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Abuse in the Church: The Perpetrator Perspective
Ethical and Theological Reflections on Evil, Forgiveness and the Unforgivable

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Abstract. — *This article examines sexual abuse in ecclesiastical contexts through a comprehensive analysis of the perpetrator perspective, offering a critical evaluation of three dominant ethical frameworks: diabolization, banalization, and ethicization. It challenges simplistic moral dichotomies and argues for a nuanced understanding of power dynamics within pastoral relationships, emphasizing how perpetrators employ fragmentation and self-deception to justify their actions. The analysis extends beyond individual cases to address systemic institutional factors while exploring the complex interplay between Christian ethics, forgiveness, and accountability. The article proposes that authentic forgiveness requires meeting five essential conditions: sincere repentance, acceptance of punishment, restitution, prevention, and memory work. It introduces the concept of* "l'impardonnable" *(the unforgivable) and examines its theological implications, particularly in cases where perpetrators maintain patterns of self-deception or victims are unable to grant forgiveness. The discussion culminates in advocating for a theology of Silent Saturday, proposing this as a framework for institutional remembrance and victim recognition. Through this analysis, the article contributes to understanding how religious institutions can address historical abuse while developing more effective preventive measures and supporting healing processes for victims, perpetrators, and the broader religious community.*

This contribution focuses on the perspective of the perpetrator to understand, assess, and help prevent the problem of sexual abuse in the Church from a Christian-ethical perspective. We realize that this choice and this perspective are not obvious. After all, today there is (rightly) a leading call to give voice and recognition to the victims of Church abuse after many years of denial, trivialization, or even suspicion. Moreover, even a Christian-ethical approach is not obvious given that the perpetrators often situate themselves within a Christian-ethical framework, and this framework has not been able to prevent their crimes; on the contrary, it has sometimes channeled or even legitimized them. Our analysis is based on the idea that we can best empower and protect current and

future victims by (also) understanding what motivates the perpetrator. After all, sexual abuse in the Church does not just fall from heaven but happens through concrete people in specific contexts. The choice of a Christian-ethical approach is motivated by the fact that many people, Christians and non-believers alike, do not understand that precisely Christians, and especially Christian authority figures, have committed such crimes. This critical observation implicitly echoes the fact that sexual abuse cannot be reconciled in any way with the Christian message. Therefore, it seems useful to us to consider not only where Christian ethics is vulnerable to such perversion but also how it can rediscover itself in the face of the unspeakable evil of sexual abuse, for example, in Christian vocabulary about judgment, punishment, and forgiveness. Our undertaking is further complicated by the fact that there is no single perspective on the perpetrator and, relatedly, no single reading of Christian ethics. On the contrary, there are different ways of looking at the perpetrators of sexual abuse and their crimes. In this regard, there is a veritable paradigm battle in the ethics literature,[1] referring back to divergent and even clashing anthropological, philosophical, ethical, and theological presuppositions. This contribution presents three classic ethical approaches to the offender, each applied to sexual abuse in the Church. These views are analyzed and criticized one after the other: diabolization, banalization, and ethicization. A fourth section presents our Christian-ethical view of the evil of the perpetrator of sexual abuse and, from there, formulates some reflections on forgiveness and the unforgivable. This contribution ends with a plea to install in the Church a culture of remembrance for victims founded on a theology of Silent Saturday.

1. Diabolizing the Perpetrator of Sexual Abuse

The first approach to the perpetrator is the most popular, widespread, and 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 situations, especially in a Church context and in a contemporary social media environment. And understandably so. Today, the pastoral relationship is often the last refuge for believers to turn to within the Church with their problems. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that outsiders, victims, and fellow pastors react indignantly when cases of abuse in the pastoral context come to light.

1. Didier Pollefeyt, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 41-86.

"Everywhere but still not in the Church," it often reads. This "moral fury" makes it clear that humans are not neutral beings in an anthropological sense. We do not remain indifferent when confronted with good and evil but 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 – despite all the comments of cultural pessimists about the collapse of values – people are still capable of discovering themselves as directed toward, or placed on the trail of, the good. Even if in a negative way, moral outrage expresses how people also continue to associate the Christian message as such with authenticity and humanity, even if they are not religious. Why else be outraged?

Yet there is a risk that this ethical outrage may lead people to use simplistic and ultimately problematic ethical schemas in their judgment of crimes and criminals. We often see how the public opinion places great emphasis on the immorality of those who abuse their power in a pastoral relationship. This 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 by the image of the "angry (judging/punishing) God" who is hostile to evil and the sinner. The whole complexity of abuse in the pastoral relationship can be traced back in this approach to the shocking and unequivocal confrontation with the powerful and immoral pastor. Because of our genuine moral outrage, we will usually agree to such a depiction of the actual abuse of power that sometimes takes unimaginably violent forms. Such a schema, by the way, contains much of the truth about abuse of power, especially when it comes to the absolutely vulnerable and innocent victim who is at the mercy of the perpetrator's atrocities.

However, this unambiguous, highly popular binary usually does not do justice to the phenomenon's complexity. The issue of abuse in- and outside the Church can be situated on a continuum along the side of the perpetrator and has many degrees and variations. On this continuum, you find the pastoral caregiver who in a pitiful way searches for meaning and humanity or who, out of an inherent sense of loneliness and the lack of human recognition and warmth, is driven to cross boundaries and seek affection from the care receiver; but you also meet the perpetrator who blatantly lies, cheats and manipulates to selfishly get his or her due. The continuum is replaced by the unified image of the ill-wishing suspect (and the vulnerable victim) in the dualistic representation.[2]

2. Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

Some media in particular tend to incite polarization. In many media representations relating to cases of sexual abuse, the accused becomes a predatory animal, a hideous devil (versus the defenseless victim). In this paradigm, the justified choice to stand up for the innocent victim leads to an overly simplistic attitude toward the perpetrator. Anyone who dares to draw attention to perpetrators in a pastoral context is quickly suspected of wanting to minimize the enormous damage done to the victim. The result of such an approach is often a highly moralizing attitude toward abuse of power, in which a clear distinction is made between the "good" and the "bad" pastoral caregiver, or – worse – in which the whole pastoral world (or even the whole Church) is smeared with the same evil, making serene (and non-biased) reflection very difficult.

Taken by itself, this model can be a very attractive way of thinking. It offers an easily manageable schema, an unambiguous warning, and a radical "no" to abuse of power in the pastoral context. The main advantage of this schema is that it places the responsibility for abuse of power on the pastoral caregiver in a clear and utterly correct way. Therefore, this model is a very safe choice. It draws the clear moral lines of physical and emotional intimacy: boundaries that should never be crossed and responsibility that should be regarded as service, not mere power. It is based on the linear view of the relationship between power and ethics, centered around the categories of "warning" and "judgment": "It is forbidden. Otherwise, punishment will be given."

This is a very important and valuable message. In this contribution, however, we try to show that if the approach to abuse of power was limited to this external moral condemnation, it would fall short of preventing abuse of power in the long run or even be counterproductive. This moralizing approach holds no space for the complexity and paradoxes in the relationship between power and powerlessness in the pastoral context nor for the plurality of gradations and shades of gray in the phenomenon of power.

This demonizing interpretation is based on a pessimistic view of human beings. People are oriented toward evil (abuse of power) and need an external moral code to curb their "evil" desires. Sometimes, this approach functions as a self-defense mechanism because it allows the distinction between "good" and "bad" pastoral caregivers. In this way, it denies the real danger of the possible perversion of *any* pastoral relationship (and, more generally, of any human relationship) through the abuse of power. This simple schema can enable the pastoral caregiver – and more broadly, any human being – to situate the danger of abuse of power outside of himself or herself by condemning it in others and thus

reorganizing his or her own identity without any spot or wrinkle.[3] If we have no similarities to the abuser, we can condemn the other person with indignation and then close the page with confidence.

In this contribution, we want to emphasize that dealing with power is relevant to every pastoral caregiver at every stage of his or her vocation and, more broadly, to every person confronting a vulnerable other. In other words, it is not enough to take others to task to recover one's own purity as a Church or as a society.[4] The strong forms of abuse of power unfolded by some media are the magnification and end point of a phenomenon that occurs – as a possibility or sometimes as a reality – in every pastoral relationship and *in extenso* in every human relationship. Surprisingly, a society can unleash a (justified) investigation against specific categories of offenders to purify its identity by sacrificing a scapegoat. Meanwhile, society remains collectively blind to the many other, supposedly milder but much more widespread forms of (e.g., financial or sexual) corruption that affect its fabric. This selective indignation often elicits in Church circles the (overly) defensive response that the Church is being dealt with "harder" than other sectors of society where the same problems arise: sports clubs, youth movements, healthcare, the military, the university, politics, etc.

A final objection to this model concerns the puritanical reflex it can produce. It can lead to any form of bodily expression in a pastoral context and, more broadly, all human relationships becoming the subject of suspicion. It can also lead to a witch hunt against anyone who dares to raise the issue. A curious shift can be observed here: the exclusively moralizing attitude is not only to condemn actual sexual abuse of power but to see every expression of human connection as problematic and even risky. And the more the moralizing attitude becomes general, the less the pastoral caregiver, or people in general, will venture to bring up their struggles with power for fear of being stigmatized. Here, the danger arises that we can only be satisfied with an unquestioning prohibition of intimate behavior both inside and outside a pastoral context (even though such a prohibition can be valuable) and that any conversation about the pastoral caregiver's feelings becomes a potential taboo.

We think that this danger sometimes manifests itself in voices that reverberate in the pastoral world itself, voiced by people who are no

3. Kenneth S. Pope, Janet L. Sonne, and Jean Holroyd, *De seksuele gevoelens van de psychotherapeut* (Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1996), 36-37.

4. Emil Rodolfa et al., "The Management of Sexual Feelings in Therapy," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 25 (1994): 168-172, 168.

longer willing to talk about the issue of intimate feelings or who even suppress or neglect them. In this situation, an important principle of (pastoral) psychology has been forgotten: what has been suppressed will resurface in a different form but with the same intensity as before (or worse). Acknowledging the problems and dealing consciously with the dynamics between power and desire is only possible if we dare to recognize and transcend our moral aversion to the abuse of power. Instead of merely continuing to moralize from an outside perspective, we are then forced to confront the complex internal relationship between power and powerlessness in every human relationship. In this way, the aversion to abuse of power is not neutralized but restructured and integrated into a reasonable and forward-looking concern to address the problem. Undoubtedly, this is a frightening challenge because it confronts us with the shadow sides of our own being. In the following sections, it will become clear that this approach offers serious opportunities but poses new risks.

The most-shocking TV program *Godforsaken* (2023)[5] on victims of sexual abuse not only brought the issue of sexual abuse in the Church in Flanders again into the spotlight (and rightly so) as an unprocessed past, but at the same time revived the paradigm of the diabolization of the perpetrator, even among new generations who were encountering the issue for the first time. *Godforsaken* finally gave the victims a face and reverently allowed the story of their deep suffering to resonate. But the perpetrator, and by extension the entire Church system, appeared in this documentary to be perverted like "devils." Of course, all the facts stated and shown were true, and rightly so; more than ever before, institutional aspects of sexual abuse in the Church were unflinchingly exposed, but the way facts were selected, edited, and condensed into one shocking picture of the perpetrator, and by extension of the Church as such is an example of diabolization. Understandably, Church leaders in the country

5. "Godvergeten" (or: *Godforsaken*) was a groundbreaking four-part documentary series broadcast on VRT Canvas in Belgium from September 5 to September 26, 2023, and subsequently in the Netherlands in January 2024. The series documented extensive sexual abuse within the Belgian Catholic Church, featuring approximately twenty victims and their families seeking recognition, including a significant case involving the Bishop of Bruges, Roger Vangheluwe. The documentary sparked an unprecedented public reaction, leading to mass requests for debaptism, a 31% increase in abuse reports to national helplines, and ultimately prompted the Vatican to reopen investigations into historical cases. Notably, the series contributed to establishing a parliamentary commission in October 2023, resulting in comprehensive legislative recommendations for addressing institutional abuse in Belgium. It was also the major background of the visit of Pope Francis to Belgium in 2024. See: https://www.vrt.be/nl/over-ons/nieuws-over-vrt/nieuw-op-vrt-canvas-godvergeten.

felt frustrated and angry that certain aspects were not addressed at all; only the perspective of the victim was shown, and then again, of a particular group of victims that fit the binary picture (and other victims were not invited to give a testimony); and the Church's efforts to accommodate victims were underexposed or only negatively presented (as "the Church is trying to shut up the victims by giving them a lot of money"). But there was/is little point in protesting that because, in the eyes of public opinion at such a very intense and emotional time, that would only confirm the schema of radical evil. "When the sheep is shorn, it must sit still," says the proverb. *Godforsaken* was/is a necessary moment in the coping process in Belgium and abroad to let the facts speak, to give a place to the moral outrage, and to finally give recognition to the victims. But sincerely lived moral indignation by no means automatically also guarantees a correct presentation, analysis, and approach to evil; quite the contrary. Moral indignation is itself manipulable and can be used, for example, to serve political ends with which even the victims do/would not agree. For example, in the context of public anger, the CEO of the Flemish public broadcasting company VRT, Frederik Delaplace, immediately questioned whether worship services should continue to be broadcast on national television. "Do we have to pretend at 10 o'clock on Sunday as if nothing happened?,"[6] as if every parish and every Catholic believer in Flanders was at fault and every victim would want this (the same man would, a few weeks later, try to stop the broadcast on national TV about the victims of a famous and popular Flemish media figure Bart De Pauw).

Moral outrage is often not long-lived either. After the broadcast of *Godforsaken*, the call for the "laicization" of the former bishop of Bruges, Roger Vangheluwe, following the shocking abuse of his nephew, sounded more potent than ever, as if the whole solution to the problem of sexual abuse in the Church could be found there (and becoming a "layman" again can really be a punishment: what image of the relationship between "layman" and "ordained" is behind that? Therefore, it is perhaps better to speak of "loss of the clerical status" than of "laicization"). On Wednesday March 20 2024, under pressure from Belgium and the Belgian Bishops, Pope Francis finally stripped him of his clerical status. Public opinion mainly effused that "finally" justice had been done. But the satisfying effect of (necessary) retribution is often short-lived in public opinion. Meanwhile, other issues fuel the moral indignation that drives the popular press. Victims realize that this is not the end of the matter,

6. See: https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/10/13/ceo-vrt-frederik-delaplace-wil-erediensten-afschaffen/ and https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20240326_95387369.

that Rome's gesture is insufficient for them, and that they are left with a kind of void after the trauma. And will the media still be interested once the spectacle, sensation, and outrage have subsided?

2. The Banalization of the Perpetrator of Sexual Abuse

Instead of moralizing condemnation from the outside, this second approach to the perpetrator attempts to address the dynamics of the relationship between perpetrator and victim to understand sexual abuse from the inside out. This model attempts to reconstruct the history of abuse, sometimes to the fury of victims. In this way of thinking, it often seems that the abusive pastoral caregiver himself or herself is controlled by a host of factors outside of his or her own conscious (bad) will. For example, the analysis of the development of abuse shows how the use of power in a pastoral relationship becomes a means to cope with one's own traumatic past, to compensate for an unsatisfactory private life (loneliness, frustrating or unsatisfactory intimate private life, financial problems, divorce, and so on). Sometimes, the abuse of power can be traced to pedagogical dereliction of duty by the pastoral caregiver's parents in childhood, low self-esteem that must be compensated for by using power, etcetera. Proponents of this second model will conceive of sexual abuse of power as a result of the caregiver's desire to reclaim childhood or as the result of the irrepressible inner demand to humiliate women to free himself from the suffocating relationship with his mother. In some exceptional cases, the abusive caregivers are diagnosed with *borderline* personality disorder or people with antisocial personalities who, due to a defective *superego*, are unable to control themselves against impulsive outbursts.

In short, the second approach puts forward determinant, amoral psychological factors that allow for understanding the outcomes of using power. Sometimes, social determinants are added, for example, the social representation of men and women (women are then often portrayed as an accessible object) or the social representation of the pastoral caregiver as the new guru. This approach even subverts the risk profile of the abusive pastoral caregiver. The pastoral caregiver who abuses power is usually (but not always) male, spiritual, middle-aged, successful, (seemingly) well-educated, and so on. The caregiver can, in fact, also be a female or any other layperson acting in the name of the Church, of course. In the context of sexual abuse in the Church, the Church is also often referred to as an institution of power to understand the abuse.

The Church is then seen as a hierarchical and undemocratic system that distributes power unequally between the laity and ordained, or attention is drawn to a particular theology of ministry, which as it were, assigns supernatural characteristics to the ordained priest or bishop; to celibacy in the Church that makes it, as it were, "comprehensible" that those who are "subjected" to it "go elsewhere"; or to a misunderstood relationship between "ethics," "pastoral" and "ecclesiastical law" where everything is covered up in the name of Christian love, even the most terrible evil.

Understanding abuse of power is often accompanied by a certain degree of justification. In the second view, it becomes clear that the perpetrator is, to some extent, also a victim and that it is very difficult to make a clear distinction between the phenomena of power and powerlessness, contrary to what was put forward in the first view. In this second schema, it is not so much the dimension of guilt that comes to the fore but rather the tragedy, the dimension of fate always present in abuses of power. The forum where this happens today is not primarily the media but rather the courts and the domain of the perpetrator's psychotherapy.

Courts are very familiar with this scheme. The lawyer attempts to reduce the offender's responsibility by focusing on the offender's characteristics and history. In the context of abuse of power in a pastoral relationship, there is attention given – in contrast to the first schema – to the powerlessness of the pastoral caregiver and even the power of the care recipient. It is sometimes argued that responsibility for the use (and abuse) of power in a pastoral relationship is often divided between the caregiver and the care receiver, at least in adult relationships.

This paradigm also contains part of the truth. Sometimes, the pastoral care receiver takes on some of the power in the pastoral relationship. Sometimes, it is the pastoral care receiver who stifles the pastoral caregiver by using power. For example, this is the effect of frustration due to the inequality in the distribution of power, which makes the pastoral care receiver long to knock the pastoral caregiver off the throne of power, make him/her equal, or even reduce him/her to a (sexual) weakling. This game in which power is divided may also be driven by the fear of the impending end of the pastoral relationship or by the fascination with the celibacy of the (*i.c.* priest) pastoral caregiver. Again, a kind of statistical profile of the pastoral care recipient has been developed: female, ten years younger than the pastoral caregiver, qualified, in crisis, et cetera (even though there are situations, of course, where the care recipient is male). According to this view, if the pastoral caregiver "fails," he/she may be poorly trained, but that does not make him/her (completely) culpable

or ill-willed. The (adult) victim also bears some responsibility and guilt in this schema.

The institutional approach to the Church also has relevance here. Sexual abuse in this paradigm requires the Church to critically question all aspects of its functioning: the hierarchical structure of the Church, the theology of ministry, the view of gender and sexual identity, the issue of celibacy, especially in the training of young seminarians, the (personal, moral, pastoral, and canonical) relationship between the bishop and his priest(s). Too often in the past, those who asked to look at such aspects with care were targeted rather than inciting willingness to face the pernicious consequences of a culture of silence on these topics.

This second strategy of excusing the perpetrator is not at all exceptional. Sometimes, this line of argument is used to cover up complaints. "Is it true what the pastoral care recipient claims, are they not just some exaggerations of a twisted mind?" The complaint of abuse of power is then described, e.g., as an "innate" tendency of women to invent such things, attributing these acts to innocent men or to the imagination of children. This strategy is consistent with the general cultural tendency to repeatedly blame the victims (the process of "*blaming the victims*"). From this perspective, if an attractively dressed woman is raped, it is often said that "she deserved it." The seduction hypothesis has also often been successful in the pastoral context. It is then said that women use their bodies and helplessness to gain affection from the pastoral caregiver. This line of thinking makes the (male) pastoral caregiver a victim of the manipulation of the (female) pastoral care recipient, which is a new edition of the old myth that the woman asked to be raped.

This leads to a profound critique of the second view. This model shows us how abuse of power is a complex reality that makes it clear that there is always a kind of unwillingness as well as impotence on the part of the pastoral caregiver to look seriously at his/her deontological code and mission. However, the pastoral caregiver always risks falling into de-ethicization, where it proves impossible to speak of power and powerlessness in ethical categories. Abuse of power becomes so psychologized and socialized that it becomes an amoral reality. This model carries the risk of reducing people to puppets of the situation. A deterministic human view replaces the pessimistic human view of the first approach. People become deplorable ("banal") beings (hence, "banalization") whom you can no longer hold accountable, and this entails that people are no longer free beings.

From a Christian perspective, contrary to this deterministic view, we believe that you can never reduce a human being to the exponent of

his biological infrastructure, individual history, relational dynamics, or social context. Human responsibility in the face of evil is a basic assumption of any Christian anthropology. It is not because the perpetrator is banal that he cannot do demonic things. On the contrary, banal people can commit terrible evil. Just as we cannot allow the perpetrator to be devilish in his evil, we cannot use the banality of the evildoer to trivialize the horror of evil. The same is true when using institutional arguments. It is not that every ecclesiastically ordained person in a hierarchical system will automatically abuse his power. Nor is it the case that every celibate person automatically accedes to sexual abuse; on the contrary, most sexual violence today occurs in families.

In particular, the pastoral caregiver must be aware of the fact that responsibility for the abuse of power can *never* be left to the pastoral care recipient and that, ultimately, the pastoral caregiver him- or herself – and not the pastoral care recipient – is responsible for the ethical content of the pastoral relationship. There is no room here for "thoughtlessness." It is the pastoral caregiver who, using his/her upbringing and his/her experience on the basis of a well-formed conscience and aided by the experience of a God who is concerned with good and evil, must respond appropriately. This presupposes an openness in the training of pastoral caregivers to those elements that may stimulate or undermine the ethical level of pastoral relationships. However, this is not easy in a surrounding culture and with media coverage that moralizes every action. Consequently, the media also bear some responsibility for upholding the issues they themselves (diabolically) raise.

3. The Ethicization of the Perpetrator of Sexual Abuse

The use of power does not necessarily lead to abuse of power. Power can be used constructively, and in some cases, it may be necessary to use power (something that can be seen, for example, in forced admission to psychiatric institutions). The problem, however, is that ethical arguments also support abuse of power in this paradigm.[7] The pastoral caregiver who abuses his or her power does not call himself or herself an immoral or morally neutral being but will usually cite *ethical* motives for

7. For further reading: Didier Pollefeyt, "Het kwaad is een verhaal: Schets van een hanteerbaar ethisch model voor de geriatrische hulpverlening in confrontatie met het kwaad," in *Gerontologie en geriatrie 1996: Proceedings 19th Winter-meeting Oostende*, ed. Jean-Pierre Baeyens, Société belge de gérontologie et de gériatrie (Leuven and Apeldoorn: Garant, 1997), 193-211.

using power. In this, one recognizes one of the paradoxes of being human: a human being wants to be good, even though he misbehaves, even though he uses his power for evil. A human being is characterized by an inhuman urge to self-justify (Moyaert).[8] Here, we meet the subject of self-justification. People are experts at coming up with good motives for what they do, especially those who are doubtful and selfish.

Using this method, explicit and far-reaching physical touch in a pastoral context is often defended because problems cannot be solved by just having conversations, and a pastoral caregiver's task is to give himself or herself away for the care recipient, who thus becomes (psychologically, spiritually, eventually even physically) healthy again. For some care recipients, physical touches (such as a pat on the shoulder, a comforting hand placed over theirs, etc.) can be healing in nature.[9] Sometimes, they provide an opportunity to convince pastoral care recipients of their beauty and desirability, to reinforce their personal identity, to dispel doubts and hesitations, to remove feelings of physical inability, and so on. These more "pastoral" reasons for physical touch are often combined with professional ethics or the pastoral vocation that calls for doing *everything possible* to improve the well-being of the pastoral care recipient. Sometimes, care recipients also seem to allow physical intimacy in the relationship with a pastoral caregiver. Because of their search for warmth, they are the first to welcome the special attention they receive from the pastoral caregiver. Sometimes sexual abuse begins this way, and this "ethical" dynamic is what this approach wants to face before focusing on its immoral outcome.

Consequently, this third model begins with the proposition that some pastoral caregivers' *actual* attempts to abuse power in a pastoral relationship are legitimized on an ethical or even theological basis. For example, to morally justify his or her actions, the abuser invokes his or her personal authority ("I'm sure this will work"), self-esteem ("I wouldn't call myself a pastoral caregiver if this doesn't work"), or all sorts of rationalizations ("love can never be bad," "some contact will be good for her," "in human relationships, one must follow the human body"). Some pastoral caregivers defend themselves on ethical grounds that intimate physical contact took place *outside* the pastoral context.

8. Paul Moyaert, "De mens en zijn onmenselijke drang naar zelfrechtvaardiging," in *Psychiatrie tussen mode en model: Liber amicorum prof. Gerard Buyse*, ed. Guido Kongs and Hugo De Cuyper (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 77-100.

9. Hans L. C. Geluk, *Waarden en ethiek in de hulpverlening: Een bundel artikelen over de rol van waarden in de psychosociale hulpverlening en de ethische aspekten van individuele, gezins-, relatie- en gedragstherapie* (Baexem: Gamma, 1979), 69-81.

Even in more extreme forms of sexual abuse in Church contexts, perpetrators do not abandon their commitment to the good and try to legitimize themselves ethically. Perhaps a textbook example of this is the shocking interview former bishop Roger Vangheluwe gave to the Flemish VT4 channel on April 15, 2011, about his nephew's years of sexual abuse. Here, he does not present himself as an immoral monster or a victim of a terrible Church system but makes a moral argument. "It was a bit of a relationship" [framing]. "It was just at the time" [contextualizing]. "All the good things I did as a bishop are forgotten" [drowning the fish]. "There are a lot of people who feel I was treated unfairly" [seeking supporters]. "I felt like my nephew didn't look up to that at all" [speaking on behalf of the victim]. "It happens much more in sports and medical circles, and there, it's much less scrutinized. Why do they want it to be much stricter for priests? I don't understand that" [deviate to other sectors].[10]

The weakness of this third model, which is used not by public opinion (diabolization) or in courts (banalization), but mainly by the abusive pastoral caregiver himself or herself, is that nothing is said about the plausibility and credibility of this argument. In fact, this ethicizing stance is usually nothing more than an "*apology*" or an ethical-aesthetic "garnishing" of the abuse of power at the moment or afterward. In the case of Vangheluwe's interview, it became abundantly clear how evil can be unscrupulously condoned. His media appearance was not only a perversion of ethics but also showed a total lack of empathy for the victim. Therefore, the media's reaction and public opinion were rightly outraged.[11] The disgust many experienced upon hearing the interview once again reinforced the paradigm of diabolization. Often, we see how the ethicization of the perpetrator and the diabolization of the victim and bystanders reinforce each other. Even *vice versa*: the more one's perpetrator is portrayed as an immoral person, the more the perpetrator will try to convince himself and others of his good, so-called "moral" intentions and the more the excuse for the abuse of power, and the abuse of power itself, will increase. Here, the fragility of any ethics becomes apparent, and the powerlessness of diabolization. This, by the way, is not a typical trait of Vangheluwe but a universal fact among perpetrators. Even in the greatest evil, people do not give up their attachment to the good;

10. The full interview can be heard at: https://www.goplay.be/video/de-tafel-van-gert/bekijk-het-volledig-interview-van-vangheluwe-met-marc-geenen.

11. See: https://www.absolutefacts.nl/opinie/jcm-wiesman/afschuw-interview-bisschop-vangheluwe.htm.

rather, the desire to avoid guilt and shame becomes even more significant. One sees this even in the context of child abuse, where the victim is entirely innocent, and the responsibility can in no way be divided between perpetrator and victim; there, too, the paradigms of banalization and ethicization will bring in "reasons" to understand or legitimize such an evil, but there, too, the criticisms of these reductionist approaches apply.

4. A Christian View of Right and Wrong in the Context of Sexual Abuse

In this fourth section, we develop our own view of abuse of power in the pastoral relationship. We try to go beyond moral repulsion (first model: the immorality of the offender) and ethical (self-)justification (third model: the morality of the offender). A central theme in our interpretation is the human capacity for fragmentation.[12] We derive this from our study of Holocaust perpetrators.[13] By fragmentation, we mean a person's ability to split himself into different domains (for example, mind and emotion, work and private life) and no longer connect them. A shocking example is a priest who abuses a child in a liturgical space to act as a pastor in the Eucharist in the same place a few hours later while simultaneously upholding his moral image at other times. One can also say that the (Flemish) Church has collectively fragmented away from the evils of sexual abuse ("everyone knew," but everyone remained silent or looked the other way).

To illustrate the fragmentation process, we give the theoretical example of a 35-year-old female pastoral care recipient visiting a 40-year-old, married male pastoral caregiver. During this relationship, the pastoral caregiver consents to his pastoral care recipient's desire for human connection through intimate (erotic) touch. The caregiver himself also visibly enjoys the touches. In the case of this pastoral caregiver, this is happening for the first time. He is certainly not an ethical pervert, but he reasons that this kind of contact has an apparent healing effect on his pastoral care recipient.[14] The pastoral care recipient does not feel abused;

12. Didier Pollefeyt, "Gevaarlijk normaal! Over Auschwitz of het kwaad rondom ons en in ons," *Groepspsychotherapie: Tijdschrift van de Nederlandse vereniging voor groepspsychotherapie* 29, no. 3 (1995): 72-83.

13. See footnote 1.

14. Even if, from a perspective of canon law, he (as a married person) is already acting against the sixth commandment, even if this act is consensual, see cc. 1394 and 1395.

on the contrary, through these contacts, she experiences her own personality more authentically and intensely. Yet, at some point, she asks the pastoral caregiver for a more integral form of intimacy. The pastoral caregiver, however, refuses. The pastoral care recipient is very upset and disappointed. She does not understand the pastoral caregiver, even though she still appreciates the pastoral caregiver as a person. She will even admit that she seduced him.

Although, in this case, there is no overt sexual violence of the pastoral care recipient by the pastoral caregiver, we still think that here, too, there is transgressive behavior and abuse of power. By the way, we are aware that many other forms of abuse of power are possible in pastoral relationships: psychological, financial, social, spiritual, etc. But not in the simple sense of immorality, but more subtly and ambiguously. As in many other cases, in this example, power and powerlessness are divided in a very complex way between the pastoral care receiver and the caregiver. In the person of the pastoral caregiver, we see the fusion of pastoral care and selfishness, of leading the pastoral relationship and being led by the pastoral care recipient, of ethical reasoning and awareness of the fact that certain boundaries are crossed, of power and powerlessness, of right and wrong.

Where does the problem lie? The pastoral care recipient *experiences* the caregiver's "pastoral care" as an expression of his personal devotion and affection for the care recipient. On the other hand, the caregiver reasons, at best, that his intervention is of a "purely" technical and pastoral nature. The pastoral care receiver does not so much think that the caregiver has abused his power as that he is inauthentic because by having had an intimate relationship, she has experienced as receiver the intense pastoral and human power of intimacy, and without that physical and human attention, would never have been able to find herself again and heal her wounds. The problem, however, is that the essential condition for this "pastoral healing" was the intimate relationship's non-pastoral nature. In fact, this is an anthropological paradox inherent in human physicality, namely that the "pastoral" efficacy and human richness depend on the non-pastoral and non-instrumental nature of the intimate relationship.[15] Christian ethics has always been very aware of this paradox. In its understanding of sexuality, human healing through intimate experiences

15. For further exploration of the anthropological dimensions of human sexuality, we refer to Roger Burggraeve, *Zinvol seksueel leven onderweg: Concrete probleemvelden en belevingswijzen. Een dynamisch-ethische benadering in christelijke perspectief*, Niké series: Didaché (Leuven: Acco, 1992), chapter 7. An analysis was made of the six basic constants of human sexuality: intimacy, communication, pleasure, reciprocity, devotion, fertility.

can only be possible if the intimate touches are embedded in the safe proximity of someone who experiences the contact as a total human being and not just as physical gymnastics that have nothing to do with the "internal" body or soul. If the personal "devotion" in the intimate experience is set aside and the touch is reduced to a mere act in the pastoral healing process, the core pastoral power of the intimate relationship itself is desecrated and nullified. The actual tragedy for the pastoral care recipient is not so much the direct abuse of intimacy but rather the grieving process she must go through because of its instrumentalization. By this, we do not mean to assert that developing mutual and lasting intimacy between two equal partners in a pastoral relationship is impossible. Of course, such intimacy is possible, obviously not before pastoral therapy is over and within the limits of what can be called "authentic" concerning the situation.[16]

In most cases, the pastoral relationship will develop, as in the example described, into a not fully personal, reciprocal relationship between pastoral caregiver and pastoral care recipient, but the pastoral caregiver will continue to deny the anthropological paradox ("pastoral efficiency through non-pastoral inefficiency"). The price he must pay for this is his inauthenticity. The only way the pastoral caregiver can continue to deny the paradox is by simultaneously using fragmentation, namely by splitting himself into different sub-areas, such as physicality and emotionality, work and family, etc. In this fragmentation, the pastoral caregiver isolates physicality from its being and gives it a purely instrumental role, meanwhile setting up an ethical argument by emphasizing that it is "good" for his pastoral care recipient. Certain consequences or effects of intimate action are also fragmented away. Of course, many forms of sexual abuse in pastoral relationships are much more immoral and even violent, although usually, they begin in such "well-intentioned" ways, but eventually take enormously damaging forms, especially for the most vulnerable in this relationship, namely the pastoral care recipient. This slippery slope mechanism from good intentions to evil acts, or collectively, from democracy into totalitarianism, is something that is well documented in holocaust studies.[17]

Meanwhile, the pastoral caregiver knows very well that whoever touches a body is touching the reflection of the whole person. In the

16. Cf. Glen O. Gabbard, "Reconsidering the American Psychological Association's Policy on Sex with Former Patients: Is It Justifiable?," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 25 (1994): 329-335, 331.

17. Didier Pollefeyt, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), section 2.

Christian view of humanity, body and soul are not two separate components but force fields that constantly influence each other by their fundamental anchoring. However, he pretends not to realize or see this. He misleads himself. He does not elaborate on the dynamics of events but is very aware that a more profound meaning can be found. He actively (he misleads himself) and passively (he is misled by himself) denies the symbolism behind the interaction.[18] He intentionally or unintentionally closes himself off from a specific part of reality and projects that part into nothingness ("nothing happened"), or he reduces it to something else (for example: "instincts"). Of course, this fragmentation only works up to a certain point, and the pastoral caregiver is aware that he/she fragments himself/herself. There is no fragmentation without self-deception. In his interview with VT4, Vangheluwe says, "I must say that I don't really understand myself either – how it is that I have done such things for so long." Interviewer: "Wasn't there a voice inside you saying, 'You can't do this?'" Answer: "Yes, of course, I knew it wasn't right. I also confessed it regularly." Most cases of abuse of power in a pastoral context are not the result of ill will but rather of self-deception: one reasons something in a pastoral and ethical way while knowing that this situation is untenable. Yet, one tries to convince oneself that there is no

18. Another example can describe this self-deception in the pastoral relationship. A priest-pastoral counselor explains his intimate contact with a pastoral care recipient using the following ethical self-justification: "Celibacy is only an external law, designed by the Church as an institution, which can be changed, and moreover will be changed in the near future. Why should I not have a physical relationship with my pastoral care recipient now?" Whatever may be true of this conception of celibacy, one "forgets" that meanwhile in this pastoral context celibacy is present as an active provider of meanings. This (unacceptable) line of thought is based on a dualistic and autonomous view of man, in which the pastoral caregiver believes that by means of his rational and autonomous will, he is able to give purposeful meaning to his own rational physical presence. Consequently, the body is reduced to an object and the potentiality of tendencies, to a means of expressing certain things, without the body itself providing a voice to be listened to. See Roger Burggraeve, "Verbond, seksualiteit en gezin: Het seksuele lichaam als christelijke uitdaging," in Wilfried A. Dumon et al., *Gezien het gezin: Feiten en waarden* (Leuven: Davidsfonds and Universitaire Pers Leuven, 1995), 144-165, 146. Due to the instrumentalization of the sexual body, physicality as a heteronomous sensory experience falls into the background. A one-way communication is created from the mind to the body, whereas in a non-dualistic, Christian view of sexuality, there is a continuous mutual influence of the body on the mind and vice versa (ibid., 148). This interaction takes place against a social, historical and ecclesiastical background. Applied to our example, this means that celibacy as a specific sexual status into which the priest enters creates meaning and purpose within the pastoral relationship. The unacceptable motive tries to ignore or manipulate the meaning that comes from the specific pastoral context itself in a self-deluding way. It is precisely at this point that one loses sight of the limits of the pastoral context. See also M. Brender et al., *In het kort: celibaat. Voor geïnteresseerden, en betrokkenen* (Brussel: Nationaal centrum voor roepingen, 1996).

problem. As a result, one gets caught up in one's own logic of self-deception. In other words, the pastoral caregiver knows that it is technically impossible to instrumentalize intimacy to become merely a pastoral technique, but he convinces himself/herself that this is not the case. The temporary pleasure offered to him or her is a fragmented and inauthentic existence as a kind of gigolo. The woman in the example felt this implicitly when, after the pastoral counseling ended, she declared, "Something wasn't quite right."

This means that from an ethical position we are critical of intimate touching in a pastoral context, not because intimacy and sexuality are "evil forces" that we should try to contain (rather than integrate in a meaningful way), but because the instrumentalization of intimacy and sexuality within the pastoral context leads irrevocably to the perversion of the significant anthropological and Christian dynamics of (sexual) intimacy itself. Intimacy in the pastoral relationship often does injustice to the dimension of time intrinsic to an authentic relationship. From a Christian perspective, touching other persons in an all-encompassing way also means touching them in their future. It may be that the pastoral caregiver or the pastoral care receiver has the sincere feeling that he or she is giving himself or herself authentically, that is, as a human being, to the other person at the moment of pastoral contact. At that moment, however, one forgets that the perspective of "time" must also be part of the intrinsic finality of this commitment.[19] Indeed, the integral-personal (sexual) self-surrender requires a sustained dedication and commitment to realize its inherent intentions day after day, something that is difficult to achieve in the context of a very bounded pastoral relationship.[20]

Abuse of power (not just in the physical way) comes not so much from immorality but rather from a lack of authenticity (or sometimes an unhealed trauma). In self-deception, the pastoral caregiver deludes himself or herself and others into believing that his/her use of power is ethically permissible. At that point, a selective and manipulative contact with reality arises based on one's own needs and requirements. Consequently, every pastoral caregiver always goes through a process during the pastoral relationship that is almost similar to the struggle the pastoral care recipient goes through with his/her own history of desires and failures. In the case of possible self-deception, the pastoral caregiver is active (conscious) and passive (unconscious): he/she is powerful (perpetrator), and he/she is powerless (victim). With ethical arguments,

19. Sophie Veulemans, *De liefde voor de tijd of de tijd van de liefde?*, Doctorate in Theology, KU Leuven, 2009.

20. Burggraeve, *Zinvol seksueel leven onderweg*, 335.

he/she tries to legitimize his/her power and justify his/her powerlessness, even when abusing his/her power or capitulating to powerlessness. If this is denounced *only* with the help of a moralizing condemnation discourse, pastoral caregivers will be driven even more to self-deception for fear of rejection. Therefore, a vision of abuse of power in a pastoral setting that goes beyond (not despite) moral disgust and justification is needed.

5. How Do We Deal with Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse?

In practice, we see how the paradigms of diabolization (on the part of victims and public opinion) and ethicization (on the part of perpetrators and their lawyers) clamp down on each other and so precisely hinder the ability to halt the pernicious dynamics of sexual abuse in action and in processing afterward. Diabolization is a logical, almost mechanical reaction to evil on the part of victims and public opinion. It is prompted by the hurt that evil inflicts on the basic trust and reliability that people require to live together correctly. In a sense, diabolization is a protective mechanism against evil in society. But ethicization is also an understandable, almost mechanical reaction of the perpetrator in the face of the evil of his or her own crime. This, too, is an expression of the same basic desire for the good. The offender then attempts to self-deceive by justifying his or her wrong-doings by the demands of the good. The administration of justice will usually reinforce this dynamic: the prosecutor tries to push the offender into the diabolization paradigm, and to defend the offender, the banalization and ethization paradigm is invoked. There is little room for other approaches, and the result is usually very unsatisfactory for all parties. In particular, such an approach provides little room for the offender to come to self-awareness, admission of guilt, and repentance. And even if the offender demonstrates guilt insight, this can be framed in the diabolization paradigm as a false way to evade blame. Authentic public confession has become almost impossible today. This does not imply a plea to return to harsh morality that once again feeds distrust and pushes the offender into self-deception in advance or further. On the contrary, we argue for the importance of providing preventive strategies around sexual abuse in the Church and society through professional, interdisciplinary centers (possibly also at Catholic universities) where perpetrators can go to raise the problematic (including moral) aspects of sexual abuse and "be allowed" to remedy them, out of the eye of the cameras and the demonizing eye of public opinion, in the different phases that sexual abuse goes through (from predisposition to subtle forms of abuse, to pronounced forms of sexual violence).

6. Is Forgiveness Possible?

In the Church context, we sometimes see dynamics other than diabolization and ethicization occurring in the treatment of sexual abuse, particularly in the relationship between Church doctrine and pastoral practice. On the one hand, Church doctrine is often particularly harsh and principled, thereby forcing perpetrators into self-deception and moral hypocrisy. On the other hand, "after the fact" or "behind the scenes," the Church often applies mercy to perpetrators too quickly, easily, and cheaply, without sufficient consideration for the victims, especially when it comes to its own people or its own history. Church leaders are sometimes "lions in the pulpit but lambs in the confessional." Or to put it more fundamentally, in Church (theological and pastoral) circles, ethics and pastoral (and Church law) are often mismatched. In this context, a particularly "dangerous" category concerns the concepts of "forgiveness" and "reconciliation." The most tragic example of this in the Belgian context is the famous, so-called Danneelstapes, the recordings that the family of Vangheluwe's victim secretly made of the private conversations between Cardinal Godfried Danneels (1933-2019), head of the Belgian Church, the former Bishop of Bruges (and abuser), Roger Vangheluwe, and his nephew and victim, Mark Vangheluwe. The Cardinal uses the word "pardon" eight times in this conversation, basically to silence the victim. The most relevant passage reads as follows. Cardinal: "Ah! We can also, as I said, ask forgiveness and give forgiveness; that is also another possibility." Victim: "That's not possible for me; I don't believe in that anymore; when you see all those things, no, it's not possible anyway." Cardinal: "That has happened a lot in history, and not only in the Church you know, later on. It is bad, and it remains bad; it does not change, but uh, yes, you see, if you sincerely ask forgiveness, then we both bear it, that is also a possibility, hey." Victim: "Of course that would be the easiest thing for you, huh." It is, therefore, particularly difficult to broach the theme of forgiveness in this context today because the forgiveness discourse itself has become a tool that can be used against the victim, providing an institutional pathway to provide the perpetrator with an easy way out. "Cheap grace," Bonhoeffer called it.[21]

Yet even today we continue to theologically advocate for forgiveness as a precious reality, at least when properly understood. In a society that no longer knows mercy, forgiveness provides a safe space where the offender can confront his or her own crime without the immediate

21. Henk Florijn, ed., *Bonhoeffer: Zijn mooiste citaten* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2010), 1-2.

diabolical gaze of public opinion. Such a place offers an opportunity for the offender to give up fragmentation and self-deception and reconnect with himself, the other, and the transcendent reality. It is essential that such spaces exist in society and are also well protected (such as through confessional secrecy). No one can be denied this possibility *a priori*, although forgiveness after doing evil (*a posteriori*) can never be given unconditionally and automatically, just like that, within such a space. Therefore, in the Catholic tradition (individually and collectively), forgiveness is always tied to a number of conditions. In brief, it includes repentance, punishment, restitution, prevention, and work of remembrance. Each of these conditions is elaborated in the context of sexual abuse in the Church.

The first condition is sincere repentance for the evil committed by the offender. Forgiveness is possible only when the confession of guilt clearly and unambiguously acknowledges one's own responsibility. Without "buts." Without a "side sentence." Authentically, that is, not too early or too soon, not too late or after date, not long-winded, not too short, not too cumbersome, not mechanical, but not theatrical. Without ulterior motives or with a political or ideological agenda in mind. Without calculation. Not primarily to restore one's own image or the image of the institution. The authenticity of the confession of guilt is related to the authenticity of the person confessing the guilt at that moment. In a culture of diabolization, such a confession of guilt is almost doomed to failure in advance, even if spin doctors give advice to make a convincing impression (which complicates authenticity). The main criterion for judging the authenticity of the confession of guilt is not its rationality or emotionality but the recognition given to the suffering of the victims (while often, a great deal of self-pity shines through in confessions of guilt). Confession of guilt, in the case of the Church, should take on not only an individual but also a collective dimension. It is the Church that has structurally failed here as an institution. This poses significant challenges to ecclesiology. The "Church" (capitalized) as the body of Christ has such an exalted and mystical self-understanding that it is difficult to speak of its sinfulness from this idea of the Church's holiness. Perhaps the cognitive dissonance Benedict XVI experienced between his exalted image of the "Church" versus the sinfulness of the "church" he faced as pope played a role in his resignation on February 28, 2013.[22] A good illustration of this issue is the "confession of guilt" the

22. Lieven Boeve, "Waarom paus Benedictus XVI is afgetreden," *Tertio* 15 (2014): 10-11.

Church tried to make for its centuries-long history of anti-Judaism in 1998 in the Church document *We Remember*: "We deeply regret the errors and shortcomings of these sons and daughters of the Church" [read: but not of the Church itself]. The entire document – leading up to the Jubilee Year 2000 – makes a defensive distinction between the [holy] "Church" and the [sinful] "sons and daughters of the Church." Later, Cardinal Lehmann, President of the German Bishops' Conference, formulated a completely different confession of guilt as a (German) Catholic Church on the same theme: "Looking back on the history of the time and the attitudes of Christians and the Church [reminds] the bishops that the Church, which we profess to be holy and venerate as a Mystery, is also a sinful Church in need of conversion. Therefore, the renunciation and culpability of the time concerns the Church *as an institution* and does not only concern frequently displayed and denounced shortcomings of individual Christians" [our italics].[23] It is this kind of ecclesiological reflection that is necessary for the Catholic Church to arrive at an authentic collective confession of guilt, including about its history of (sexual) abuse of power.

The second condition concerns the punishment to be accepted and endured by the offender. It is difficult today to punish the offender because, in a media-dominated society, the public diabolization of the offender sometimes threatens to replace the judicial punishment itself often before guilt has even been established and pronounced (and it sounds even then: "the person concerned has already been prosecuted and punished enough by the damage done to reputation"). The punishment should be proportionate to the crime committed and the punishments given to perpetrators of analogous crimes within or outside the Church. Punishment is a form of reparation for the offenders and society. But in a sense, the offender also has a "right" to punishment, at least if this punishment is not aimed at diabolization but also includes an invitation and even a duty for the offender to recommit to goodness. In this way, punishment becomes a way of acknowledging the victim's suffering and a path through which the offender can come to self-reflection and regain his/her dignity.

A third condition concerns restitution. Restitution requires respect, creativity, and patience. One cannot "clean up" evil and crime. Nor can

23. Karl Lehmann, *Erklärung des Vorsitzenden der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, Karl Kardinal Lehmann, zum 40. Jahrestag der Erklärung Nostra Aetate des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils am 28. Oktober 2005*, Pressemeldung nr. 110a, 28.10.2005, Deutsche Bischofskonferenz: https://www.dbk.de/presse/aktuelles/meldung/erklaerung-des-vorsitzenden-der-deutschen-bischofskonferenz-karl-kardinal-lehmann-zum-40-jahrestag.

one enforce forgiveness by compensating for the crime. Even the greatest monetary compensation, the most significant monument, the greatest gesture cannot (fully) compensate for the suffering of victims. Perpetrator, but also helper, will have to understand that – even after the most significant and most authentic effort – it will never have been enough, the clock can never be turned back, and the traces of evil can never be erased entirely. One can fill all the churches of Flanders or elsewhere with statues in memory of the victims – and that would be a meaningful gesture – but even then, victims will not say that everything is now "back in order." Indeed, in Christian logic, it is tough to accept and "stand alongside" "unredeemed evil." Christians believe Christ has come, and that is redemption from the power of evil. In Christianity, people sometimes want to move far too quickly from Good Friday (the suffering) to Easter Sunday (the redemption) and cannot "stand" the unredeemed, as it were, an attitude that is sometimes very damaging to the victims who cannot participate in this movement or are simply forgotten in it. Christians and Christian churches, in light of the sexual abuse in the Church, will have to learn to live with forms of unredeemability in one's own womb, even after everything has been done to repair the suffering.

The fourth condition is prevention. This is a task for individual pastors, for Church leaders, and also for theology. After the Belgian documentary *Godforsaken*, and much similar evidence elsewhere in the world, sexual abuse in the Church can no longer be seen as an *accident de parcours* in Church history but as a structural fact that calls for a thorough reflection on all aspects of Church reality without those who dare to ask the questions being themselves targeted. Here, a great responsibility lies with training priests and pastoral caregivers. On this point, tremendous efforts are currently being made worldwide. Through communication, training, supervision and intervision, appropriate codes of conduct and codes of ethics, random *ad limina* visits, etc. abuse can be prevented (further) rather than waiting for it to come to court.[24] Of vital importance, therefore, is openness to the topic itself. It is essential that this subject not only be discussed in a moralizing and repressive way in pastoral training and education (and beyond). First and foremost, this means that pastoral caregivers must learn to check in with themselves regularly and monitor their own needs, desires, fantasies, etc. They must question themselves about the mechanisms they use to defend themselves, their manipulations, and their own desires, as well as reflect on their

24. M. P. Bolton, "Voorkomen is beter dan voorkomen," *Tijdschrift voor Psychotherapie* 13 (1987): 364-368.

appearance and their symbolic way of dealing with things, etc. They should be alert to their own relational bottlenecks, psychological blocks, emotional and sexual wounds, their basic needs, innocent gestures, social determinations, and last but not least: their own values. This increases self-knowledge, allowing them to handle power better. The presence of a trusted fellow pastoral caregiver who is open to dialogue can be very helpful. This allows the pastoral caregiver to anticipate the imminent danger of boundary crossing. Measures to prevent boundary crossing can then be taken much more quickly. Sometimes, it will be necessary to refer the care recipient to another caregiver and require the caregiver himself or herself to seek help. Only the best pastoral caregivers dare to look in the mirror and ask for help. Sometimes, this help can be offered in the context of existing spiritual direction, but sometimes, some additional form of supervision will be necessary. It may also be helpful to seek or further invest in human relationships outside the pastoral context; relationships that are not guided by the reality of power. These relationships offer opportunities for an authentic and integrated experience of human involvement. However, we often see that pastoral caregivers do not dare or want to seek help and instead flirt with the boundaries, using all sorts of pseudo-ethical and pseudo-pastoral justifications. Next, we want to emphasize the importance (in education and pastoral training) of listening to pastoral caregivers' and care recipients' experiences of abuse of power. This increases understanding and comprehension. Well-structured discussions with colleagues in intervision sessions can also be helpful. The expression of feelings of power and powerlessness can and should never be just causes for criticism or condemnation. Moreover, talking to the pastoral care recipient may be necessary. Here we want to emphasize the major difference between expressing feelings *about* power and desire in the pastoral relationship and actually giving in to forms of power and inappropriate expressions of desire.

A fifth condition for forgiveness is memory work. It is not: "forgive and forget," but forgive and (therefore) remember. It is precisely because there are certain things we cannot simply forget that forgiveness matters. Forgiveness does not take away evil. Forgiveness makes the offender's guilt more bearable by creating a space between offender and crime (individual), between the Christian message and the misconduct of Church authority figures (collective). Forgiveness says, "this is you, but you are also more than that." Forgiveness does not deny the wound but allows the wound to heal in the form of a scar. But a scar always remains visible. Sexual abuse is a scar on the face of the Church. Therefore, it is essential for the Church to have the memory of the victims in a permanent

place in its own identity. This can be done through symbols, rituals, prayers, memorial services, the Church calendar, the church as an architectural space, in giving voice to the victims and their relatives, in local and global declarations, etc. Finally, also here, the work of remembrance is a condition of forgiveness, but does not create the right to forgiveness because forgiveness does not belong to the order of law but to the order of love; it is ultimately a gratuitous act on the part of the victim, or not. This brings us to the last point.

7. The Unforgivable

The question arises, however, whether there are not forms of abuse that are so malignant that no forgiveness is possible, even if the perpetrator fulfilled all the conditions for it. Sometimes, the victim's humanity is so trampled upon that we speak of the unforgivable (*l'impardonnable*).[25] Isn't there something similar in the context of sexual abuse in the Church? Usually, this concept is used within the framework of the paradigm of diabolization. In our own approach, however, the unforgivable is the actual situation in which an offender imprisons him- or herself in fragmentation and self-deception. Because an offender does not meet the conditions for forgiveness, he/she cannot receive forgiveness. In Biblical terms, when someone commits "sin against the Spirit" (Mt. 12:31-32), then forgiveness is impossible. This factional situation of unforgiveness can also occur when the offender has died. Some offenders die without having repented and continue to cling to the fragmentation and self-deception all their lives, right up to their deathbed. Even more dramatic is when the victim has died. Even then, a factional situation of unforgiveness arises (unless one accepts the possibility of vicarious forgiveness, a complex problem of its own[26]). It may also be that the perpetrator meets the conditions for receiving forgiveness; the victim is still alive but is unable or unwilling to grant forgiveness to the one who is capable of receiving forgiveness authentically. This, too, is a tragic situation. As stated, forgiveness is not a "right" that the offender, the Church, or society can demand, even with the greatest confession of guilt. *L'impardonnable* can, therefore, become a reality on the part of the victim who is incapable or

25. Jacques Derrida, *Pardonner: l'impardonnable et l'imprescriptible* (Paris: Galilée, 2012), 41-46.

26. Didier Pollefeyt, "Vergeving: een nieuw begin voor dader, slachtoffer en samenleving?," *Kultuurleven: Tijdschrift voor cultuur en samenleving* 66, no. 2 (1999): 38-47.

unwilling to grant forgiveness. Often, in time, this attitude also stands in the way of the healing of the victim, and a kind of lasting attachment to or even determinacy by evil develops along the victim's side.

Theologically, the question arises about whether there is some kind of eschatological unforgiveness. In the Christian perspective, there is a belief that *ultimately* (end-time, eschatological) good is stronger than evil. Indeed, the Catholic faith rests on the hope that, ultimately, the victim will be restored and healed of all evil and that the perpetrator will not *ultimately* be able to escape justice and righteousness. As Catholic theologian Erik Borgman declared to the Catholic newspaper *Tertio*, "Without my faith I cannot bear the misery of the world" (*Tertio* of Jan. 24, 2024). Therefore, first and foremost, we must pray for the victims, living and deceased, from the firm belief that although they were forgotten by men, they are never forgotten by God. In this sense, the title of the Belgian documentary *Godforsaken* would, theologically, be better named *Forgotten by People*, given that Christianity professes a God who radically identifies with the Victim (the title *Godforsaken* implies an entirely different kind of anthropology and theology). However, the question of eschatological redemption also extends to the perpetrators of evil. Is the eschatological restoration of the perpetrator also possible in the form of forgiveness, even if the perpetrator falls under the earthly category of *l'impardonnable*? Christians believe that death is not the end but man's confrontation with the ultimate source of reality and human existence, classically expressed with terms such as "Love" or "God." That can be described as a place where fragmentation and self-deception are no longer necessary and possible because, from the presence of Love, one knows oneself as accepted and loved as one is. In this respect, "hell" is the confrontation with one's own evil and the ultimate refutation of fragmentation and self-deception. The offender is not punished by God in some kind of eternal burning in hell, but the offender punishes himself or herself in the light of the Goodness of God. "Purgatory" symbolizes the offender's purification process to make a final choice. Can the offender ultimately resist the lure of Good? Whoever answers "yes" to this ultimately states that the omnipotence of God's love is not absolute. Those who answer "no" to this do not take seriously the human freedom of the offender and of every human being. This is a classic dilemma in theology: Manichaeism ultimately holds that some form of evil can persist eschatologically (which goes against monotheism, which ultimately has only one absolute principle); *apokatastasis* holds that in the end, everything and everyone will be saved, which does not take freedom, as well as evil, sufficiently seriously. Both are historically heresies in the

Church. Perhaps the answer to this dilemma lies in the choice of the offender; either he/she ultimately chooses conversion and can be saved subject to repentance; or he/she chooses continued fragmentation and self-deception and ultimately falls into the black hole of nothingness, for evil itself has no foundation, no defender, no future; it is the eclipse of the good (*privatio boni*). We should not pray that the perpetrators will be punished; they will punish themselves or disappear into the Great Nothingness (*horror vacui*) of human history.

8. Plea for a Culture of Remembrance of Silent Saturday

We conclude this contribution with a plea for a re-evaluation of the theology of Silent Saturday. A Church that wants to do memorial work in the context of sexual abuse at the core of its identity could declare Silent Saturday locally or globally, temporarily or permanently, as a day of remembrance for the victims of sexual abuse in the Church, and more broadly, for all victims of human history. In this article, I have argued how the Church has problems recognizing unredeemed evil, particularly in her own womb. This is a direct consequence of the confession that Christ turned the world order upside down and opened the way to human liberation and the ultimate redemption of creation. This is why the Church, and in its wake theology, always tends to move from Good Friday (suffering, evil) to Easter (redemption, liberation), preferably as quickly as possible, at the risk of sweeping evil and suffering under the carpet of history. In the liturgical calendar, Silent Saturday lies between Good Friday and Easter. That is not just another lost day "without celebrations" and with the Crucified Christ hidden under a white cloth. Silent Saturday provides a delay between evil and redemption. Perhaps that is the time to take the suffering of the victims seriously in peace and reflection. It is a day of "silence" after all words have been spoken, after all self-justification. A day when we can let it dawn on us that all seems lost. A day of comforting. Acknowledging that there is no quick answer for evil. It could be a day where the Church gives a place to the victims in her midst, and especially the victims of her own history, and acknowledges their suffering. It could be a day of slowing down, self-reflection and prayer for the healing of the victims (and for the conversion of perpetrators). By recognizing Silent Saturday as a liturgical day around 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.

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