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Roma locuta?

Ecclesiology of the Vatican summit on sexual abuse

The Church's current response to sex abuse is still in its early stages,
and that is not just the fault of the Vatican or the ecclesiastical hierarchy



"The age of deference is over," Lord Altrincham tells a still-to-be-enthroned and furious Elizabeth II in the tv series "[The Crown](#)." He then convinces the young queen to modernize her court, if not the monarchy itself. The scene could easily be applied to the Catholic Church and its hierarchy today. Just as political revolutions and cultural upheavals from the 18th century onwards impacted the divine rights of monarchs, so the clerical sex abuse crisis is taking down the divine rights of the Catholic hierarchy. The crisis is much bigger than a massive problem of corruption and cover-up.

The scandal of sex abuse in the Catholic Church is not an isolated moment in history. Rather, it must be seen within a number of challenges that modernity has posed to institutional religion. On the horizon are huge, long-term consequences for the role and life of the Church. They include the following: the effects of transparency and accountability on organized religion; the ability of the Church to handle the psychology of indignation in the age of social media; and the huge re-negotiation of the relations between Church and State, as [Australian Archbishop Mark Coleridge](#) pointed out during a press conference at the Vatican's summit on clergy sex abuse.

The Feb. 21-24 summit — officially called a "meeting on the protection of minors in the Church" — will stand as an important moment in the history of institutional Catholicism. And while the most decisive part depends on follow-up to the four-day gathering, the summit itself has already offered an image of the Church that helps us understand the complexity of the crisis.

The history of the Catholic Church's response to the sex abuse crisis as a global crisis still has to be written, however, we can identify three different ways that the Vatican has dealt with it up to now. During the pontificate of John Paul II, the response was characterized by defensiveness and denial — not only by the Polish pope himself, but also by his entourage and senior Vatican officials he appointed. There was also the tendency to defend the abusers and those who covered up abuse. The most scandalous example was John Paul's appointment of Cardinal Bernard Law as archpriest of the Roman Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in 2004.

During the era of Benedict XVI, the Vatican began focusing on cases such as the Legionaries of Christ and the Catholic Church in Ireland. It adopted new legal instruments to fight the phenomenon of sex abuse, but it did so by following the classic model of top-down ecclesial management based on a centralistic ecclesiology.

The pontificate of Pope Francis has ushered in a different moment, not only because of the new developments in the global crisis between 2017 and 2018 (especially in Australia, Chile and the United States), but also because of a different ecclesiological approach. First, Francis has brought the crisis to the Vatican not just as a place for one-on-one, bilateral relations between Rome and the Church in one country or one religious order. There is the convergence between Francis' perception of global Catholicism and his ecclesiology of synodality: all countries represented at the meeting by the bishops' conference, all areas of the world represented by the speakers; the essential contributions made by women to the conference; the need to create space and take time for an ecclesial conversation that has to precede any decision-making.

Second, the ecclesiology of synodality is relevant for the Vatican's handling of the abuse crisis as a global Church. The crisis has revealed the unsustainability of an ecclesiological model that in the second post-Vatican II period (from John Paul II to Benedict XVI) thwarted the theological role of the local and national levels.

In this sense, Francis' action on the sex abuse crisis has been a necessary combination of impulses from the center (from the creation of the Pontifical Commission for the Abuse of Minors in 2014 to the meeting of February 2019) and the creation of new spaces for collegiality and synodality. This is a mix that reflects not only the pope's ecclesiology, but also the need for mutuality between the universal-central level and the local level in Roman Catholicism. Francis has initiated the ecclesiological conversion for greater collegiality and synodality as necessary for combating clericalism, which he identifies as the root cause of clergy sex abuse.

Third, a synodal Church requires discernment. At the recent abuse summit the Vatican tried to be transparent by use of the media, making much of the meeting accessible to anyone who wish to watch its public sessions online, in particular the three daily presentations and media briefing. But it tried to balance that transparency with private, off-

camera moments necessary for creating a climate of discernment among the participants. For this reason, it did not provide coverage of the Q&A period after each presentation. And it allowed only summit participants to attend Saturday's penitential prayer service and Sunday's closing Mass, rather than opening it to the public.

These closed-door sessions were clearly necessary also for security reasons, in a meeting held in a Vatican under siege, both symbolically and materially, by organizations representing abuse victims and other Catholic advocacy groups. But the closed sessions were also meant to impress upon the participants that this was a spiritual retreat, as well, and not just a media event. The liturgies of Saturday and Sunday were prepared and understood very differently from those in the past — particularly those during the pontificate of John Paul II. For example, penitential liturgy in St. Peter's Basilica for the Great Jubilee (March 12, 2000) St. Peter's Basilica was not followed and for a reason.

Fourth, a synodal Church is open to different kinds of contributions coming (*ad extra*) from the world outside.

That was very visible in the sources and organizations that Pope Francis cited in his final speech: the World Health Organization, UNICEF, Interpol, Europol, the Asian Center for Human Rights, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and so forth. The summit gave a special place to the media, not only as a simple messenger of the news, but also as a key player in the history of the Catholic sexual abuse crisis.

The speech by veteran Vatican journalist Valentina Alazraki from Mexico was the recognition of the power of the media in the Church — and also a *captatio benevolentiae* to the press from the Vatican media strategists. On the other hand, the Vatican summit did not include other key actors that could help better understand the complexity of the abuse crisis, such as representatives of the police, lawyers, insurance managers and, most of all, attorney generals and prosecutors who work for civil jurisdiction. The Vatican meeting offered a simplified picture (featuring the ecclesiastical hierarchies, the victims, and the media) of a much more complex situation.

Fifth, a synodal Church means a Church open to change that is not just structural, but also theological. The summit made clear more than ever that the Church needs ecclesiastical governing bodies that include women at the table where decisions are made.

For all the visible awkwardness of Francis' colloquial way of speaking about women — especially harsh to the ears to most Catholics in the Western world — it is undeniable that some positive steps have been made in the right direction.

But the spectrum of issues in the long run is much wider. Sexual abuse is not only a problem for Western churches grappling with a crisis of civilization, centered on sexual and biopolitical questions.

Rather, it is a global problem, and potentially a more serious one for churches in places such as Africa, Asia and also Italy where the sex abuse has been irresponsibly underestimated up to now.

It is not simply a question of dealing with a criminal phenomenon. It is also a theological question: from the theology of the sacraments (especially ordination to the priesthood) to ecclesiological models; from the role of women in the Church to last century's magisterium on sexual morality.

The most complicated issue concerns the structural reforms required to address the mystique surrounding the priesthood and the episcopate, which are often still seen as positions of honor without the responsibilities that derive from holy orders.

The spectrum of the issues to be addressed is broad. In this sense, the demands for "zero tolerance," which must be listened to, especially because it comes from victims groups — can become a slogan that is unhelpful for understanding the vastness of open issues.

To make a comparison, the Council of Trent in the 16th century did not respond to the Protestant Reformation only with a program of cleansing from corruption.

It also rethought some theological categories. The Church's current response to sex abuse is still in its early stages, and that is not just the fault of the Vatican or the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The paradox is that the scandal has hit more strongly in those countries furthest away from Rome — places such as Australia and the United States that are geographically and culturally distant, and where theology is vital but, in the last few decades, has had less impact on the elaboration of doctrinal policies and the magisterium of the Church. Under Pope Francis, the papacy seems to have turned a corner in its fight against clerical sexual abuse. But in the global Church, and in this global communion made now up of peripheries, Catholicism still has many corners to turn.