

The Catholic Church Sex Abuse Crisis

The Rhetoric of Pope John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis

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Abstract Recent developments in the field of sexual abuses perpetrated by Catholic clergymen have heightened the need to address and analyze the issue from different points of view. The concept of modernity is key to understand the internal but also the external debates on child sexual abuses within the Church. While the roots of the problem are old, the issue represents a new social challenge that generates a firestorm both inside and outside the ecclesiastical world. The purpose of this article is to analyze and comprehend the rhetoric and approach adopted by John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis toward clergy abuse around the world. Therefore, this article explores some of the official speeches delivered by them on various occasions, paying attention to the context and the terminology used to talk about abuses. The final goal is to understand the position of the three pontiffs mentioned on the issue and to figure out if there is a common thread between the appearance (public speeches) and the concrete measures taken (e.g., reforms of canon law, summits on abuse, removal of guilty priests).

Keywords Catholic Church. Sex abuse crisis. Pope John Paul II. Pope Benedict XVI. Pope Francis.

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1 Introduction

Recent developments in the field of sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic clergymen have heightened the need to address and analyze the issue from different perspectives. The past decade has seen the emergence of thousands of reports and studies on this topic, which is considered one of the biggest scandals the global Catholic Church has faced and is still facing today.¹ The concept of modernity is key to understand the internal but also the external debates on child sexual abuse within the Church. As reported in one of his articles, Faggioli proves that the debate within the Catholic Church developed, on the one hand, with conservatives who considered clear the association between scandal and modernity penetrated into the religious institution through the Second Vatican Council and, on the other hand, liberals who accused the Church of not having modernized enough – by eliminating, for example, celibacy – and that, because of this, the religious institution has become fertile ground for the outbreak of the abuse scandal.² While the sexual abuse within the Church is a centuries-old problem, the ‘globalization’ of the issue represents a new social challenge that has generated a firestorm in the media and in the public opinion both inside and outside the ecclesiastical world, with implications that affect not only the religious belief and sphere but the legal and political contexts too.³ Although the first cases of sexual abuse were regarded as ‘exaggerated anomalies’ magnified to discredit and destroy the Church and its hierarchy, the scandal, initially labeled as an issue pertaining only to the U.S. Church, later demonstrated that it was not just a geographically localized situation but a generalized concern within the Catholic Church.⁴ A common narrative pattern, employed by the major news outlets, described the abuse putting an extreme pressure on the cover-ups perpetrated by the dioceses.⁵ From their part the Catholic Church and the ecclesiastical members implied in the scandal always tended to refuse to

1 Official studies have been published in the different parts of the world. For example, those published in the United States, the place where the scandal broke out, include: Doyle, Mouton, Peterson, *The Problem of Sexual Molestation* (also known as the Doyle, Mouton, Peterson 1985 Report) and the 2004 and 2011 John Jay studies (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, *The Nature and Scope and Causes and Context*). There have also been many reports published by experts, dioceses and bishop’s conferences on abuse. Among the most recent are the 2018 report by Dressing et al. (“Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests”) and the 2021 report by the Commission Indépendante sur les Abus Sexuels dans l’Église (*Les violences sexuelles*).

2 Faggioli, “The Catholic Church’s Biggest”.

3 Benigno, Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine*. See also Bromley, Cress, “Narratives of Sexual Danger”.

4 Barry, “Priests and Pedophilia”.

5 A practical journalistic example can be found in Cropper, “A Diocese Settles a Case”.

comment on the events or to be interviewed. If on the one hand, the press work has been extremely useful to push many victims to denounce the violence suffered, on the other it generated a great turmoil within the Church. In fact, the Vatican accused the secular media to undermine their moral standing, emphasizing what for them were considered just isolated misconducts.⁶ Furthermore the media were blamed for exaggerating the problem the Church believed could be managed from the inside without generating a public scandal. It is important to emphasize that within the Catholic Church there is a long-held belief that the media, considered to be the proponents of the scandal, are composed of anti-religious people and, especially in the countries where the Church has succeeded over time in building a position of power and a wide grip on the faithful, they played a key role in trying to scuttle and undermine its religious authority.⁷

Besides, the approach the Catholic hierarchies chose to take in dealing with the scandal and in responding to allegations of abuse have caused some experts to consider the Church's attitude 'old'.⁸ The most commonly used strategies were the denial of the problem, the culture of secrecy and the bunker mentality not to allow information to leak, the suspension and transfer of accused priests from parish, diocese or to specialized medical centers to handle complaints, the confidentiality agreements and the private damage compensation between the victims and the diocese to ensure that the victim did not report anything to the secular authorities, penalty the restitution of the agreed sum.⁹ The major interest of the Church was to hold back the abuses from the secular society in order to protect both the institution and its hierarchy and to maintain the position of power and authority. As a matter of fact, one of the consequences of the scandal was to call into question all the principles and the moral teachings of the Catholic Church, already undermined by the advent of modernity. The leaders of the Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy had to clash with the advent of modernity, which placed the autonomous determination of human beings at the center. As evidenced by several studies, this led to a change in the relationship between reason and faith and initiated a conflict between Church and civil society.¹⁰ Moreover, this attitude was well represented by the magisterium of some popes, such as Pius IX, who adopted an 'intransigent Catholicism', believing

6 Neuhaus, "Boston and Other Bishops", 67-9.

7 McLeod, "Being a Christian", 636-47.

8 Plante, *Bless Me Father*, 120-5.

9 The Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe, *Betrayal*, 74-5. See also https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/spiritual-wounds-sexual-abuse/#_ftn1.

10 As an example see Vian, *Il modernismo*, 11-13.

that sins and evils were caused by the errors of modern society.¹¹ In his study on the relationship between the Catholic Church and secularization, Menozzi explains that the Church adopted a social doctrine that attempted to offer suitable solutions to the problems of the contemporary age, recognizing to the pope a socio-political role as well as pastoral.¹² Historically speaking, it is true that with the Second Vatican Council the Church opened up to modernity, emphasizing the need for a dialogue with society, but the issue remained one of the most debated, so much so that even John Paul II and Benedict XVI continued to question it decades later. It should be noted that, following the Council, modernity was partially accepted but with reserve, that is to say on condition that the doctrine and the internal structure of the Church were kept intact.¹³

As Chappel exposes in his work, the Church has conceptualized and reshaped its relationship with both modernity and the secular society to its own advantage.¹⁴ From the early 1920s to the late 1950s, in fact, the Catholic Church has started to broadly accept - this does not mean there was a consensus on all topics - the political, economic, and social side of the secular nation-state.¹⁵ Accepting the separation of Church and State is to be considered a fundamental element that has played a key role in Church's modernization. Chappel also mentions John Paul II and Benedict XVI, considering them as exponents of what he calls 'paternal modernism' as they mobilized to address sexual issues during their papacy.¹⁶ In this perspective, with the Church embracing principles as state separation, religious freedom, and human rights, it must be considered that an important change the Church accepted, to some degree, is the application of the liberal

11 The Church closed attitude was applied through the magisterium of the popes: starting with Pope Pius VI, who expressed how the new culture brought by the Enlightenment wanted to build a society where there was no place for God nor the Church (*Inscrutabile Divinae*, 1775). Passing on to Pope Pius IX, who condemned modern ideologies and tried to guarantee a Catholic orthodoxy by trying to demonstrate that the individual freedom exalted by the rise of liberalism was a limiting element of the new secular world (*Quanta Cura*, 1864) and establishing, in the course of the First Vatican Council, the infallibility of the doctrinal and moral dogmas of the Catholic Church transmitted through the infallible magisterium of the pope (*Pastor Aeternus*, 1870). Up to the papacy of Pius X who condemned modernity as the "synthesis of all heresies" (*Pascendi Dominici Gregic*, 1907).

12 Menozzi, *La Chiesa cattolica e la secolarizzazione*, 99-100.

13 Morozzo della Rocca, "Chiesa Cattolica e modernità".

14 Chappel, *Catholic Modernity*, 17-18.

15 Chappel, *Catholic Modernity*, 72-3.

16 For Chappel there are two kinds of Catholic modernity. One called 'paternal modernism', focused on Church and family as sources of spiritual renewal and moral teachings. This form of Catholicism also puts emphasis on human rights and dignity. The other, labeled as 'fraternal Catholicism', instead invokes cooperation, reciprocity, and the spiritual solidarity of brotherhood.

State's power in term of punishing offenders. This also made possible to move from considering the problem of abuse as a sin, turning it into a crime punishable by both canon and civil law as it will be covered below. Indeed, the attitude of the Church has always been that of solving problems from within. In this process, the civil society has always been excluded on the one hand to protect the reputation of the Catholic institution from secular intrusions and, on the other, to maintain unaltered the relations between Catholic hierarchies and believers. Moreover, one of the main elements that wanted to be preserved was the hegemony the Catholic Church had managed to build over the centuries.¹⁷ This *modus operandi* has been adopted for the issue of abuse too. However, when the scandal became public, high diocesan officials and the pope himself had to forcefully address the issue.

The purpose of this article is to analyze and comprehend the rhetoric and approach adopted by John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis toward clergy abuse around the world. Therefore, this article explores some of the official speeches delivered by them on various occasions, paying attention to the context and the terminology used to talk about sexual abuse. The final goal is to understand the position of the three pontiffs mentioned on the issue and to figure out if there is a common thread between the appearance (public speeches) and the concrete measures taken (e.g., reforms of canon law, summons on abuse, removal of guilty priests).

2 Pope John Paul II and Abuse as a Legacy of Modernity

To comprehend John Paul II's vision, one must first understand his reading of contemporary society that was characterized by a dualism: if on the one hand he used the tools of modernity, on the other hand he nurtured a strong distrust of the modern culture, so much so he was considered by many a conservative.¹⁸ He has always identified the source of the evils and problems of society in the crisis of morality that arose with the advent of modernity.¹⁹ In a speech in 1982 addressed to participants at a conference on public morality, for example, the pope highlighted that the crisis of thought, in which there was an absence or a blurred vision of God, led people to have a distorted view of reality and of themselves, generating a moral permissiveness, labeled as risky as it distanced individuals from righ-

¹⁷ Martel, *In the Closet of the Vatican*.

¹⁸ Portier, *La pensée de Jean Paul II*.

¹⁹ Works on John Paul II: Miccoli, *In difesa della fede*. Ciciliot, *Donne sugli altari*. Manion, *The Vision of John Paul II*. Menozzi, *Giovanni Paolo II*. Weigel, *The End and the Beginning*. Portier, "Jean-Paul II et la compréhension moderne".

teousness and faith.²⁰ Consequently, this crisis of civilization – there had only been technological progress and not always a moral/spiritual advancement – led to a crisis of values that, according to the pontiff, has spilled over into the whole society.²¹ This is the framework in which John Paul II operated and where it is important to place his reading of the sex abuse scandal as well.

It was under his pontificate that sexual abuse began to be perceived as a real, widespread and concrete issue. The first time the pontiff spoke of clergy sexual abuse was on June 26, 1999. In his speech, addressed to the bishops of Ireland, John Paul II emphasized that the pressures exerted by the culture surrounding priests – to be read as a secular one – caused them suffering that was even more aggravated by the “terrible scandal” committed by some of them.²² On the one hand, the pope said he was close to the victims in their pain, and on the other he asked for prayers for the guilty clerics so that they would realize “the evil nature of their actions and seek forgiveness”.²³ It can be argued that the option of asking for mercy and the use of the adjective ‘evil’ referring to their misdeeds leads to categorize those actions as sins: thus, sinning priests by seeking forgiveness could reach the path of repentance and receive the forgiveness of God. Moreover, in the second part of the same speech, John Paul II makes it clear that he was against reconsidering the obligatory nature of celibacy in priesthood implicitly adopting the conservative view of the scandal mentioned above. It should be kept in mind that at the time there was a great social debate that considered elements such as homosexuality and celibacy to be the root causes of abuse, and there were questions concern about whether eliminating celibacy would end abuse. In 2011, however, a John Jay College study commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) shed light to the issue explaining that neither celibacy nor homosexuality is statistically a cause of abuse.²⁴

As a consequence of the scandal break in the U.S., in 2002 John Paul II was forced to convene a summit in Rome with the American cardinals to acknowledge the mistakes and change course. In his address to the cardinals, he expressed his sorrow at the “suffering and scandal” caused by some priests, and he reminds the participants that due to the bad actions of a few the entire religious institution has been looked upon with distrust by the faithful and by pub-

20 Giovanni Paolo II, *Discorso Convegno sulla Moralità Pubblica*.

21 Pope John Paul II spoke about this crisis of values in several speeches. See for example *to the Religious Representatives*, 2-3.

22 John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of Ireland*, 6.

23 John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of Ireland*, 6.

24 John Jay College of Criminal Justice, *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse*.

lic opinion. In the same occasion, John Paul II talks about the abuse using the following words:

The abuse which has caused this crisis is by every standard wrong and rightly considered a crime by society; it is also an appalling sin in the eyes of God.²⁵

This dual categorization suggests that while the civil society considers abuse a punishable crime the Church tends to regard it more as a sin, a result from moral collapse. As can be deduced from canon 1395 §2, contained in the 1983 code of canon law, the Church considered the abuse of a minor as an offence against the sixth commandment of the decalogue.²⁶ It, being centered on the sin against chastity, prohibited not only adultery but any form of sexuality. Rape, acts of homosexuality, abuse were understood as sins leading to a punishment and sometimes to the removal and a consequent laicization of the offensive priest.²⁷ Moreover, in the Church's attitude a sin and redemption mechanism can be evidenced. The idea of forgiveness, in fact, is reiterated a few lines down of the papal speech:

At the same time [...] we cannot forget the power of Christian conversion, that radical decision to turn away from sin and back to God, which reaches to depths of a person's soul and can work extraordinary change.²⁸

The mention of the power of Christian conversion suggests the existence of a 'spiritual healing' for abusive priests resulting in a second possibility given by God and, consequently, by the Church. Therefore, if, on the one hand, the pope uses the terms "great harm, crime and pain" to describe abuse and reiterated that the scandal is a "grave symptom of a crisis affecting not only the Church but society as a whole", on the other hand, he leaves a window open for forgiveness. It can be assumed the Church, by declaring itself open to forgiveness, is more inclined to protect its own ecclesiastical hierarchies and not to safeguard the victims, who were initially offered only a pastoral response, when in fact they would have needed more transparency and better management of abuse cases, at least according to secular media.²⁹

25 John Paul II, *Address to the Cardinals of the United States*, 1.

26 See Code of Canon Law. Book VI: *Sanctions in the Church*. Title V: *Delicts Against Special Obligations*. https://canonlawabstracts.uk/html/book_vi.html.

27 Provost, "Offenses Against the Sixth Commandment".

28 John Paul II, *Address to the Cardinals of the United States*, 2.

29 The Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe, *Betrayal*, 74-7.

Finally, in his address to the cardinals, John Paul II claims that the Church must help society understand and face the ongoing crisis of values:

The abuse of the young is a grave symptom of a crisis affecting not only the Church but society as a whole. It is a deep-seated crisis of sexual morality, even of human relationships, and its prime victims are the family and the young. In addressing the problem of abuse with clarity and determination, the Church will help society to understand and deal with the crisis in its midst.³⁰

This reminds us of the conservative concept of the Church as a moral entity above society and how Wojtylian magisterium could be partially seen as a period of ‘abstention’ from the practice of dialogue with modern agencies that began with Vatican II.³¹ Youth is also the pontiff’s focus. In 2002, during the World Youth Day in Toronto, the pope spoke for the first time to a non-clerical audience about abuse, not quoting it explicitly but using the expression “the sins and failings of some” clergymen.³² Choosing young people to be the first to open a dialogue with may not be a casual choice. In particular, youth days were intended as a ‘new’ religious experience, one of the purposes of which is to establish a bond with the new generations in order to reverse the trajectory of secular dynamics.³³ Therefore, having chosen this occasion to emphasize that the Church as an institution is not responsible for the scandal but, instead, is the victim of shame due to the damage done by a few, can be a way to give young people a new image of the Church where they too, through their faith or decision to join the priesthood or a religious order, can make a difference. Thus, it seems that the pope wants to give the appearance of a Church on the one hand extraneous to the wrongdoings committed by some priests and on the other more open to improve the religious institution through young people.

What is more, as can be seen from several speeches, John Paul II believed that despite the difficult and painful scandal the Church would be able to purify and renew itself, by learning from the errors committed, and to reconcile and regain the trust of society as a whole.³⁴ Thus, through the path the Catholic Church was obliged

30 John Paul II, *Address to the Cardinals of the United States*, 3.

31 Portier, *La pensée de Jean Paul II*.

32 The speech was delivered during the 17th World Youth Day during the solemn mass. See John Paul II, *Homily of the Holy Father*, 5.

33 Mercier, *L'Église, les jeunes et la mondialisation*.

34 The pope mentioned this concept in John Paul II, *Address to the Cardinals of the United States*. See also John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of Atlanta and Miami*.

to face, due to abuse itself, there should have been “a holier priesthood, a holier episcopate, and a holier Church”.³⁵ In conclusion, the Wojtylian view on sexual abuse can be summarized as still anchored in the logic of a sin as redeemable and caused by a corrupt society that manages to creep in and permeate even part of the Church. Specifically, sexual abuse is also intended, in addition to being a sin, as a disease for which a cure can be found. If on one side John Paul II uses modernity as a yardstick to measure the evils of society – and for this reason he is considered a conservative – on the other he employs modern language and tools (e.g., television and radio, new gatherings, etc.) to convey his ideological vision. Nevertheless, it seems pretty clear that at the core of the viewpoint developed by the Wojtylian Church the preservation of the priesthood remains paramount.

3 Pope Benedict XVI: From a Pastoral Rhetoric to Abuse as an Act Punishable by Human Law

Also Benedict XVI, during his pontificate, faced the endemic crisis of sexual abuse.³⁶ In some ways his position mirrored the one of his predecessor in that he believed that the modern crisis – and pedophilia – has been generated by the replacement of morality by the perversion of the concept of *ethos*.³⁷ In fact, Ratzinger’s framework claimed that the moral concept of proportionalism born in the 1950s has led people toward a lack of education making them believe, for example, that “certain things, such as pedophilia, could be in a certain proportion good”.³⁸ The Church has always considered itself external to all this, but according to Benedict the ‘deviant attitude’ of society has managed to insinuate itself into the religious institution, influencing many priests and diverting young men who decided to enter the seminaries, pushing many of them to abandon their vocation.³⁹ Those circumstances have led to an integration of the formation offered in seminaries: pastoral and spiritual formation has been combined with a human and intellectual education. The last one is, according to Benedict XVI, a concept still central today along with

35 John Paul II, *Address to the Cardinals of the United States*, 4.

36 Works on Benedict XVI: Miccoli, *In difesa della fede*. Allen, *Pope Benedict XVI*. Baudry, “Identité, islam et catholicisme allemand”.

37 One of the several examples is Benedict XVI, *Christmas Greetings*. The concept of ‘perversion of *ethos*’ implies that in society there is no longer a difference between good and evil, right and wrong due to secularization and a culture marked, as Benedict XVI, says, by the “tyranny of mammon” that leads the individual to classify one thing only as more right/wrong than another.

38 Benedict XVI, *Interview Flight to Australia*.

39 Wimmer, “Full Text of Benedict XVI Essay”.

the proper selection of aspiring members of the clergy and the prevention given by knowledge of nature and scope of the problem.⁴⁰ But it must be noted that the new mentality/abuse correlation, if ideologically can work for the modern era, does not take into account the fact that sexual abuse was already present in the Catholic Church well before the 1960s, as illustrated in *Peccato o crimine* written by Benigno and Lavenia or in *The Corrupter of Boys: Sodomy, Scandal, and the Medieval Clergy* by Dyan Elliott.

The second aspect that Benedict XVI shared with John Paul II is the idea that the difficult period the Church was going through, both due to the leak of new scandals around the world and the massive media attack, could be considered a “time of purification”.⁴¹ As his predecessor, Ratzinger was careful to point out that the Church and the entirety of the clergy were overshadowed by the ‘sin and transgression’ committed by few that have caused great suffering, shame and humiliation, a wound that has affected and weakened relations between priests and laity. It can be summarized, then, that for both of them the key to solve the problem involves a true return of societies to God.

The final similarity is the fact that both chose to bring up the issue during a World Youth Day: indeed, the actions of John Paul II in Toronto have been ‘emulated’ by Benedict XVI on July 19, 2008, in Sydney. During the Eucharistic celebration at Saint Mary’s cathedral, the pope expressed sorrow for the victims and unequivocally and publicly condemned the misdeeds of the guilty priests, specifying that “those responsible for these evils must be brought to justice”.⁴² It is, nevertheless, presumable that the Church wants to do justice by itself, entrusting the accusations considered tangible to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and, in extremely relevant cases, to ecclesiastical tribunals or to the direct decision of laicization by the pontiff. In fact, since 2001, with the *motu proprio Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*, promulgated by John Paul II, the congregation has been given full authority to deal with grave delicts, including abuse.⁴³ In the same year Ratzinger, who was prefect of this Vatican dicastery, in his *Letter Explains New Norms* addressed to bishops and other members of the Catholic hierarchy, stressed that when there was a “probable knowledge of a reserved delict” the case must be reported directly to the Congregation for the Doctrine

40 This vision has been confirmed in the course of various formal occasions. See John Paul II, *Address to the Cardinals of the United States*. See also Benedict XVI, *Homily Conclusion of the Year*. In addition, see also Benedict XVI, *Interview Flight to the United Kingdom*.

41 The concept is explicitly present in Benedict XVI, *Address to the Bishops of Ireland*. It is also present in the Benedict XVI, *Homily St Patrick’s Cathedral*.

42 Benedict XVI, *Homily St Patrick’s Cathedral*.

43 See John Paul II, *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*.

of the Faith.⁴⁴ There is, in fact, a precise procedure for dealing with any sin against the sixth commandment of the decalogue committed by a priest against a minor.⁴⁵ The regulations provide that a diocese must open a preliminary investigation as soon as a *notitia criminis* is reported, even in presence of a simple suspicion. If the allegation is confirmed, the case is referred to the CDF, which gives its opinion on the procedures to be followed and the measures to be taken. The congregation can authorize the local bishop to conduct an administrative criminal trial in which the accused priest is called to answer the charges or a judicial criminal trial before a local ecclesiastical court during which evidence is examined.⁴⁶ If the priest is found guilty, canonical penalties might include suspension from public ministry or dismissal from the clerical state. Only in particularly serious cases and in the presence of overwhelming evidence, the CDF can report the case directly to the pope asking for an *ex officio* laicization. The matter could be debatable since it is usually the high ecclesiastical ranking members who decide if an accusation is legitimate; if not, as it happened and was documented many times in the U.S. abuse affair, the situation is filed and forgotten.⁴⁷ Furthermore, only from 2019, as a consequence of Pope Francis *motu proprio Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, better explained later, there is the moral and judicial obligation to report to the Vatican authorities any sexual offense committed by a cleric, a member of an institute of consecrated life or a society of apostolic life.⁴⁸ In addition to the legal and prompt obligation of clerics to report such crimes to the local ordinary, any person can report a conduct that could be considered criminal. The only case in which clerics are freed from this obligation concerns the application of canon law 1229 §1 and the code of canons of Oriental Churches 1548 §2. In fact, an exemption from the obligations is expected for “clerics regarding what has been known to them by reason of sacred ministry”.⁴⁹ As for reporting to civil authorities, however, in the same year the conference of Italian bishops (CEI) introduced only a moral obligation given the lack of legal requirement to report the facts to the judicial authority.⁵⁰ The article points out that the decision was viewed as ‘dishonest’ by Rete l’Abuso, a group of Italian victims, as it was pointed out that in 2014 the same conference had issued similar guidelines according to which bishops had a moral duty to report

⁴⁴ See CDF, *Letter Explains New Norms*.

⁴⁵ Code of Canon Law. Book VI: *Sanctions in the Church*. Canon 1395 §2.

⁴⁶ Scicluna, *The Procedure and Praxis*.

⁴⁷ Cafardi, *Before Dallas*, 153-4.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*.

⁴⁹ Code of Canon Law. Book VII: *Processes*. Title IV: *Proofs*.

⁵⁰ Winfield, “Italy’s Catholic Bishops”. See also CEI, CISM, *Linee guida*.

the abuses. Moral duty can be a relative concern in that it can vary based on subjective moral and ethical beliefs that sometimes may not be totally neutral. The interpretation of moral obligations results in a twofold reading: insufficient on the part of the victims who would have liked a different attitude on the part of the Church and a quick step forward - bearing in mind the different response time of the religious institution - for the Catholic hierarchy. Furthermore, it has to be acknowledged that the concept of moral duty is the antechamber to the obligation to report abuse to secular courts.

What instead distinguished Benedict XVI from John Paul II is that he was the first to apologize to the victims promising the development of measures and policies to prevent similar tragedies from happening in the future such as the laicization of priests considered guilty and the updating of the rules of procedure concerning the 'acts against morality'. Besides, shortly after his election, Ratzinger immediately had Father Marcial Maciel, the notorious founder of the Legionaries of Christ, removed. This is not to be considered a fortuitous act but a concrete example of how Ratzinger was willing to take responsibility for the mistakes committed by the Church - and by his predecessor who, even though was aware of the numerous abuses committed by the priest, did not act.⁵¹

Some historians have demonstrated how the Church initially labeled abuses as a sin rather than a crime and this concept can be found in most of Benedict XVI's speeches.⁵² During the celebration of vespers with the bishops of the U.S. on April 16, 2008, in his address the pope uses the terms "sin of abuse" and "gravely immoral behavior". Similarly, during the papal homily at the conclusion of the *Year for Priests* (June 11, 2010) the expression "the sins of priests come to light" is used.⁵³ A similar form can be also found in the *Videomessage for the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin* (June 17, 2012) when the pope talks about "sins committed by priests and consecrated persons entrusted to their care".⁵⁴ This idea implies the notion of confession and subsequent forgiveness, provided that there is a regret for the actions committed. The categorization of sexual abuse as a sin, then, justifies the importance of the conviction that what a victim needs is a pastoral response. The healing of the souls of the victims and the pastoral response/challenge is one of the themes that return several times Benedict XVI's speeches, but one major drawback of this approach is the focus only on the spiritual, and not on the psychological part of the entire issue. In fact, sometimes 'wounds' are mentioned in the pope's

51 Beltramo Álvarez, "John Paul II Knew".

52 Benigno, Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine*.

53 Benedict XVI, *Homily Conclusion of the Year*.

54 Benedict XVI, *Videomessage the Closing of the Eucharistic Congress*.

speeches when talking about victims: a wound, as is well known, is something that over time is bound to heal and disappear but the same cannot be said for the traumas of the victims, many of whom have been abused during childhood.⁵⁵ To remain in the 'medical' domain, abuse has also been defined as a perversion and an illness. As a matter of fact, in the course of the interview of Benedict XVI during the flight to the United Kingdom on September 16, 2010 the pope, talking on abuse, seems to accept the medical approach, declaring:

We know this is an illness, that free will does not rule where this illness is present, and that we must protect these persons from themselves and find a way to assist them and to protect them from themselves and exclude them from access to young people.⁵⁶

Again, the attention and concern are expressed for abusive priests, along with those for the victims. Notwithstanding, surveys show that not all abusive priests are to be labeled as pedophiles since pedophilia is a psychological condition that must be diagnosed, but not all pedophiles commit abuse.⁵⁷ Finally, it should be noticed that in the course of the homily for the Eucharistic celebration in the city of Westminster delivered in the same period, on September 18, 2010, the pope expressly used the word 'crime' to refer to abuses:

Here too I think of the immense suffering caused by the abuse of children, especially within the Church and by her ministers. Above all, I express my deep sorrow to the innocent victims of these unspeakable crimes, along with my hope that the power of Christ's grace, his sacrifice of reconciliation, will bring deep healing and peace to their lives.⁵⁸

The papal switch from the 'medical' and 'spiritual' models to the use of the term 'crime' leads to the recognition of a very specific configuration in which there is a victim and an offender who is accountable to civil justice – besides being accountable to God – and that involves a punishment too. Consequently, it can be said that the use of that terminology presupposes the intention to address the whole issue not only from a moral and pastoral point of view, but from a judicial one too, sanctioning the beginning of a shift from a 'partial administration' to an approach that would have included more judgment and concrete punishment factors.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, *Homily Holy Mass in Washington*.

⁵⁶ Benedict XVI, *Interview Flight to the U.K.* September 16, 2010.

⁵⁷ John Jay College of Criminal Justice, *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse*, 3.1.

⁵⁸ Benedict XVI, *Eucharistic Concelebration*.

Although, it must be specified that, in Ratzinger, insofar the element which continued to be considered fundamental was the absolute defense of the priesthood and despite, the partial continuity that bound him to the moral doctrine and vision of his predecessor, it is possible to see a step forward, meaning that the papal pastoral rhetoric began to shift towards the idea of abuse as a crime punishable by human law. This shift should not be emphasized too much, though. At the base, the root of abuse remained the lack of value of modern society, as confirmed by a late text published by the pope emeritus in 2019 under the magisterium of Bergoglio.⁵⁹ In fact, according to the pope emeritus Ratzinger, the crisis was made possible by a progressive loss of faith in God, which made real a collapse of Catholic morality landing people to give in to ‘relativistic temptations’, such as (again) the sexual revolution of the 1960s. These ideologies – just as John Paul II believed – had a way of negatively influencing young lay people, and also those who had decided to take the path of priesthood. Finally, in the last part of the text, he pointed out that abuse in the Church has been characterized, in the past, by the presence of a juridical imbalance dubbed as ‘guarantorism’, i.e., an all-out defense of the rights of those belonging to the Catholic hierarchies, namely the accused priests.⁶⁰

4 Pope Francis and the Definition of Abuse as a Crime to Be Punished

Since his election Pope Francis⁶¹ has been proactive in the fight against sexual abuse.⁶² Bergoglio proven to be an excellent communicator and well aware of the vastity of sexual abuse scandals: in one of his first public comments, referring to the abuses, he declared “the Church has done a lot on this route, perhaps more than anyone else”.⁶³ From his speeches it can be understood that for him the clergy sex abuse could be read both as a threat and an opportunity to purify the Church and society at the same time, adopting

⁵⁹ See Ratzinger, *The Church And the Scandal*.

⁶⁰ At this point it is natural to wonder how things can concretely change today if the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is mostly composed of priests, continue to be the only office officially in charge of preliminarily evaluating the cases of abuse submitted to its attention and if the canonical judicial processes, if they occur, still remain top secret.

⁶¹ Works on Pope Francis: Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis*. Allen, *The Francis Miracle*. Vian, *Le pape François*.

⁶² The Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe, *Betrayal*, 292-3.

⁶³ This statement was made during an interview, shortly after his election, to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. See De Bortoli, “Benedetto XVI non è una statua”.

both a traditional and a new rhetoric.⁶⁴ Citing a concrete example, Bergoglio stated:

the Church will restate her firm resolve to pursue unstintingly a path of purification. She will question, with the help of experts, how best to protect children, to avoid these tragedies, to bring healing and restoration to the victims, and to improve the training imparted in seminaries. An effort will be made to make past mistakes opportunities for eliminating this scourge, not only from the body of the Church but also from that of society.⁶⁵

Francis expressed his greatest sorrow and shame at the acts committed especially by churchmen, a concept that returns numerous times in both his contributions and those of his predecessors. Abuse in his addresses is referred to by several terms: in 2014, Francis described it as an evil, a “personal, moral damage”, a “crime and grave sin” and even an “execrable act” and a “sacrilegious cult”.⁶⁶ This ‘sacrilegious cult’ could be interpreted as a profanation of some priests’ promise to God, leading them to commit violence and sacrifice children, souls whom according to their mission they were supposed to preserve and guide, to the ‘idol of concupiscence’ – as the pope calls it, that is, the lust taught by civil society – casting a veil of shame over the entire religious institution. In the following years, abuse is also considered a horrible sin and a terrible ruin for all mankind, a plague, an abomination, and a criminal phenomenon as well as a very serious calamity afflicting the Church and humanity.⁶⁷ In most of his speeches, at least at the beginning, however, a rhetoric considered recycled by secular media, transpires together with the belief that abuse is intrinsic to all sectors of society.⁶⁸ In particular the continued expression of grief and sorrow over the abuse and violation of children’s innocence have been considered something ‘already heard’ in his predecessors. It has been noticed that the element that distinguished the Church from society could be identified in the fact that the whole religious institution is seen as guilty and that, therefore, the fault of individuals are collective faults, while the issue is different for the other categories of civil society that commit abuses. For

⁶⁴ Francis, *Address to the Roman Curia*. See also Francis, *Meeting The Protection of Minors*.

⁶⁵ Francis, *Address to the Roman Curia*.

⁶⁶ These expressions are contained in the speeches: Francis, *Address to the BICE*. Francis, *Homily with a Group of Victims*.

⁶⁷ Francis, *Address to the Commission for the Protection of Minors*. See also Francis, *Address to the Roman Curia*. Francis, *Meeting The Protection of Minors*.

⁶⁸ Giuffrida, *Campaigners Furious After Pope’s Speech*.

example, if a coach or an educator commits violence in society, the entire professional category is not blamed for the crime while on the contrary, the whole Catholic Church and its leaders are considered implicated in the facts.⁶⁹ This is what emerges in the media and can be considered the methodology employed by the public opinion to attack the Church itself as the aim would seem to be the will to undermine at the root the validity of any past, present and future statements regarding morality.

Unlike his predecessors, for Francis the root cause of abuse is not only to be found outside the institution but is also caused by a culture present within the Catholic Church. On the one hand, according to the pontiff, there is an evil historically intrinsic and widespread in all cultures and civilizations, a brutality that enters the body of humanity and makes individuals become the “instrument of Satan”.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the source of abuses is to be recognized in clericalism and in the abuse of power of some clergymen, a malignant mentality that according to Francis must be healed.⁷¹ The first time Francis spoke of clericalism in correlation to abuse was in 2018, when in a letter he expressed that it, in addition to being the trigger of many evils, represents the cause of a schism within the Church and society.⁷² In the text of the epistle, the pontiff writes that “to say no to abuse is to say an emphatic no to all forms of clericalism”.⁷³ Assuming that clericalism is indeed one of the roots of abuses, it can be supposed that with its elimination the Catholic Church will no longer ‘stand on the pedestal’ as the defender and tribunal of orthodoxy and moral purity in a more theoretical than practical manner, but that it could place itself on the same level as the faithful, concretely reducing the distance present between clergy and laity so as to be able to finally see the problem from a different perspective and try, at last, to adopt new measures. Francis has repeatedly stressed that the Church is committed to putting the victims first and not its own reputation, ensuring both the search for the truth and justice and punishment for the guilty.⁷⁴ On a practical level, in one of his January 2020 addresses, he mentioned the creation of norms to integrate the canon law in the field of abuse and for the first time he explicitly speaks of civil national and international authorities, as well as ecclesiastical, with which to collabo-

69 Agnoli, *Chiesa e pedofilia*, 83-5.

70 Francis, *Meeting The Protection of Minors*.

71 Francis, *Incontro con Compagnia di Gesù*.

72 Francis, *Letter People of God*.

73 Francis, *Letter People of God*.

74 Francis, *Safeguarding God's Children*.

rate.⁷⁵ At this juncture, in 2021 there was a rewriting of the canonical code with the addition of book VI of canon law. Within the new volume the concerning crimes of the sexual abuse of minors are, for the first time, part of the title VI called *offences against human life, dignity and liberty* while in the past they were included in the section *crime against special obligation*.⁷⁶ In addition to updating existing norms, the numerous normative measures enacted especially since 2016 – e.g., the motu proprio *As a Loving Mother* and the already mentioned *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* – have been incorporated to improve the Church’s procedures of criminal justice administration.

If it is true that in the course of his pontificate on a concrete level Francis condemned abuse and added it to the list of offenses, eliminated the pontifical secret in cases of sexual abuse of minors, organized *The Protection of Minors in the Church* summit on the topic – a four-day meeting that was held in Rome from 21 to 24 February 2019 – and founded a committee of experts, defrocked many guilty priests, and updated the canon law, on a theoretical level his rhetoric seems to be partially a *déjà vu* at first glance. As a matter of fact, also his predecessors had expressed their sadness, prayers and pain over this scourge that represents “the greatest desolation the Church is undergoing” and had postulated that proper knowledge of the problem and an adequate training for seminarists and priests could stem the issue.⁷⁷ What is more, the very action of continuing to apologize and show shame at such crimes, characteristics even of Francis, could represent a powerful means too by which the Church wants to show that it has understood its mistakes, and, above all, those committed by bishops and high Vatican officials in the administration of abuse cases and to be ready to respond to victims and society by adopting policies of accountability and extreme transparency in order to curb the problem. Indeed, as highlighted in a recent study, “acknowledging and managing the shame of wrongdoing is an integral part of the remedial function of apology” and is a fundamental part to attempt to repair the destruction of the institution’s public image.⁷⁸ And that is exactly what Francis emphasized during his October 6, 2021, general audience referring to the events which came to light in the French Catholic Church:

I wish to express to the victims my sadness and my pain for the traumas they endured and my shame, our shame, my shame that

75 Francis, *Address to Diplomatic Corps*.

76 See <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/06/01/0348/00750.html#in>.

77 Francis, *Incontro Compagnia di Gesù*.

78 McAlinden, “Apologies as ‘Shame Management’”, 77.

for so long the Church has been incapable of putting this at the centre of her concerns, assuring them of my prayers. I pray, and let us all pray together: To you Lord the glory, to us the shame: this is a moment of shame.⁷⁹

However, it is in this occasion that a major conceptual shift appeared. If in previous speeches Francis had defined abuse as a “personal and moral damage” or as an execrable act that has left on victims “life-long scars”, here for the first time the concept of trauma has been used.⁸⁰ The psychological model has been finally added. This is not considered enough though, it can be assumed that the trauma of a victim of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy, as well as being spiritual, physical and psychological, could also be read as a ‘betrayal’ by the Church for not supporting and listening to them and, at times, trying to silence and hide the allegations.

According to the public opinion and some experts, like Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of Bishop Accountability,⁸¹ the response given by the three popes and the Church is still incomplete and will only become real and concrete when the rhetoric of denouncing abuses to civil authorities becomes an obligation and not just a moral recommendation, or when the Vatican archives concerning abuses will be desecrated worldwide.⁸²

Another step forward could be considered *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* in which Francis, in addition to establish the internal obligation to report violence and abuse to Church authorities, states in article 19 that the rules set are applicable:

without prejudice to the rights and obligations established in each place by state laws, particularly those concerning any reporting obligations to the competent civil authorities.⁸³

Hence, the pope seems to be willing to collaborate with secular authorities. This point could be definitely considered a basis for the introduction of mandatory reporting by clergy of all crimes committed by Church members to the secular law enforcement.

79 Francis, *General Audience*.

80 Francis, *Address to BICE*. See also Francis, *Homily with a Group of Victims*.

81 Bishop Accountability, founded in 2003 by Terence McKieran, a member of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, is one of the largest online public resource of information on the Catholic clergy abuse crisis whose mission is to provide a ‘full account’ of sexual abuse by providing a digital archive containing a broad documentation.

82 Allen, *Pope Francis vs. Critics*.

83 Francis, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*.

In the same year, the *Instruction on the Confidentiality of Legal Proceedings* that ratified the end of pontifical secrecy in matters of abuse was promulgated.⁸⁴ The text mentions that:

Office confidentiality shall not prevent the fulfilment of the obligations laid down in all places by civil laws, including any reporting obligations, and the execution of enforceable requests of civil judicial authorities.⁸⁵

Therefore, in these cases, canon law is meant to be complementary to civil law. On the one hand this modifies the Vatican legal system, while on the other hand it opens the way to easier collaboration with secular authorities, provided that the law of the State foresees the obligatory reporting of informants. This issue is not only alluded to in the two aforementioned sources, which resulted in normative changes, but there is also a trace of it in the *Vademecum* published by the CDF in 2020.⁸⁶ Point 17, in fact, states that although there is no juridical obligation, the members of the clergy are invited to report criminal acts to the police if it is considered essential for the protection of the offended person. While a debate can be opened on the assessment of indispensability – since in the past some abusive priests were held harmless by the personal opinion of bishops and this attitude only led to the reiteration of abuse –, it must be acknowledged that these statements and/or regulations are sign of progressive, albeit slow, evolution toward mandatory denunciation of crimes committed by clerics.

It can be concluded that Francis' rhetoric can be understood as more open than that of his two predecessors, even if to a certain extent there remain a shared conceptual framework, some legacies of the past and a 'veil' behind which the Catholic Church still maintains in part its bunker mentality, its lack of transparency, and the desire to manage its problems internally for the reasons seen.⁸⁷ Bergoglio, while partially sharing the ethical relativism of his predecessors,

⁸⁴ *Instruction on the Confidentiality of Legal Proceedings*. December 17, 2019. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2019/12/17/1011/02062.html#en>.

⁸⁵ *Instruction on the Confidentiality of Legal Proceedings*, 4.

⁸⁶ *Vademecum on Certain Points of Procedure in Treating Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors Committed by Clerics*. July 16, 2020. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20200716_vademecum-casi-abuso_en.html.

⁸⁷ In the report by the Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église (*Les violences sexuelles*, 72-3), it is argued that although Francis has taken some progress by enacting strong measures and abolishing papal secrecy to contrast abuse, this is not enough and shows a partial immobility of the church.

used in fact a different paradigm to talk about abuse. First, in his speeches there is no view of abuse as a modern evil but, for example, the focus is on abuse as a 'timeless problem' as well as a problem for which the devil is partially responsible. This, for instance, can be observed in Francis's speech on February 24, 2019, during the Eucharistic celebration for the meeting The Protection of Minors in the Church:

Our work has made us realize once again that the gravity of the scourge of the sexual abuse of minors is, and historically has been, a widespread phenomenon in all cultures and societies. Only in relatively recent times has it become the subject of systematic research, thanks to changes in public opinion regarding a problem that was previously considered taboo; everyone knew of its presence yet no one spoke of it.⁸⁸

Thus, Francis has started to abandon the rhetoric, used for decades by the Church, of opposition to modernity, together with the view of pedophilia as a disease to be treated, and begins to define abuse as a crime that must be absolutely punished.⁸⁹ Francis appears not to insist on the crisis of values, the corruption and apostasy of modern society but seems to use modern means to ultimately 'modernize', at least in part, the judicial apparatus related to the lawsuits against abusers, and it can be assumed that during his magisterium the overcoming of the 'modern/antimodern logic' is also put in place, substituting it with the polyhedric paradigm.⁹⁰ Although, it must be concretely noticed that a step forward in dealing with abuse has been taken under the papacy of Francis, still part of the civil society continues to perceive the Catholic ecclesiastical administration as not 'transparent' enough.

88 Francis, *Eucharistic Concelebration*.

89 To sum up among the main reforms of the canonical system wanted by Francis, in 2013, are the enactment of laws VIII and IX which concern, on the one hand, additional regulations relating to crime against minors and, on the other hand, amendments to the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code. See https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/8257/file/Holy%20See_Supplementary_Norms_on_Criminal_Matters_2013_en.pdf and <https://www.derechos.org/intlaw/doc/vat2.html>. In 2019, then the pontifical secrecy on abuse cases is eliminated and the law CCXCVII is enacted requiring Church members to report without delay to Church authorities any sexual abuse case. See https://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_protezionemineri-legge297_20190326_en.html.

90 Vian, *Sinfonia nella Chiesa*. See also Vian, "Le pape François et la mondialisation".

5 Conclusion

The purpose of the current article was to examine Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis' rhetoric in order to understand how the paradigm of modernity has been used to interpret the global sex abuse scandal. As has been underlined the Vatican was pushed by the public opinion in the wake of such scandals to publicly confront the abuse issue when it had already exploded.⁹¹ Public opinion has repeatedly pointed out that the Catholic Church did not voluntarily take the first step to solve the situation but found itself obliged to do so when it was attacked by the media and more and more complaints began to reach the civil authorities.⁹² Moreover, the public opinion has always considered abuse as "the worst and most irremediable crime",⁹³ also alluding to the fact that for decades sexual abuse was also considered one of the consequences of homosexual acts, which were described as *crimen pessimum*.⁹⁴ This worst crime, according to a theological conception of Catholic Church was to be considered as irremediable. The Church, instead, has labeled it for years as "an act amendable with confession and penance" thus showing the difficulty of the institution to adapt to the historical, social, and cultural changes taking place in modern society.⁹⁵ Sexual abuse has been treated through the use of a 'modern narrative' that places on one side the perpetrator,⁹⁶ a figure of power with a good reputation according to the parishioners, who with his 'deviant behavior' becomes the embodiment of the Church, and on the other an innocent victim, usually a child, often belonging to a difficult or marginal social context.⁹⁷ Additionally, the media portrayal of abuse is constructed in scandalous terms that result in a discrediting of the religious institution, i.e., causing a collapse of image and trust in the Church and

91 The reference is to the 2002, 2018 and 2021 scandals.

92 The Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe, *Betrayal*, 47-9.

93 Benigno, Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine*.

94 Beal, "The 1962 Instruction *Crimen Sollicitationis*".

95 Benigno, Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine*.

96 It is interesting to note the 'deny, attack and reverse' victim-offender psychology. The perpetrator, first, makes the victim believe that it was their fault if the abuser committed the offense. In addition, there is a tendency for the abuser to deny the facts, even though there is strong evidence, to attack the victim and his or her testimony, and to apply a strategy called perpetrator-victim reversal psychology. At this juncture, the perpetrator makes himself out to be the victim, for example, making believe that he is the one attacked (e.g., by the public opinion) or that he is absolutely grieving for the pain suffered by the victim. The perpetrator, therefore, assumes a victimized role to divert his blame. See Harsey, Freyd, "Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim".

97 Bromley, Cress, "Narratives of Sexual Danger".

its members.⁹⁸ Furthermore, specific terms are chosen: for instance, the priest-pedophile categorization has been created, leading public opinion towards the idea that the whole institution is guilty and causing a ‘social panic’ that just intensifies even more the gravity of the problem in that an element that is culturally and socially conceived as positive (the priest) is juxtaposed with a negative one that only amplifies the wrongdoing (the pedophile). A concrete example can be found in the fact that in most of the speeches of the popes the expression ‘sexual abuse’ is used while in the media it is mostly described by the word ‘pedophilia’.⁹⁹

Conversely, the reaction that the Catholic Church has had and that had tied the rhetoric of the three popes together – although with different urgencies –, has consisted in emphasizing the fact that the sex abuse scandal has been the result of “few bad apples in an otherwise good barrel”,¹⁰⁰ in other words the misdeeds of a few cannot be attributable to the whole Church. It may be assumed that this has been done to maintain some distance from certain events and to stem the discredit the religious institution had had to endure. Amongst the strategies of reparation adopted by the Church, which are present in the speeches analyzed in this article, there is the admission of mistakes made by some members of the clergy, the reconstruction of a new way of accreditation – with the laicization, the development of norms and the updating of canon law done by the three pontiffs – and the attempt to revise the role of the Vatican in society to bring it closer to being a guide and protector of the rights of minors. Hence, the Church focuses on publicly acknowledging and accepting the crimes committed by some of its representatives, stressing that everything will be done to ensure that the situation does not happen again. By showing interest in solving the problem, an openness and transparency in pursuing concrete action is perceived, at times promoting, at least in papal rhetoric, measures, and norms to address the problem, such as an active collaboration with the civil authorities.

The discovery of sexual abuse perpetrated by some clergy destroyed not only the experience of Catholic faith, but also the ultramontanist/integralist vision of the Church as a pure and perfect society. While some responsible persons within the Catholic Church

98 Gili, Pompili, “Comunicazione della Chiesa”, 80-9.

99 For example, in the 2021 speech concerning the recent discovery of abuses in France dating back to the 1950s, Pope Francis speaks only of abuse and shame, while some newspapers and websites use the term ‘pedophilia/pedophiles’. See, for example, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58781265> or <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/03/europe/france-catholic-church-pedophilia-abuse-intl/index.html>.

100 This is an expression coined by the U.S. Pentagon referring in principle to the scandal that occurred in Abu Ghraib, but which can also be applied to the situation of abuse committed by some priests within the Catholic Church.

believe that, with its attacks, the secular media is trying to undermine its secular reputation, public opinion is mainly urging it to adopt a different attitude in the administration of abuse, more victim-centered, postulating the creation of an institution no more focused on “denialism, complicity, conformity and protectionism”.¹⁰¹ Many victims and the public opinion today do not have full trust in the Catholic Church. If one assumes that the Vatican has hidden and lied in the past on abuses, one might come to the conclusion that nothing can prevent it from happening again in the present and in the future. The question that remains central today is: if Catholic leadership has been part of the problem (with transfers of guilty priests, cover-ups, momentary suspension), can it also be the solution?

The analyzed papal attitudes show that over time the Vatican’s position toward sexual abuse has changed. It can be affirmed that the passage from the definition of abuse as a sin to a recognized crime, and also a trauma for the victims, has made a concrete example that the Church, though forced and not on its own initiative, has become aware of the reality of abuse and despite the initial ‘unproductive attitude’ of belittling the problem, had corrected itself ‘in the process’. The 2019 Vatican summit for the protection of minors certainly made clear the Church’s willingness to listen to victims and to generate and implement concrete measures against the recurrence of sexual abuse and for the punishment of offenders.¹⁰² True purification, then, starts with the promise not to cover up or underestimate any accusation and to properly select and train candidates for the priesthood. Furthermore, the practice of the popes to make formal apologies as representatives of the entire institution, as well as the implementation of concrete punitive measures against guilty priests – albeit often delayed by years – shows a shift from the Church’s old practice and a first step in opening a constructive dialogue with the victims. Lastly, regarding the causes of the abuse, several suppositions can be made, but it is not yet possible to give an exhaustive explanation. Similarly, it is not possible to have a complete chronological line of the cases of abuse committed by priests all over the world because in many diocesan archives, as well as in the Vatican archives in Rome, is not possible to have access to carry out such a study. Thereby, one has to wonder if the Catholic Church can really emerge unscathed from the purification it has set out to achieve. It can be presumed that merely admitting the guilt and the mistakes made in the past is not enough as this should only represent a starting point to make up for the mismanagement, to adopt real working strategies and to rebuild a more transparent religious institution that no longer ‘sweeps

101 Driscoll, “Catholic Church Response”.

102 Francis, *Meeting Protections of Minors*.

the dirt under the rug'. It is undeniable that in the future there might be a transformation in the Church's attitude towards crimes. The reforms of the legal system regarding sexual abuse, that have taken place in recent years, should be considered only a first step in establishing a network of accountability and in ensuring that mercy is no longer put before justice.

To conclude, it could be argued that a dialogue and a true adaptation to modern values, such as self-determination, for the Catholic Church is and will not be easy.¹⁰³ The Church cannot in fact ignore nor completely eliminate the conceptual framework it has built on modernity over the centuries, but in order for the dialogue to be real and constructive, it should concretely get rid of some legacies of the past that are no longer welcome and accepted by secular societies, such as the bunker mentality, clericalism and the unappealable defense of its members. Unless the Church changes its vision and reshapes its attitude, the problem of sexual abuse will probably have no end.¹⁰⁴

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103 Scalfari, "Il dialogo".

104 The topic of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church is to be considered very current and continuously evolving, especially during the papacy of Francis. The analyzed elements considered in this article take into account the major events until October 2021.

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