

From the Editors

Christians believe in salvation history; in other words, they believe that salvation has a history: the savior of the world was born at a particular time and a particular place to a particular woman. Jesus of Nazareth was executed by the order of a Roman prefect in Judaea during the reign of Tiberius Caesar; in the decades after his death, Jesus' disciples spread the story of his resurrection throughout the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean, eventually arriving in Rome by the mid-first-century CE.

Sin too has a history. Once upon a time, Christians believed that the history of sin began in the Garden of Eden, until scientific advances relegated a talking serpent and the presumption that the entire human race descends from two human beings to the more respectable category of myth. While this primeval and supernatural understanding of sin has waned in Christian theology, one does not have to be a professional theologian to recognize and mourn the ways in which structures of ecclesial power have often exemplified sin and magnified its effects. Those who study the history of the Catholic Church know that priests, bishops, and popes have often sinned grievously and have too often used the authority vested in them by ordination to perpetrate deeds that have wounded Christ's body. Recounting this sinful history of abused authority demands recounting at least a few of the many specific instances: Bishop Alduin of Limoges giving the city's Jews a choice between forced conversion to Christianity or exile in the early tenth century; Benedict IX selling the papacy to a successor in 1045 during the second of his three tenures as the Roman pontiff; Urban VI imprisoning and probably executing cardinals in the midst of the Great Schism during the late 1300s.

These medieval examples of ecclesial sinfulness are egregious enough that today polarized Catholics of various persuasions can at least agree in denouncing these episodes from past church history. For American Catholics at least, such abuses of ecclesiastical power can be explained as the fault of aligning the church with the power of the state, a particularly congenial position that places US constitutional arrangements in a flattering light. Any assumption that the Catholic Church had left this history of ecclesial sin behind in the medieval, Tridentine, or pre-Vatican II past, however, has come crashing down in the wake of the clerical abuse scandals that have roiled the worldwide church for the past two decades. Ever since the *Boston Globe's*

2002 Pulitzer Prize-winning exposé of clerical abuse cases in Boston, theological attempts to treat clerical abuse as simply a collection of individual priestly failings grow less credible with each new revelation of a cover-up or a legal settlement. Bishops and cardinals have been reassigned or have resigned, and in the case of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, defrocked. These sins have involved Catholic prelates using the power of their clerical offices to deny or minimize the trauma of sexual violence against children and adolescents.

With this sordid present disabusing today's Catholics of any progressive or whiggish assumptions that the Church had outgrown its history of ecclesial sin, a new temptation emerges, namely, cynicism. If sin is a constant in the life of the Church and among its clerical leadership, does it not mean that structural reform is futile until individual Catholics respond to the grace that God makes ever present? In his new book *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church*, Brian Flanagan reviews the history of the theological distinction between individual sinners and the holy church that undergirds such pessimistic appraisals. "This formula, in its attempt to explain away the fact that sanctity and sin reside in the same community of people, leads to a serious ecclesiological error, that of positing a church different and detached from the actual concrete community of women and men living their Christian lives throughout history."¹ As Augustine wrote in *The City of God*, the Catholic Church is a "mixed body" joined to both the city of God and the city of the world. The history of salvation and the history of sin are not two separate strands of history; rather, they are fused together in the history of the community of Christians.

Gary Macy's 2009 plenary address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, entitled "Impasse Passé: Conjugating a Tense Past," complements Flanagan's study, reflecting on the dynamics of reform and the proper role of the past in assessing contemporary problems.² While deftly describing the situation of the church in the eleventh century, exploring what we might learn from that period, and analyzing unintentional results of reform, he also clearly identified what might be the key obstacle to true reform: "If the present church structure is understood as part of God's eternal plan, then the church cannot change, and has never changed."³

The clerical sex abuse crisis festered for so long because abusers were abetted by a church structure that valued loyalty over integrity, silence over

¹ Brian P. Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 6.

² Gary Macy, "Impasse Passé: Conjugating a Tense Past," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 64 (2009): 1–20.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

prophecy, and self-advancement over pastoral care. Thousands of lives have been destroyed, children have been violently violated, and young men and women have suffered untold indignities because of abuse of power in a system that protected power and privilege in the name of a perfect, eternal, and unchanging church. Macy explains that if the church is eternal and outside of history, then “We have no future because we have no past. We are eternally trapped, frozen motionless and helpless in the eternal moment.”⁴

The people of God refuse to yield their future and will not remain helpless. The leaders of the church are being called to account for abuse and malfeasance, but it will take more than the defrocking of dozens of Theodore McCarricks to address the atrocity of abuse. The cry of Habakkuk (1:2 NABRE) lingers on the hearts of the faithful: “How long, O Lord, must I cry for help and you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ and you do not intervene?” God is, in fact, in the cry of the lay faithful demanding “a holy clergy” and a purified church structure. The lay faithful will no longer accept the excuses born of an “eternal” church. They will not remain trapped and they will continue to leave the church in the absence of authentic reform that puts the gospel and the people of God first and the structures of power a distant second.

When Bishop Emil Josef De Smedt stood in the aula at the Second Vatican Council and decried the first draft of what would eventually become the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) as triumphal, clerical, and juridical, his criticism expressed hope for a different type of church—humble, inclusive, and pastoral. A facet of the “new stage of history” to which the introduction of Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) alludes is the expectation that those who lead organizations and nations will be responsible for ensuring justice and protecting the well-being of the people who compose these organizations and societies. Such expectations have increased greatly in recent generations, and the Pastoral Constitution’s words ring clear: “This social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more humane balance. An improvement in attitudes and abundant changes in society will have to take place if these objectives are to be gained.”⁵ If the church is to find its way through the current debacle, it must pay attention to authentic reform and improving the many aspects of its structures and theology that fomented the current crisis. The Catholic

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), 26, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

Church's structures for ensuring the welfare of children require improvement; the Church's canonical laws for holding clergy accountable for crimes of violence against minors require improvement; the Church's willingness to abide by the norms of civil society in cooperating with secular governments to bring clerical abusers to justice requires improvement; the pastoral formation of seminarians and requirements for who can be ordained require improvement; the Church's ecclesiology that insulates itself from sin requires improvement; the Church's sacramental theology that allows the moral behavior of its leaders to be secondary requires improvement; the Church's relegation of anyone who is not a heterosexual male to secondary status requires improvement.

Without such reforms, without directly confronting the structural and theological dimensions of the sexual abuse crisis, why would anyone listen to any pope, to any bishop, indeed, to any teaching of the Church? Without such reforms, we are left with an echo chamber of hypocrisy. The people of God demand more.

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We welcome Dr. John Sheveland, of Gonzaga University, to *Horizons*. With this issue, he joins Mary Kate Birge in the stewardship of the book review section. As always, we thank our authors for sharing their scholarship with our readers.