

Not diabolical, not banal. On perpetrators of sexual abuse in the church

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This contribution focuses on the perspective of the perpetrator to understand, assess and help prevent the problem of sexual abuse in the church and does so from a Christian-ethical perspective. We realise that this choice is not obvious. Today, much attention is rightly focused on the victims of church abuse. Moreover, a Christian-ethical approach is not self-evident because perpetrators often situate themselves within a Christian-ethical framework, which has sometimes trivialised or even legitimised their crimes. Our analysis is based on the idea that (future) victims can best be protected by also understanding what motivates the perpetrator. Sexual abuse in the church happens by concrete people in specific contexts. Many do not understand that Christians in particular, and Christian authority figures in particular, can commit such crimes. This raises the question of how Christian ethics is vulnerable to perversion and how it can rediscover itself in light of sexual abuse, especially in speaking about judgement, punishment and forgiveness.

There are different ways of looking at the perpetrator of sexual abuse. In the ethics literature, there is a paradigm battle over this, depending on divergent and sometimes clashing anthropological, philosophical, ethical and theological presuppositions. This contribution discusses three classic ethical approaches to the offender, each applied to sexual abuse in the church: demonisation, banalisation and ethicisation. A fourth section presents our Christian-ethical view of the offender's evil, followed by reflections on forgiveness and the unforgivable. We end with a plea for a culture of remembrance of victims in the church, based on a theology of Holy Saturday.

1. Demonising the perpetrator of sexual abuse

The first approach to the perpetrator is the most popular, widespread and also the most obvious reaction to the harm done by the perpetrator. Public opinion usually reacts immediately and exclusively with feelings of moral disgust to news of abuse, especially in a church context. Today, the pastoral relationship is often the last refuge for believers to turn to within the church with their problems. Therefore, it should not be surprising that outsiders, victims and fellow pastors react indignantly when cases of abuse in the pastoral context come to light. "Anywhere but not in the church," it often reads.

In this "moral rage", it becomes clear that humans are not neutral beings. We do not remain indifferent when confronted with good and evil, but we discover ourselves as connected to the good. In this sense, moral outrage is a positive thing. It shows that people are capable of worrying about evil and that they have the capacity to discover themselves as directed towards, or placed on the path of Good.

Yet, there is a risk that people are guided by this ethical outrage to the extent that they start using simplistic and ultimately problematic ethical schemas in their judgements of crime and criminal. We often see public opinion placing great emphasis on the immorality of those who abuse their power in a pastoral relationship. This kind of approach is often based on a dualistic view of good and evil, in which evil is identified with the perpetrator without question. Theologically, this reasoning can be supported with the image of the "angry (judging/punishing) God" who is hostile to evil and the sinner.

The whole complexity and many degrees of abuse in the pastoral relationship is reduced in this approach to the shocking and unequivocal confrontation of the powerful and immoral pastor with the vulnerable and utterly innocent victim. Because of our genuine moral indignation, we will usually agree to such a depiction of the actual abuse of power that sometimes takes on unpredictably suggestible violent forms (but equally sometimes subtle and almost invisible).

However, this unambiguous, highly popular binary scheme usually does not do justice to the multi-faceted nature of the phenomenon. The issue of abuse has many forms and variants. In the dualistic representation, this continuum is replaced by the unambiguous picture of the ill-wishing suspect (and vulnerable victim).

The programme *Godvergeten* ("Godforsaken"; VRT, 2023) not only brought the issue of sexual abuse in the church back into the spotlight (and rightly so) as an unprocessed past, but at the same time revived the paradigm of the demonisation of the perpetrator, even among new generations who were encountering the issue for the first time. *Godvergeten* finally gave the victims a face and made the story of their deep suffering

resonate with reverence. The perpetrator, and by extension the entire church system, was presented in the documentary as a dark, evil force. The makers chose (besides a specific selection of victims) not to include perpetrators, which led to a one-sided picture. The church was portrayed as an institution that encouraged and covered up systematic abuse, without nuance or acknowledgement of positive initiatives the church took in the meantime. This approach, while understandable from the perspective of victims, carries the risk of an overly simplistic representation of the issue, which can ultimately be counterproductive in addressing and preventing abuse in the future. It often forces the church into a defensive posture, impedes a structural approach, and sometimes even pushes the church into believing itself to be a victim of a conspiracy by anti-church media.

2. Banalisation of the perpetrator of sexual abuse

The trivialisation of evil is a second approach that seeks to understand the perpetrator of sexual abuse from the human condition and social context. This view recognises that every human being is vulnerable and capable of evil in certain circumstances. It often sees the perpetrator as a victim of a system or culture, and emphasises the complexity of human behaviour and ethical judgements. This approach looks for explanatory determinants and contextual factors to understand evil, and points to the grey areas between good and evil.

The trivialisation of evil offers insight into how internal church power dynamics can contribute to sexual abuse within the church. The closed culture of the church environment can lead to a lack of transparency and external control, which can encourage abuse of power. The hierarchical structure of the church plays a crucial role here, with authority figures having considerable power over subordinates and believers. Priests and other church functionaries often hold positions of trust within the community, which can be abused to gain access to potential victims. These power dynamics can result in situations where perpetrators are not easily held accountable, allowing abuse to be perpetuated.

In the context of sexual abuse in the church, this approach can lead to the popular understanding that perpetrators are seen as victims of a rigid system of celibacy. It then highlights the social loneliness and emotional needs of priests. Also fitting into the context of trivialisation is the often-heard argument that abuse was considered more or less “commonplace”, or at least tolerated, “at the time” and “in the cultural context of the time.” This reasoning suggests that “everyone” knew about such practices, but no one intervened because of prevailing norms and values.

While this approach offers insight into the complexity and contextuality of evil, it is also rightly criticised. First, this approach undermines the personal responsibility of the perpetrator by placing too much blame for the behaviour on the cultural context, which can lead to downplaying the seriousness of crimes. Banalisation ignores the fact that, regardless of the zeitgeist, individuals still make moral choices and are responsible for their actions. Second, this reasoning ignores the victims’ pain and suffering by suggesting that their experiences were less severe because they took place at a time when such behaviour would have been “accepted”. This risks minimising the trauma and long-term consequences for victims and can lead to a lack of recognition and justice.

Some explanations are also oversimplified or even downright wrong. Sexual abuse, for example, also occurs in non-celibate contexts, including families and other religious communities that precisely do not practice celibacy. This suggests that celibacy itself is not a direct cause of abuse. Many priests (and others) consciously choose a celibate life and experience it as meaningful, without leading to transgressive behaviour. Therefore, simply abolishing celibacy does not guarantee the elimination of abuse. Meanwhile, it does feed a stereotype that all priests, or *in extenso*, all celibate people are potential abusers in whom responsibility is, as it were, automatically switched off.

3. Ethicisation of the perpetrator of sexual abuse

Ethicisation of the offender is a third approach that focuses on the moral reasoning and justification that people build up for themselves even when they do evil. This approach assumes that offenders, even when they commit morally reprehensible acts, still try to remain ethically consistent in their own or others’ eyes. They construct an (individual or collective) moral framework (“an ethic”) within which their actions appear justified.

In the context of sexual abuse in the church, this ethicisation manifests itself in complex ways. Perpetrators of abuse in pastoral settings often construct elaborate internal moral justifications for their actions. For example, they may reason that their actions stem from genuine love or pastoral care. Some interpret their actions as a form of spiritual guidance or see themselves as instruments of God's love. These moral justifications may be reinforced by the special position pastoral caregivers occupy. They often see themselves as mediators between God and humanity, which can lead to a sense of moral superiority or untouchability. This can result in a belief that the normal rules of inter human behaviour do not apply to them, or that their "higher calling" entitles them to overstep boundaries.

In addition, Christian teachings on forgiveness and grace can be misused in this process of ethicisation. Perpetrators may convince themselves that their sins will be forgiven, or that their good works proportionally outweigh their transgressions. They may also shift blame to the victim by pointing to their "sinfulness" or "temptation."

Paradoxically, the celibacy and sexual abstinence expected of clergy may also contribute to this ethicisation. Some offenders rationalise their behaviour as a "necessary evil" in order to continue performing their pastoral duties, or see it as a "human weakness" that is forgivable in the light of their greater devotion to God. Or as a "just compensation" for what they have to "miss out on."

These moral arguments enable perpetrators to maintain a positive self-image and continue their behaviour despite the suffering they cause. Understanding this ethicisation is crucial for developing effective prevention measures and interventions within pastoral and therapeutic contexts. It is important to learn to recognise different forms of it: spiritualisation of abuse, redefinition of love, moral compensation, victimisation of the perpetrator, relativisation of harm, appeal to a higher authority, far shifting responsibility to the "seducing" victim, appeal to the special needs of the victim, rationalisation from celibacy, misuse of forgiveness, and so on.

The critique of ethicisation is that perpetrators simply misuse ethics to legitimise their crimes. This approach shows how perpetrators of sexual abuse blatantly manipulate ethical concepts and moral reasoning to justify or cover up their misdeeds. This is not ethics, but a perversion of it. Endorsing ethicisation leads to moral relativism. Good and evil are redefined as one sees fit, which goes against the fundamental principles of ethics that seek precisely to protect against self-interest and harm to others. By using ethics in this way, perpetrators (and anyone who follows this track) undermine the whole concept of moral responsibility, and minimize the seriousness of their actions and the harm to victims.

4. A Christian view of right and wrong in the context of sexual abuse

Our own Christian vision of good and evil in the context of sexual abuse offers a perspective that counters these simplistic approaches. It opposes not only the binary dynamic of demonising perpetrators, but also approaches that do not take evil sufficiently seriously, such as trivialisation or ethicisation, which explain away or legitimise evil respectively.

Central to our approach is the concept of fragmentation. This refers to the tendency of people in confrontation with evil to separate different aspects of their personality and behaviour. A poignant example of this is the priest who abuses a child in a sacred space, where he then devoutly celebrates mass. Fragmentation allows the perpetrator to coexist with two seemingly incompatible realities: one's own high moral self-image and doing abominable evil. Because fragmentation is never perfect, it is almost always accompanied by self-deception. Perpetrators try to convince themselves that their actions are not harmful, try to rationalise them within their role as clerics; but at the same time, they are aware that this moral framing is actually implausible to themselves (and to others). They deceive themselves (perpetrator) and they are simultaneously deceived by themselves (victim).

Ironically, strict morality from the church can reinforce this fragmentation and self-deception. Faced with a rigid moral framework, people – and perpetrators in particular – may be tempted, for fear of moral rejection, to split their "bad" behaviour even more from their "good" selves, instead of integrating it and taking responsibility for it. This can lead to a dangerous form of hypocrisy. A purely repressive approach to sexual abuse may therefore well backfire, pushing perpetrators even further into fragmentation and self-deception.

A Christian outlook recognises that no one is completely good or completely evil. Even perpetrators of serious crimes retain their humanity and the potential for change. At the same time, this means that even

seemingly “good” people have the potential and real possibility of doing evil, especially in situations where they receive or acquire power.

This approach calls for deep self-reflection within the church. It requires spiritual directors and church leaders to recognise their own vulnerabilities and potential to abuse. It also requires a rethinking of ethical practices, church structures and clerical cultures that facilitate or even encourage fragmentation and self-deception.

For dealing with perpetrators, this vision implies an approach that goes beyond pure condemnation or easy excuses. It requires a process of confronting one’s own crimes, empathy for victims, taking responsibility and inner transformation. Perpetrators must be encouraged to overcome the fragmentation in their self-image and face the full impact of their actions. Without this, even the beginnings of recovery and forgiveness are not possible.

For victims, this approach provides a framework to better understand the offender without downplaying the seriousness of their crimes. It recognises the complexity of their feelings towards the offender, which are often a mixture of fear, anger, confusion and sometimes even affection.

For the church as a whole, this vision calls for a culture of openness, accountability and constant vigilance. It requires breaking the silence and denial that often surround sexual abuse. The church (and society) as a whole has also spent decades “fragmenting away” from this great evil in its own bosom. Finally, it also calls for the development of robust mechanisms to prevent, report and address abuse.

Ultimately, this Christian vision of good and evil offers a nuanced perspective that acknowledges the seriousness of sexual abuse, while also leaving room for healing, reconciliation and transformation. It challenges the church to look more deeply at human nature and become a more authentic and protective community, countering fragmentation and self-preservation and encouraging integral and communal accountability.

Dealing with perpetrators of sexual abuse is often complicated by the classic opposition between demonisation (by certain victims and public opinion) and ethicisation (by perpetrators, their lawyers and sometimes the church itself). These dynamics are often mutually reinforcing and thus hinder effective transformation and prevention. Our alternative approach could take shape in new professional, interdisciplinary counselling centres at Catholic (university) institutions where perpetrators of sexual abuse in the church at various stages of abuse can safely go for help and remediation, within a well-formed Christian anthropology.

5. Is forgiveness possible?

Forgiveness in the context of sexual abuse within the church is extremely sensitive. On the one hand, Church teaching often adopts harsh and principled positions that can (further) push perpetrators into self-deception and moral hypocrisy. On the other hand, in pastoral practice, perpetrators are sometimes granted mercy too quickly and easily, without sufficient attention to the seriousness of the evil and its victims. The inadequate alignment between “morality” and “pastoralism” can have tragic consequences, as demonstrated by the so-called Danneels tapes (2010), in which the late Cardinal Danneels repeatedly used the word “forgiveness” to silence the victim. A Christian forgiveness discourse thus risks becoming a tool to be used against victims and giving perpetrators an easy way out.

Yet, if approached correctly, forgiveness can remain a precious reality. It offers offenders a chance to confront their crime without the mercilessly demonising gaze of public opinion, and to reconnect with themselves, others, and God. For victims, it offers a way to break free from the suffocating relationship with the perpetrator and their misdeeds, and to give their own wounds a chance to heal and to mend.

In a Christian understanding, however, forgiveness is always tied to conditions upon the offender: repentance, punishment, restitution, prevention and remembrance

Sincere repentance requires from the offender an authentic, and unambiguous recognition and confession of his own responsibility and guilt, with great empathy for the suffering of the victims. For the church, this also implies a collective dimension of guilt and an ecclesiological reflection on the sinfulness of the church as an institution.

Punishment is also among the conditions for forgiveness. It serves as reparation to victims and society, but also offers the offender an opportunity for self-reflection, regaining dignity, and rebuilding society.

Restitution means trying to repair the harm done as much as possible. This requires respect, creativity and patience, recognising that victims’ suffering can usually never be fully compensated. It will never be

enough in most cases. The evil is too great for that. Christians, in the context of sexual abuse, will have to learn to live with forms of irresolvability, even after all sincere efforts at recovery.

Prevention is a task for individual pastors, church leaders and theology. Prevention can include training, screening, behaviour codes, reporting procedures, monitoring, support and a culture of openness and vigilance within the church.

Remembering means not forgetting, nor endlessly recalling, but remembering with an eye to the future. This is how the wound can become a scar. Sexual abuse is an indelible scar on the face of the church. It deserves a permanent place in the church's identity through symbols, rituals, prayers, commemorations and giving voice to victims.

Only subject to these conditions can forgiveness play its own salutary role in the painful context of sexual abuse within the church.

Yet at the same time, forgiveness remains a gratuitous act on behalf of the victim, which cannot be enforced even if all conditions are met on the offender's side. Forgiveness belongs to the order of love, not justice. Even the offender's greatest confession of guilt does not imply a "right" of the offender to receive forgiveness.

Forgiveness also does not necessarily mean reconciliation or re-establishing the relationship with the offender. It can be an inner process in which the victim frees themselves from negative emotions that hold them captive, without necessarily having consequences for the relationship with the perpetrator (or a return to the church). This choice of the victim should also be respected.

"Unforgiveness" can arise when an offender traps themselves in fragmentation and self-deception, making receiving forgiveness impossible. This actual situation of unforgiveness can also occur when the perpetrator or victim has died, or when the victim is unable or unwilling to offer forgiveness to the perpetrator who is able to receive forgiveness authentically.

Christian doctrine has wrestled for centuries with the question of whether there is a form of unforgiveness that persists even after death, believing on the one hand that evil will eventually be overcome, while on the other hand leaving open the possibility that an offender may choose to permanently turn away from God, disappearing into the "nothingness" of one's own fragmentation.

6. Plea for a culture of remembrance of Holy Saturday

The church, wishing to make remembrance in the context of sexual abuse, could declare Holy Saturday (in Dutch: "Stille zaterdag", literally: "Silent Saturday") locally or globally, temporarily or permanently, a day of remembrance for the victims of sexual abuse in the church and more broadly, for all victims of human history. Holy Saturday provides a liturgical and ecclesial "delay" between evil (Good Friday) and redemption (Easter), a time to take the suffering of victims seriously in quiet reflection, without too quickly reaching for explanation, without cheap grace, but waiting and suffering with. It is a day of "silence" in the church after all the words have been spoken, a day when Christians can allow it to sink in that for the victims and perpetrators all seems lost, a day of comforting and acknowledging that there is no quick answer for evil. By recognising Holy Saturday as a day recalling sexual abuse in the church, the church learns to live "in exile", between earthly misery and heavenly goodness, between rebellion against evil and faith in the resurrection of the Good.