowed to clerics as if they were Catholic royalty. This essay approaches this question from a perspective guided by the virtues of Christian faith and justice and their implications for both clerical and lay behavior.

An obvious and consistently ignored division in the world is the division between rich and poor. There are a very few people who are very rich and who have more wealth than they know what to do with and there are very many people who are very poor and struggle every day just to survive. Pope Francis writes of this inequality in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*: “We should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves worthier than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions” (2015: 9). There is another obvious and consistently ignored inequality in the Catholic Church at which we should be equally indignant, namely, the institutionalized power gap between clerics and laity in the Church and the abuse of their power by a small number of clerics. This power-gap is undoubtedly a major contribution to both justice- and sexual-abuse in the church as laity fear to react to, object to, and fail to report to the proper authorities abuse by clerics whose authority they have learned to trust and to fear. We recall a particularly powerful cleric (at least in his own mind) saying that he had been ordained for service and that he was making sure he got all the service to which he was entitled. We doubt that this is what Jesus had in mind when he announced that he had come “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). There are serious ethical issues embedded in the gap between the rich and the poor in societies and there are equally serious ethical issues embedded in the power-gap between laity and clerics in the church. In this essay, we propose as a remedy to those ethical issues the virtuous perspective of faith that sees injustice and does justice, in imitation of Jesus confessed in the Christian churches as the Christ and the incarnate son of God.

Faith that Sees Injustice and does Justice

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines faith as “the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us” (1814); it defines justice as the preservation of “our neighbor’s rights and render him[/her] what is his[/her] due” (2407).

Drawing on Catholic social teaching, the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, have prophetically joined these two virtues to promote a theological ethical principle, “faith that does justice.” We add what we believe is an important corrective to this principle: “faith that *sees* injustice and *does* justice,” for one necessary way to be moved to justice is first to see and then to be indignant at injustice. Clerical pedophiles and ephebophiles and the bishops who protect and enable them apparently do not see the injustice being done to minor and almost-adult boys and girls and, therefore, are not moved in their faith to do and to promote justice. They suffer from *scotosis*, from the Greek *skotoma* meaning darkness, in common parlance, a blind spot. *Scotosis* is not a conscious act but an emotional censorship, which can be either positive or negative. Positively, it selects and arranges materials that emerge in consciousness and give rise to knowledge; negatively, it prevents the emergence into consciousness of unwanted knowledge. The Catholic bishops around the world who protect pedophile and ephebophile priests are guilty of this negative censorship. By not wanting to know the injustice done by clerical pedophiles and ephebophiles to children and adults, they are creating and perpetuating *scotosis* in both lay Catholics and civil authorities that prevent them also from noticing the abuse being perpetrated in the church. We are told that the creation and perpetuation of that *scotosis* was to prevent scandal in the Body of Christ (Cupich 2019), but we suggest that it actually caused greater scandal by seeking to preserve and to protect clerical power and privilege in the Body of Christ. A virtuous perspective can shine light on that scotomic darkness that allows faith to *see* injustice and to *do* justice.

In order to *do* justice, to actively confront and eradicate clerical justice-abuse, we must first be able to *see* injustice. Faith that sees injustice and does justice reflects a virtuous perspective that, in turn, creates an awareness of and sensitivity to the reality of clerical justice-abuse throughout the Catholic world so that in word and, more importantly, in action we can respond to the reality of this injustice. This virtuous perspective aligns well with the “see, judge, act” model of pastoral reflection initiated by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, which invites an ethical response to lived experience, especially in this case the experience of clerical justice-abuse. Faith that sees injustice and does justice allows a person first to *see* injustice, both individual and ecclesial, then to *judge* injustice through analysis and evaluation, and finally to *act* on behalf of justice in light of that analysis and evaluation. The legitimate complaint about the reaction of many bishops to clerical sexual- and justice-abuse is that there have been too many words and promises of prayers and too few actions. Acts of justice will seek both to reform sinful systemic ecclesial structures that enable clericalism and clerical justice-abuse and to facilitate the attainment of human dignity and well-being, with the concomitant promotion of the common ecclesial good. Pope Francis has named clericalism, the power, privilege, and sense of entitlement of priests and bishops, as an illness in the church and at the root of the clerical sex-abuse and, we add, justice-abuse. “To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism” (Francis 2018). As individual acts of charity are necessary and important to fulfill the gospel imperative to love one’s neighbor, acts of justice are essential to confront and transform unjust social structures such as clericalism that violate the common good and perpetuate the endemic clerical justice-abuse we have learned is widespread throughout the Catholic Church.

Scripture and Justice

Injustice is not a new reality in world history and neither is the deep chasm between the powerful and the powerless, in this case between powerful Catholic clerics and powerless Catholic laity. We would expect it, therefore, to feature in the scriptural sources of Christian ethics, and so it does. To understand the meanings of the ideas expressed in those sources, however, we must first understand the differences between the culture of the times in which they were written and contemporary American culture and then understand the various perspectives of justice in scripture.

Scripture and Cultural Context

American culture is now largely individualistic, proposing that every individual person should stand unaided on his/her own two feet and generating cultural norms to enable and enforce this value. Try to imagine an individual diagnosing and curing his own cancer, creating his own worldwide web, or crossing from Ireland to Florida under his own steam to see how ridiculous such an ideal and value is. The culture in which the scriptures were written was quite different. It valued not individualism but communal covenant with God and, therefore, kinship with one another. Those who share this kinship are honor-bound to come to the aid of their kin.

In ancient Israel that covenantal kinship embraced all members of Israelite society. The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus extended that kinship to embrace all those who believed in Jesus as the Christ as brothers and sisters (Matthew 25:40; Luke 6:41-42; 1 Corinthians 8:13). This pattern is very much in play in everything the New Testament says about justice and the obligation the followers of Jesus have to value and care for one another as brothers and sisters. The God in whom Christians believe is a God who acts in human history, who liberated Israel from Egypt and who raised Jesus from the dead, verifying his life and everything he said about how to be “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). Christians are called to respond to God’s saving actions in history with ethical actions in their own history, specified by the observance of God’s commandments. That, of course, is exactly what clerical justice-abusers have not done, in spite of their preaching that Catholic laity observe those commandments to the letter. Hypocrisy heaped upon injustice.

Scriptural Perspectives on Justice

When we ask what are the actions God demands of his believers, the scriptures leave us in no doubt that God demands just actions. However, what justice demands is not always clear or consistent in Scripture. The Old Testament reveals that the power of the God who led Israel from Egypt will continue to be in defense of the vulnerable, but defense of the vulnerable does not eliminate violations of justice in scripture such as slavery (Exodus 21:17) or human sacrifice (Exodus 22:29-30). Justice in scripture is not a homogeneously understood concept but has various, often conflicting definitions and manifestations (Portier-Young and Sterling). Therefore, we must investigate various perspectives on biblical justice to gain some insight into both what justice requires in scripture and what correcting justice-abuse in the church requires.

To begin, we repeat the *Catechism’s* definition of justice: the preservation of “our neighbor’s rights and render him[/her] what is his[/her] due” (2407). When looking towards

scripture for some indication of how to understand and apply justice to a contemporary situation, we must read scripture in a critical and discerning way. Some perspectives attempt to ground the virtue of justice in “biblical principles” or values to justify moral arguments. However, as John Collins accurately points out, there are clear biblical values, often codified as laws, that violate justice, such as slavery and human sacrifice. There are also sometimes projections into scripture of contemporary values and moral positions it does not share, values protecting heterosexual marriage against same-sex marriage, for instance, or the absolute condemnation of abortion, or the defense of the nation of Israel (Billy Graham Evangelistic Association). Collins points out that the most basic biblical value is love of God, neighbor and, we add, self, and that this love is expressed through actions that incarnate social justice, concern for the most vulnerable in society and in the church (Collins).

In order to use scripture appropriately in constructing a definition of justice, then, we must have recourse to biblical values, recognizing factors that complicate attempts to make those values normative for the contemporary world. These factors include: direct and explicit violations in scripture of what we understand today to be basic manifestations of justice, such as the biblical approbation of slavery; different theologies in books of the Bible that promote different values and, thus, different perspectives on justice (e.g., an eye for an eye [Exodus 21:24] or love your enemies [Matthew 5:44]); multiple values extracted from scripture that may, and often do, come into conflict (e.g., self-defense [Exodus 22:2-3] vs. thou shalt not kill [Exodus 20:13]); recognizing that adopting one set of values from scripture may require that we reject another set of values; recognizing that the values we deduce from scripture that guide our definition of justice are subject to conflict and changing historical and cultural contexts; and acknowledging that scripture provides those values as guidelines to inform discerning consciences, not absolute rules to be followed to the letter of the law.

Moshe Weinfeld extends the understanding of biblical justice as care and concern for the vulnerable and exploited and argues that, at the very foundation of God’s covenant with Abraham, the moral imperative of the covenant is “to keep the way of YHWH, by performing righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19). Insuring justice and eliminating exploitation includes “the elimination of exploitation and oppression on the part of oppressors . . .” and “must come, first and foremost, *from the exploiters themselves*,” that is, from those who hold power and can exercise exploitation (7; emphasis added).¹ Drawing from Collin’s focus on biblical values in scripture and placing the realization of biblical justice squarely at the feet of the powerful, as does Weinfeld, has profound implications for the current Catholic justice-abuse scandal. There are several biblical values we draw from scripture that can guide us in discerning justice, naming justice-abuse in the church, and offering suggestions for correcting that abuse.

Jeremiah, for instance, proclaims: “Thus says the Lord of Hosts . . . If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless, the widow, [the vulnerable] . . . then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever” (7:2-7). The reciprocation could not be

¹ John Donahue (9-13) notes the challenge of translating the Hebrew *tsedaqah*, and its contemporary meaning. It is frequently translated as “righteous” or “righteousness.” The contemporary meaning of righteous evokes personal virtue or rectitude and the social implications and demands of the original Hebrew are lost. He prefers the *New American Bible*’s translation of *tsedaqah* as “justice.” We concur with his assessment.

made clearer: knowledge and love of God is proved in practice by action on behalf of justice for the vulnerable. Isaiah's messianic formulation of the intimate connection between God and justice for the vulnerable leads us into the New Testament, for in Luke's Gospel Jesus chooses it for commentary in his home synagogue of Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives . . . for I the Lord love justice" (Isaiah 61:1-8). This predilection for the vulnerable that Isaiah prophetically proclaims will be characteristic of the coming Messiah, the ultimately righteous one of Israel. That the Messiah has come in Jesus is proclaimed in Luke's commentary on Isaiah's text: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The confession of the followers of Jesus was and is that he is the promised Messiah, the Christ (Mark 1:1; Matthew 1:1), the one anointed by God "to bring good tidings to the afflicted." The gospels announce he is the Messiah in their report of his baptism by John the Baptizer, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, and his designation by a heavenly voice as "beloved son" (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22). Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God in favour of the justice-abused and afflicted, not only in words but more importantly in actions, is what led him, first, to his death on the cross at the hands of justice-abusers and, then, to his being raised by God who loves justice (1 Corinthians 15:4; Romans 6:4 and 8:4; Colossians 2:12; Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15). His disciples were deeply dispirited by his death but "their eyes were opened" (Luke 24:31) when God raised him from the dead (Acts 2:24, 32; Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 15:15). In the resurrection God verified that the words and deeds of Jesus were right with God and that he was, indeed, the "holy and righteous [or just] one" (Acts 2:14).

The eyes of Jesus' followers were so well and truly opened by his resurrection that, ultimately, they confessed not only that he was the Christ, the just one sent by God, but also that he was God in human form pitching his tent among us (John 1:14). The universal biblical reciprocation between God and the justice-abused reaches an unsurpassable personification and high point in Jesus who is God become justice-abused by his priests and the bishops who covered up the abuse, those with power in the Catholic community. It is in his life on behalf of his vulnerable and afflicted sisters and brothers, on behalf of justice-abused vulnerable minors and adults, that Jesus is finally recognized as God's beloved Son. It is in their lives on behalf of Jesus and their justice-abused sisters and brothers that Christians, too, will be recognized as God's beloved daughters and sons, for Jesus "clearly taught the sons [and daughters] of God to treat one another as brothers" and sisters (Paul VI: 32). In our twenty-first century world there is great need for such Christian action for justice, for our world has been demonstrated to be home to gravely wounded brothers and sisters who have been justice-abused by the very priests and bishops they trusted because they perceived them as vowed followers of Jesus who was God made justice-abused.

Good Jew that he was, Jesus upheld the reciprocal relationship between God and the vulnerable and insisted that to know and love God is to act on behalf of the vulnerable and against every injustice perpetrated against them. Matthew makes this position clearest in his Sermon on the Mount: "Not everyone who *says* to me 'Lord, Lord' [which every guilty justice-abusing cleric is now piously saying] shall enter the kingdom of heaven but the one who *does* the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21) [which they most certainly are not doing]. God's will, as abundantly exemplified by Jesus, is that we care for our vulnerable brothers and sisters,

most especially our children, and on the whole many priests and bishops have miserably subverted that will, preferring the protection of the powerful over the protection of the justice-abused. The disciples who responded to Jesus' invitation to "follow me" (Mark 1:17; Matthew 4:18), "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6), and that includes all those who call themselves Christians today, were and are bound to uphold the same reciprocal relationship and to ensure that it is lived not only in words but also in actions. Matthew makes this clearest in his chilling judgment scene (Matt 25: 41-45): Then Jesus will say to those at his left hand "depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." We could add today, "I was sexually abused and you did not protect me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison [or justice-abused] and did not minister to you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

Matthew's final judgment scene is a chilling condemnation for those who, both then and now, do not recognize the reciprocation between God and the justice-abused, and a blessing for those who do: those who justice-abuse the vulnerable, especially those in power to whom the justice-abused legitimately looked for protection, "will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous [who treat them with the justice due to them] into eternal life" (Matthew 25:46). The justice that God and God's Christ demand of their followers is not easy for, although humans were created by God in a state of holiness, from the very beginning of history until today they abused their freedom at the urging of personified evil. They are split within themselves and many of them lead a double life. On the one hand, clerics vowed to chastity and service, on the other hand, hypocrites, justice-abusers, child-molesters, and bishops, who protect them and attempt to cover-up, so perpetuate justice-abuse.

How far all Christians today are from being truly followers of Jesus – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – is suggested in a statement from the Second Vatican Council in 1965. "To satisfy the demands of justice and equity, strenuous efforts must be made . . . to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities, which now exist . . ." (Paul VI: 66). Among the "immense inequalities . . . which now exist" in the Catholic Church, as we earlier noted, is an immense inequality of power and privilege between clerics and laity, especially between clerics and children, which opens itself to abuse of all kinds. If any action is to be taken to correct systemic justice- and sex-abuse in the church, the first action must be the removal of that immense inequality. When they are no longer allowed exaggerated power and privilege to abuse by their Catholic sisters and brothers, when they are stripped of their power and privilege and all the medieval trappings of that power and privilege, as is now happening, perhaps clerics will correct their *scotosis* and see the justice-abused in the church as they Christianly are, equal children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. Present day Christians, too, must recognize their own *scotosis* in the past and present justice-abuse in the church, for they have *allowed* clerics to claim a power and privilege which is not theirs in Christ's or God's eyes. In this sense, human life manifests itself as a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness, and every man and woman, every Christian, partakes in that struggle. Not one of us can judge justice- or sexual-abusers as if we ourselves were sinless. However, with greater power comes greater responsibility. The biblical value insuring justice

and eliminating exploitation must come, first and foremost, from those in power and “*from the exploiters themselves*” (Weinfeld: 7; emphasis added). The greater power of bishops who covered up sexual abuse through justice-abuse have greater responsibility to work towards transforming structures that perpetuate justice- and sexual abuse. For their part, the laity must no longer support clericalism and a clerical culture that perpetuates justice-abuse. Jesus instructs his disciples that those who have authority over the gentiles Lord it over them. “But it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44; Matthew 20:25-27). The providing, not the receiving, of service is the characteristic of the follower of Jesus. If any of them have power and privilege, it is power and privilege to serve. If any of us have power and privilege, it is power and privilege to serve.

This call to service is reported and acted out in John’s Gospel. John reports that Jesus washes his disciples’ feet at his last supper with them, a prophetic action that both reveals his will to be and to be remembered as servant and challenges those who remember him at the supper to be and to do the same. Jesus underlines the challenge: “I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). Jesus, God’s anointed Christ, the God-verified righteous and just one, who lived a life of neighbor-love (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31) in service to others, challenged his followers, then and now, to do the same. His supper injunction, “Do this in memory of me,” enjoins Christians to celebrate their eucharistic supper in memory of both his service of his brothers and sisters and their call to do the same.

Conclusion

We wonder how clerics who commit justice-abuse feel when they come to celebrate communion. By their justice-abuse they have ruptured communion in the Body of Christ and have caused many to abandon communion in this Body, driven out by the abuse they or their loved ones have suffered. As they hypocritically pretend to celebrate communion in the Lord’s supper, justice-abusers must quake at the final Judge’s judgment: “as you did it not to one of the least of these you did it not to me” (Matthew 25:45); as you did it not to my children, you did it not to me. When communion with the justice-abused is ruptured, so also is communion with the just Christ and his God. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics have left the church that is called to be and calls itself the Body of Christ, a communion of sisters and brothers who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; they do not find communion in it. In our world, *Gaudium et Spes* teaches, “it grows increasingly true that the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person,” contributes to the common good, “according to his own abilities and the needs of others” (Paul VI: 30). With greater power comes greater responsibility.

If the darkness that now overspreads the justice-abused Body of Christ, and if communion is ever to be recreated in it, we suggest, all Catholics, the few justice-abusing clerics, the many justice-affirming clerics, and lay women and men of all descriptions will all have to respond to Jesus’ invitation to “believe in the light that you may become sons [and daughters] of the light” (John 12:36). He offers ultimate comfort to all who may have lost hope: “I have come,” he says, “as light into the world that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46). That is the bedrock message of Christianity: the evil spread abroad by “scoundrels, warmongers, fakes, child-molesters, murderers, adulterers and

hypocrites” (Rolheiser 1999: 128) will not prevail in the end over the good spread abroad by saintly souls who believe that Jesus is the light of the world and walk in that light.

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