

Consultation Report:

The Truth Will Make You Free: What Promise Do National Truth and Reconciliation Processes Offer for the Catholic Church's Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis?

September 24, 2021

University of Notre Dame  
Indiana, USA

The following report summarizes a consultation, “The Truth Will Make You Free: What Promise Do National Truth and Reconciliation Processes Offer for the Catholic Church’s Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis?” held at the University of Notre Dame on a grant from Church Sexual Abuse Crisis Research Grant Program sponsored by Notre Dame’s President’s Office. The conveners were Daniel Philpott and Katharina Westerhorstmann.

### Participants

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## Session I: Unhealed Wounds

The intention of the first session of the consultation centered around the guiding questions: What are the major unhealed wounds from sex abuse within the Catholic Church? To what extent does the truth about such abuse remain untold? What wounds do victims continue to suffer? To what extent is accountability lacking? Is repentance lacking, either on the part of the Church officials or perpetrators? How do answers to these questions differ in Germany and the United States?

Before beginning to dig into these questions, the organizers of the dialogue welcomed the participants and explained the purpose of our collaboration. The question in the title of the dialogue, (“What Promise Do National Truth and Reconciliation Processes Offer the Catholic Church’s Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis?”), they clarified, is meant to be open-ended. Participants would be invited to probe the question in a creative dialectic; the conclusions were not seen as foreordained. There were, however, certain premises behind the project: (1) that significant unhealed wounds (damage and injustices to persons, institutions, and communities) persist from the sexual abuse crisis. Though progress has been made, the response of the institutional Church often has been reactive and piecemeal. It has not always been the place of “healing, home, recognition, and protection” it could be for survivors as the mystical body of Christ; (2) these unhealed wounds might include the absence of a full telling of truth, adequate accountability for bishops and abuser priests, acknowledgement of victims and survivors, healing of psychological and spiritual wounds suffered by survivors, adequate apology, a dearth of the practice of forgiveness, and damage to the credibility of the church as a moral and spiritual authority and witness; (3) there are strong parallels in the predicaments faced and addressed by nation-states in past generations in the face of widespread serious wrongs and systemic injustice affecting whole institutions and societies, where often the best responses were ones that were holistic, restorative, and proactive. These responses might involve practices of truth-telling, acknowledgement, apology, accountability, reparations, forgiveness, restorative justice, and a sense of being able to move forward for societies.

The organizers then invited the participants to introduce themselves, giving names and primary affiliations. Though it was not requested, many participants began sharing their personal connections to the sexual abuse crisis. Five participants shared that they had experienced clerical

sexual abuse themselves, most (though not all) as children, and two had experienced sexual abuse as children from non-clergy members. One participant mentioned suffering spiritual abuse. Later in the day another participant disclosed being physically abused as a child. A few participants revealed that they had been close to clergy members who they later found out were perpetrators of sexual abuse. This led one participant to encourage the group to go into every meeting assuming that in the room there are victims, perpetrators, and people who have covered up abuse, and to remind everyone that the consultation should be included in that assumption.

After these vulnerable introductions, the moderator of the first session invited the participants to return to the guiding questions, beginning with “where are the wounds today?” The moderator acknowledged that using the term “wounds” (rather than “injustices” or something else) already frames things in a certain way, but “wounds” should be taken here in a very broad sense, one that includes outstanding injustices, the extent to which the truth about abuse remains untold, the extent to which accountability/repentance/apology is lacking, aspects of the institutions that need to be reformed, and so forth. This was a time to call to mind and center the wounds, before focusing more strongly on potential actions going forward.

The very beginning of the dialogue, therefore, included a list of areas the participants wanted to be sure not to overlook, echoing a restorative justice practice of asking who was harmed and what the harm was. One participant mentioned the abuse of religious sisters and nuns by clergy. Multiple anecdotes from participants about adult abuse involved cases of sisters or seminarians brought to the United States from the developing world, who may have a particular vulnerability as victims of clergy abuse. It was suggested that there is often a class dimension to abuse; predators tend to go after the poor and vulnerable. One participant compared the complications of clerical abuse to incest and brought up potential wounds upon an accused priest, saying that “when there is a case, the accused loses his father” because the bishop now must sit in another chair. This sort of wound was somewhat contentious for participants. One participant who experienced clerical sexual abuse was once told by a bishop, “we have suffered too” because of the allegations, to which the participant responded, “never say that.” Participants experienced with restorative justice practices emphasized the ripple effects or blast radius of abuse: the friends, family members, children, and colleagues of survivors who make a whole survivor network which is often not invited to the classic

one-on-one meetings with the archdiocese. Family relationships can be wounded after clerical abuse even when the Church responds well to a survivor. One participant received validation from the Church after coming forward. However, the relationship between the participant and the participant's parents was still harmed by the abuse because the parents did not protect their child from this abuse. In the next generation, the participant's children are questioning their involvement with the Church because it is a place where they know one of their parents was violated. Another participant suspected that before all is said and done, everyone, from members of a family all the way to the Pope will need to ask themselves, "what was my role? What did I advise? And why did I think that this was the best advice at the time?"

Many participants acknowledged that, although it is not comparable to the harm done to the victims, the ripples include harm to our Church and our faith. This harm includes, as one participant expressed it, the wound of having a substantial number of priests who thought that abuse should be a part of other people's lives, the wound of having bishops that worried about the institution rather than the individuals and saw victims as problems, not people, and wounds brought about by lay lawyers who "bankrupted us financially, spiritually, and morally" by trying to pay money to have the issue go away. For example, one participant who came forward about experiencing childhood clerical abuse was offered a six-figure sum. The participant told the authorities suggesting this, "you're treating me like a prostitute."

The participants that spoke agreed that the legal battle that ensues when the Church brings in lawyers for known pedophiles silences victims. There was some disagreement about whether it is the lay lawyers or the Church authorities who bear more blame for this tragedy. It was pointed out that that people and businesses alike ignore advice from their attorneys all the time, and the Church authorities have that option. On the other hand, one participant suggested that bishops who get reports of abuse often react in shock, and it may not be a bad thing to call a lawyer. Lawyers, at their best, this participant said, can only point out not only the legal aspects of given actions but also other aspects to which Church leaders may need to attend. Church leaders and lawyers alike should know that what is moral is a higher bar than what is legal. It was pointed out that one complicating factor may be that many canon lawyers are also civil lawyers. Furthermore, one participant who works closely with lawyers reminded the group, lawyers, like many laity, are still people who "like to

be patted on the head by their bishop,” and this may affect the advice that they give. The participant had certainly witnessed some things between bishops and their lawyers that may have been indicative of a problematic reciprocal relationship like questionable annulments. Another participant familiar with the legal side of things encouraged those in the room to consider how they or their families would respond and suggested that we all bear responsibility in these situations. Regardless of the division of culpability, the wound that a poor response to an allegation of abuse causes a victim is profound.

For victims and for the Church, one way this wound expresses itself, as one of the participants who was a childhood clerical abuse survivor explained, is that many victims would never go to the Church for help. That which is meant to be a place of healing and home becomes for them a place of danger and violation. Even victims who initially try to trust the Church with their healing and think they will be kindly welcomed sometimes find themselves ostracized, minimized, and marginalized by the Church authorities they approach. Even when victims are welcomed in Church circles there can be a pressure to “get over it” or “be healed” that overlooks the gravity of the wounds and the severity of the injustice and keeps the onus on the victims themselves to do all their own advocacy. All too often that which is most healing for victims is done by family members, psychologists, and even the criminal justice system, and does not come from the institutional Church.

Given all this, it is unsurprising that a running theme that began during this initial session and continued throughout the day was the second violence of the Church’s response to those who suffered clerical sexual abuse. The sexual abuse crisis, participants agreed, is not only the fact and prevalence of clerical sexual abuse, but the damaging ways the Church as an institution has responded or failed to respond. Various reasons were proposed to explain this failure: clericalism (including the misogyny that may be at the heart of it, and including lay clericalism), careerism, a bunker mentality, listening to lawyers, fear of public opinion driving people away from the Church, fear of losing the culture wars, the inexperience of many bishops as pastors, a utilitarian way of thinking about Church money, and politics. This second violence and the revictimization it causes, many participants who experienced clerical abuse agreed, is often as bad or worse for them as the initial abuse had been. The response, like the initial abuse, also has ripples for the victim’s network.

Like the initial abuse, the revictimization of those who come forward affects the victims' friends and family and, as a participant pointed out in a later session, even sends a minimizing message to survivors of non-clerical sexual abuse about the way the Church sees the kinds of wounds they carry. "To truly protect the Church," one participant suggested, "is to protect the victims within the Church and not just the institution." Yet even from an institutional perspective, if the concern of Church authorities who try to hide from, minimize, or protect the Church from allegations of abuse is a fear that it will harm the image of the Church, they may be doing worse damage than the one they are trying to avoid. The reputation of the Church can be harmed just as badly by denying victims as by revealing the truth. One participant spoke of feeling horror after learning about a ring of priests who shared trinkets from the children they abused. This participant was disturbed not just by the level of depravity that existed among these clergy members, but also by learning about it from a state entity and not from the Church. It added a level of mistrust of Church hierarchy. When the truth comes out, as it so often does, it not only does the damage those who tried to hide it feared, but further damage is caused by attempts to cover it up or rush past it. This is reflected in the words of Saint Gregory the Great, quoted by one participant: "as much as we can without sin, we ought to avoid scandal to our neighbors. But if scandal is taken from truth, it is better that scandal be allowed to arise than that truth be relinquished."<sup>1</sup>

Intermittently during this initial dialogue, the discussion of wounds was punctuated by complications over discovering or addressing abuse. One participant expressed concern over conflicting narratives of the truth and concern that we cannot handle the truth. Another mentioned experience with immobility due to conflicting or overlapping jurisdictions between diocese and religious order and institution. Institutions that do want to act on allegations or concerns also must vie with the added complication of the ability of bishops to overlook concerns from seminaries and ordain a priest anyway, sometimes even when the priest has been kicked out of a seminary. One participant revealed that canon law is sometimes used as a place to park abusive clergy because it is a place where they are less likely to interact with the laity generally and children in particular. This means some of those who are proposing policies or making judgements around abuse allegations are abusers themselves. One participant introduced the complication of power as a function of male

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<sup>1</sup> This comes from Gregory's *Homiliarum in Ezechielem*, lib. I, Horn. VII, PL 76, col. 842.



clerical culture in the Church. Some participants who had been involved with seminaries expressed concern over a general hesitancy to address sexuality at all. In these contexts, they found, sexuality of any kind can be shrouded in secrecy and shame, so much so that one participant found sexual language entirely omitted from the minutes of a meeting that, among other things, met to discuss sex and celibacy. One of the participants who was sexually assaulted by a clergy member as an adult pointed out that there needs to be a better understanding of terms within Church language and education. Church terminology for a priest who assaults an adult is a “boundary violation,” which is the same term for a consensual affair with a priest. The consent of the lay adult is not recognized in this language. In this participant’s case it was also news to the clergy member to discover that what took place was legally assault, so there is a lack of education even about laws relating to sexual contact.

On the other side, of course, survivors of sexual abuse also find their own experiences of sexuality shrouded in secrecy and shame, and it is unclear what role traditional justice mechanisms play in lifting that shroud. One participant who had experienced clerical sexual abuse as a child found the justice system validating in a way the institutional Church had failed to be. Another participant suggested that healing can only happen after justice. A different participant who had experienced clerical sexual abuse, however, said that when the Church affirmed that sexual misconduct had occurred in that participant’s case, that participant felt a relieving sense of justice for only five minutes. The unhealed wounds were still left at home, particularly in family relationships for this participant. Another survivor that participated in the consultation specifically did not want to prosecute, and only wanted truth and healing in the relationship with the abuser.

This first session made it clear that it is not only the unhealed wounds that are varied, but also the wounded. Those who are victims of clerical sexual abuse are among the wounded, including those abused as adults (for which we do not have an estimate) and as children (an estimated 250,000 in the US alone). Their wounds include being ostracized, minimized, and marginalized by the institutional Church, feeling so alienated from it that they cannot or would not go to it for help, not being treated like family by the institutional Church, and trauma (including symptoms like suicidal ideation, panic attacks, inability to hold a job, and/or righteous outrage, to list a few). The wounded also include families, sometimes spanning multiple generations affected by the abuse of just one

member. The body of the Church has been wounded, as the faithful, some of whom are survivors of abuse by non-clergy, by the prevalence and depravity of the clerical abuse that has occurred and the failure of the Church leadership and community to respond in love to victims. The database of priests in the US we know have been accused of abuse, one participant reminded the group, has just crossed over 7,400 and is expected to go up to 10,000 (10% of the priests who have worked in the Church from 1950 to present). In Germany fewer names are known, suggesting that there are many wounds that are not only unhealed, but even unknown. The faithful are also carrying the wounds of disappointment in finding out about the severity of the crisis from state entities or media outlets instead of the Church they have trusted, and the distrust of the Church hierarchy this inspires. The leadership of the Church carries the wounds of having pedophiles as their Canon Law experts, having shepherds who do not have shepherd's hearts, bishops who think of the institution over individuals, and an inability to address that which is sexual without secrecy and shame. The entire Church body, one participant suggested, needs to fully die with Christ regarding these wounds. Until we embrace them and fully enter that brokenness, we can expect many of the wounds to remain unhealed.

## Session II: The Lessons of National Truth and Reconciliation Processes

The second session placed the wounds of the Church in conversation with the wounds of nation-states after internal conflicts. It was conceived with the following guiding questions: What are the best fruits of national truth and reconciliation processes? What sort of practices would achieve reconciliation, acknowledgement, repentance, and/or reparations? Ought the global church to undertake restorative practices? Ought national churches undertake these practices? Ought the Church to revisit its traditional teachings on avoiding scandal? What can the practice of forgiveness contribute towards the healing of the wounds of sex abuse? In practice, the session involved exploring the potential of a truth-telling process and memorials for the sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, the need for structural change and not just the prosecution of individual perpetrators, and some ideas for better practices in seminaries.

This second session of the dialogue began with a brief history of truth commissions. The moderator gave some background on the truth commission in Argentina as the country tried to heal from the Dirty Wars by learning information about the disappeared. This was followed by a short examination of the truth commission in Chile after Pinochet, which focused on reparations and transparency, and the truth commission in Mexico, which sought to establish facts to support the basis for reconciliation, reparations, and structural changes. The moderator noted that the military did not cooperate with the latter commission, refusing to hand over their records. It was also an example of a change in politics, but not economics. The introduction then turned to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, held in the aftermath of *apartheid*, as perhaps one of the most well-known truth commissions. The situation in South Africa was distinct from the others for a few reasons relevant to the group's discussions. One of them was that the civil dispute there ended in a stalemate rather than a complete reversal of power. Therefore, the country needed accountability of some kind in order to begin cooperating with itself, but it was not feasible to hold everyone accountable. The TRC also took the unconventional step of offering amnesty for truth, which attracted criticism from some international watchdogs. The emphasis on reconciliation itself was also unique, with its roots, as suggested by Desmond Tutu, the Chair, in the idea of ubuntu: I am because we are. While the TRC is often admired, it is not without controversy. Critics point out

that many townships in South Africa are now poorer than they were during *apartheid*. With cynicism around the word “reconciliation,” some within the country see the South African president at the time, Nelson Mandela, as a traitor, and the Chair of the TRC, Tutu, as religiously motivated. They see South Africa today as a country where the minority still dominates and are not equals or partners. Some are not even sure that the minority should be equal to the majority. Nonetheless many who testified at the TRC did find healing and felt honored by the process, and while some of the perpetrators who testified may have been putting on a mere performance, we have reason to believe there were some real conversions as well.

All these examples illustrate this seemingly basic human intuition that often to move on we need truth. They also bring up some of the questions this pursuit reveals. Whose truth do we need? From which angle are we obtaining truth? Is it always valuable to have the truth brought up, opening old wounds? They also raise questions about accountability, the role of courts, the value of apology, and the role of memorial, and reveal trepidations about forgiveness. The participants were invited to explore these questions and concerns in the context of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.

By and large the participants agreed that there could be much benefit in a greater embrace of the truth about the sexual abuse that has taken place. One participant expressed grief and disappointment that the Church as a highly organized and ecclesial community has not pursued truth-telling more robustly. One participant expressed despair and frustration, sharing a desire to metaphorically blow up the windowless bunker of clericalism in which some Church authorities seem to operate but feared that blowing up one bunker would make those in power simply dig a deeper one. Participants emphasized the importance of reporting abuse to reduce deniability but yearned for more than just another report. They mentioned a need to have a full account of what happened, dialogue with survivors, and structural change. They acknowledged the painfulness of invisibility and a participant who experienced clerical sexual abuse said that having some kind of public honoring would be very meaningful. Participants also emphasized that truth is not only something that is owed to victims, but also to God. “Survivors want validation,” one participant told the room, “and we all need the change it could bring.”

There was clear agreement amongst the participants that something more needs to be done to address the sexual abuse crisis and that truth-telling has a part to play in that. How best to go about truth-telling, however, was less clear. There is the practical problem of figuring out how to know when we have arrived at the point that the truth has been told. One participant suggested that the telling of truth never does end, and for the current crisis we should expect the practice of truth-telling to continue for the next two generations, at least. It is also important, one participant suggested, that the truth is not without love.

Some participants had experiences with truth-telling efforts on a smaller scale. The helpfulness of these efforts varied. Some were quite meaningful for those involved, and others fell flat, leading one participant to note that survivors are often willing to share their stories but only if it produces something fruitful. The price of opening back up these sensitive places, this participant noted, is often very high, so truth-telling or reconciliatory efforts need to be worth that price for the survivors. Making it worth that price is not only a matter of visible results for individual cases or even structural change as a whole, but also of erecting support scaffolding to help anyone involved process what they hear or remember. This scaffolding is important not only for the survivors who share their stories, but for survivors of non-clerical abuse who will hear and be triggered, and members of the Church body who have no experience of sexual abuse and may be shocked for the first time. Many within the Church have not wanted to hear or accept the truth of what has happened to some of their brothers and sisters in Christ as children or adults. In this context, the truth that makes us free is very often the truth that breaks our hearts, and participants wanted to make sure we go in prepared for that.

With an understanding of the pain truth can bring, one participant posed the questions: “Why is telling the truth good?” And “What is it that truth does that is good?” Responses included the importance of clarifying events and repercussions for victims and survivors, as well as validation of their memories. Publicizing the names of abusive clergy members can also embolden other victims to come forward, which may help them heal and rounds out the story for the rest of us. One of the lessons from the German experience so far is that there is not just one truth, but many, so the truth-telling process helps us grow our picture. Another participant suggested that truth creates openings for grace to work and that revealing the truth about a case of clerical abuse, for example,

could set up an opportunity for the repentance of the perpetrator and for reconciliation. Finally, a participant appealed to our duty to the good, suggesting that our responsibility to truth is born of duty, not benefit. The participant reminded the group that we are not always good at predicting consequences but that our calling is one to be faithful, not successful.

In honoring that duty to the truth, whether through some kind of TRC-based model or otherwise, the largest practical question for any suggestion of a truth process for the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is: Who would run it? There seems to be a responsibility on the institutional Church to be the one to move to address this issue, particularly given the second violence of her failure to adequately respond in the past. However, some participants expressed skepticism about a commission run by the institutional Church. The institutional Church is both victim and perpetrator in this issue. A restorative justice process would not be run by the perpetrator. Victims are part of the Church, and the head of the Church, Jesus Christ, is certainly a victim, but survivors have often been alienated from the institutional Church. The Church has suffered because of the abuse, but authorities within the institution have also covered it up. One participant suggested that many survivors would have a mistrust of any commission run by the Church. This participant also acknowledged that while many people would say the Church should pay the bill for an effort like this, people would likewise mistrust something funded by it. Nevertheless, it seems valuable for the Church to be very involved. One participant who experienced clerical abuse specifically expressed a desire for healing within the body of Christ. A couple of participants suggested that Catholic universities or a center therein, rather than a diocese, may be particularly well-poised to run the process. However, others worried that Catholic universities did not necessarily have a proven track record and were not without some serious conflicts of interest. They suggested that Catholic universities are already places that virtue-signal and may instrumentalize victims or the process for their own purposes (an important concern regardless of who might run the process). One interesting option suggested and seconded in response to these worries was asking a Protestant university to host instead. Even if the funding still came from the institutional Catholic Church, trusting the implementation to other Christians may draw clearer lines (not to mention being a great demonstration of ecumenical humility).

Regardless of who could fund or even host such an effort, some important points about the potential process were raised. Certainly, any effort of this kind will require significant money and time. Some participants also expressed a desire for it to be visually big in some way. A participant familiar with formal restorative justice efforts suggested that, while it should not be run by the Church, whatever group organizes it would need to take at least a year or more to set it up, and that it should have substantial Church participation when it occurs. Participation, one individual who experienced clerical sexual abuse suggested, should be a collaborative movement involving a committee composed of both Church insiders and outsiders, that include victim advocates inside and outside the Church, and perhaps even the district attorney's office or concerned lawyers who have hearts for this cause on a deeper level than the monetary factors. Many participants agreed that it should be the survivors who have the biggest voice in organizing it. Doing so would open the door to a certain element of redemption by treating survivors not as problems for the Church, but as a uniquely gifted part of it. Participants pointed out that as much as we as the Church want to help victims, our religion is one of victims. Victims are the ones to help us. The seven wounds, one participant reminded the room, are in the background of everything. Having significant survivor input is also important because survivor needs and desires can differ greatly from one to another. As one participant aptly stated, "you meet one victim, you've met one victim." Even victims cannot necessarily speak for each other. Not everyone requires the same thing, and despite how much we may desire a recipe for healing or reconciliation, one point of data is only one point of data.

Although much time during this session was given to exploring a formal truth-telling effort such a commission, participants also emphasized that addressing the sexual abuse crisis and the wounds it inflicts is an ongoing process and there is not just one thing that needs doing. Many participants, including some of those who had experienced clerical abuse, found the idea of memorials compelling. The Healing Garden in the Archdiocese of Chicago was put forward as an example of a victim-focused memorial. Some participants suggested that this type of local-level public memorial, especially if created as a collaboration between survivors, parish staff, and priests, would be a way to create an opportunity for grace without forcing a reconciliation that may be premature, and should be more widespread. Participants also brought up examples of murals in Chile and the quilt project for the AIDS crisis as the sorts of projects with the visual impact that

would illustrate care for survivors. Participants also pointed towards recent efforts at Georgetown to address its history with slavery by renaming buildings and granting legacy status to the descendants of those who had been enslaved by the Maryland Province. One participant suggested that there should be a time on the Church calendar to come together in prayer for those who have experienced clerical sexual abuse, just as there is prayer for the martyrs every year.

Participants expressed a great deal of frustration and disappointment regarding the Church during this session. Participants pointed out that there has never been communal penance done by all bishops acknowledging agency, even in prayer, despite being requested by two popes. Penance and reconciliation need to involve the whole and the parts, not just parts. One participant suggested that perhaps the laity should come together to demand change, recognizing priests as brothers in Christ before they are fathers. Participants wanted change to come from the Church, rather than the state doing what the Church should do in taking care of survivors and requiring revision. This is challenging though, it was pointed out, as there tends to be parallel attitudes towards the crisis in the Church as there is towards racism in the United States; individuals adopt an attitude that says “I’m not a racist so it’s not my problem.” In some sense participants were longing for the Church as a community to take responsibility for the crisis regardless of who bears that responsibility the most, rather than seeing it as a rotten apples problem.

Throughout this session the importance of seminarian formation continued to arise. Participants hoped that better exposure to the complications of sexual abuse and sexuality generally during this early stage may better prepare priests to be pastors. Ideas for doing this included getting survivor stories into seminaries and addressing the sexual abuse that occurs in those places. Due to the way misogynist culture has been able to grow in seminaries in the past, there was a question about whether it would be helpful for the United States to move closer to the German practice of seminarians studying alongside lay theologians, including women. One of the participants who sometimes goes to seminaries to give facts about the crisis or sexual harassment finds that the people there are always surprised and do not know the facts about what is going on. There seems to be an urgency to better prepare seminarians to deal with their own sexuality and sexual harassment. Seminarians need to be given the chance to learn about these issues and to ask their own questions to explore how this affects them.



The session ended with some sobering reflections about our role as the Church and the scope of our mission. Despite the time spent looking at TRC-based models in this session, one participant pointed out that these processes often occur against the backdrop of states transitioning from dictatorship to democracy, and the Church is not in that position. The Church is not a democracy. Nevertheless, participants were reminded that the Church is not just an association of bishops, but rather the individuals in the room. We are the Church. As the Church, among the questions we ask should always be how our responses inform our relationship to Jesus Christ. All our work comes to nothing if we are not learning about God. Part of knowing love and serving God is attempting to prevent suffering. The consultation is an example of that. However, this participant suggested, anything that comes out of the consultation will never be enough. There will always be the experience of the cross because we are part of a mystical body living the crucifixion with the Lord. Though we ourselves will never be able to eliminate suffering, the participant finally affirmed, we must take every effort to avoid the suffering of others.

## **Final Session: Practices, Measures, Initiatives, and Where do we go From Here?**

As the organizers promised in their introductory remarks, they were sensitive to the movements of the conversation and so they moved to next steps for the final session.

Before one of the mid-session breaks in the previous session, one of the participants had posed a couple of questions for those at the consultation who had experienced clerical abuse. Both questions had to do with their perpetrators. The first question, whether immunity would be too high a price to pay for truth-telling, was only touched on by one survivor in the room, and that was only to say that the survivor was not prepared to respond to that question. This response was indicative of the entire consultation; participants by and large did not spend their time discussing how the institutional Church has treated perpetrators, though the media often focuses on this. Instead, the pressing problem for the participants is how the Church has responded, or failed to respond, to the survivors and their network, and how that affects all of us and the identity of the entire Church as an institution. However, a second question having to do with the perpetrators (though focused on the survivors) was answered by all of the clerical sexual abuse survivors who had identified themselves during introductions. That question was: do survivors want an encounter only with Church officials, or with the perpetrator himself as well? The participant who posed this question disclosed that the underlying assumption was that survivors would not want an encounter with the perpetrator.

The first response to this second question indicated that meetings with the actual perpetrator would not be helpful or desirable, though it did not come from one of those participants who had self-identified as a survivor of clerical sex abuse. Instead, the first respondent was someone extremely experienced with violent crime and restorative justice. The respondent pointed out that, if we are looking at cases of clerical sex abuse of children, most survivors come forward much later in life (30 or 50 years after the abuse, in the case of a couple of participants) when there are few perpetrators they can identify who are not dead, senile, or in denial. While many of the survivors in the room found that observation mostly correct, it did not follow that they therefore did not want to meet with the perpetrator. The first survivor to respond emphasized that all survivors are different. In this participant's specific case, the participant demanded and pled to meet with the perpetrator and was shut down by Church authorities. The participant found this refusal extremely damaging.

The survivor believed strongly that the option to facilitate a survivor-perpetrator meeting should always be offered and left up to the survivor himself or herself to accept or deny. This led the participant who asked the question to suggest that perhaps survivors of adult clerical sexual abuse would want to meet with their perpetrator, but not survivors of childhood clerical sex abuse. However, again, this was not necessarily held up by the survivors in the room. A participant who experienced clerical sex abuse for years as a child had negotiated not to pursue a lawsuit in exchange for one meeting with the perpetrator and one with Bishops. When the participant met with the perpetrator, he did not acknowledge the truth, but the participant still found the three-hour meeting incredibly therapeutic, more so than the one with the Bishops. This participant reiterated, as the adult clerical sex abuse survivor before suggested, that the option to meet must always be offered. Another participant did not identify as a survivor, but had a chaplain who was a child abuser. One of the survivors of that abuse, as an adult, was insistent about meeting with the chaplain. In the meeting, the now elderly chaplain signed an admission, but later seemed to forget about doing this. Nonetheless, it was more helpful than the meeting with the Bishop in which the survivor was “tolerated rather than received.” Another participant was sexually abused as a child by a serial abuser whose lawyer advised him to deny everything. Thus, the abuser denied everything. However, the participant was able to obtain a restorative apology from a Church authority. Another identified survivor of childhood clerical sexual abuse in the room had been abused by multiple clergy in childhood, but by the time the survivor came forward about this abuse as an adult, all the abusers were deceased. The Church officials the participant met with did apologize, but also lied about the names of the abusers being published on a list and offered financial restitution in which the participant had no interest. The participant brought this up to note that the response of Church authorities, and the helpfulness of this response, varies. These accounts held up the observation that many perpetrators are in denial, or are senile, or dead, but not that this means survivors would not want to meet. What is clear is that every situation is different, that meeting with Church authorities is no more guaranteed to be helpful than meeting with the specific perpetrator, and that a rule against offering these meetings could do damage and/or shut out opportunities for grace.

Talks of victim-survivor meetings brought up another topic that was in the guiding questions from the previous session but had not yet been discussed: forgiveness. Forgiveness is often *not* a part

of mainstream political reconciliation. In the criminal justice context, with grave offenses like murder or abuse, it can be looked at very suspiciously. Some in those contexts call forgiveness the “F” word. Yet forgiveness *is* a part of the Christian faith. Participants were asked to think about what that means for our context. What are the promises and pitfalls? Many participants had thoughts about this, and some of the other participants wanted to hear from the survivors in the group in particular.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, (remembering that, as stated in the previous session, “you meet one victim, you’ve met one victim”), the responses from the participants who identified themselves as having experienced abuse were varied when it came to their comfort levels towards forgiveness. These responses ranged from suspicion and hostility to appreciation and gratitude towards the practice. On the one end some survivors pointed to the way that forgiveness as a religious practice can be fraught precisely because clerical abusers often use sacred language to gain access to their victims’ bodies. One participant even went to the sacrament of confession with the priest that abused this participant as the confessor. In the middle, one participant was able to forgive some actors but not others. The parents could be forgiven for not better protecting their child. Even some that enabled the abuse could be forgiven. But the participant did not forgive the abuser. On the other end, one participant found forgiveness a very important part of the healing journey. Another participant, who had been physically abused by a non-clergy member, forgave in order not to be full of hate. At its best, these participants suggested, forgiveness is not an erasure of what occurred, but a kind of re-gaining. Some suggested that the process of getting to the point of being able to forgive is itself healing. They proposed that forgiveness not be thought of as a moral demand, but rather as an act of love. In fact, the one thing most participants agreed upon was that forgiveness should never be pressured or commanded. Forcing forgiveness, they agreed, is a kind of violence. Yet it was also suggested that it can be damaging for us to be afraid of forgiveness. It may be, participants worried, that increasingly forgiveness is something we tend not to talk about for fear our words will be received as pressure to forgive.

Outside of these self-identified survivor accounts, participants’s comfort towards forgiveness was equally mixed. Some disagreement involved the conditions under which forgiveness may take place. Some suggested that forgiveness is the last point in a long journey that includes accountability

and prosecution. Some suggested it should occur only after the perpetrator has been confronted. Others pointed to the ways that, in the gospel, it is forgiving that triggers repentance. Again, the point most stressed by many participants was that the Church must not pressure people to forgive. Asking victims to forgive would be damaging. If forgiveness is to come, participants suggested, it may be for the sake of the victim, not the perpetrator. Victims may choose it for their own healing. We are happier when we feel love for others, one participant suggested. If forgiveness is truly treated as the free choice of the victim, instead of a moral demand, it also returns agency to the victim in a way that a proceeding focused on accountability and prosecution may not.

As was clear from the array of perspectives surrounding the topic, and as was stated outright by one of the participants, forgiveness means different things to different people. Part of the reason for caution around forgiveness may be that until we define our terms, we do not know what we are communicating. That is the case with many terms, but since forgiveness is a process often undertaken during or after serious suffering, the stakes are high. Prudence is the key word here, one participant suggested. Perhaps in prudence, only one participant ventured to share how this participant defines forgiveness in conversation: willing the good and wholeness of another. Because forgiveness is an act of will, something that someone who has been victimized can do, rather than something done to them, it can be tremendously powerful, freeing, and healing. It can also be a difficult thing. The great role of the Church when it comes to forgiveness, this discussion suggests, is not telling people *to* forgive but helping them figure out *how*, if or when they desire to forgive. One way to do this, a participant suggested, is recognizing that an act of the will can eventually lead to a heart change. Praying for someone, day after day, even if it begins just as words, can lead to genuine care over time.

Another way the Church can help is through what a participant lovingly referred to as the “S” word: solidarity. This participant suggested that truth alone will not be enough to move us forward and make us heal. Instead, we need truth and solidarity if we are ever to have reconciliation. In some ways the institutional Church has shown solidarity with clergy, but this solidarity has not always extended to the victims of clerical abuse. What we need, participants suggested, is a shift from exclusive solidarity to inclusive solidarity. There needs to be a recognition that when it comes to the Church there is not “us vs. them,” there is only “us.” One way to move towards this solidarity

is to begin teaching clergy how to interact with survivors of abuse (both clerical abuse specifically, and abuse generally). This would be particularly helpful during confession, when the concentration that should be placed on the sacrament can be usurped by a strange or inappropriate comment by the confessor. One participant spoke of assisting a survivor of clerical sex abuse who was stopped by a priest during confession. He told the penitent he did not want to hear anything about the abuse because he might know the priest. That anecdote is perhaps an extreme case, but even welcoming priests can say things that reveal a misunderstanding of the struggles and complications of healing for a survivor. One participant who was abused as a child confessed being bitter that the mother that should have protected her child failed to do so, and added to the confessor that this resentment was preventing the participant from calling the mother. The participant was given calling the mother as penance. Given the importance of forgiveness as freely given and never pressured, as emphasized earlier by participants, this was an inappropriate penance. Another participant went to confession to speak about the difficulty of finding a home in the Church in the months following abuse by a clergy member, and the well-meaning confessor suggested that maybe the participant should leave the Church. Preparation for better care for survivors during confession is also important because, as already mentioned, in many cases of clerical abuse priests used the sacrament to commit or cover their abusive behavior. Survivors who continue to seek the sacrament, then, need prudence and compassion (perhaps even trauma-informed training) in their confessors.

Some of the Church's existing resources for dealing with the abuse crisis were mentioned in passing. One participant pointed to Catholic social teaching and its emphasis on human dignity, and looking at the world from the bottom up and the outside in. They also pointed to Pope Francis as an example of someone who holds the highest clerical office and speaks out against clericalism. The Pope may have been skeptical when he first heard accusations of covering up abuse centered on his friend, Juan Barros, but then he went and spent a weekend listening to survivors and their families, leading to apologies and resignations, and even appointing one of the survivors to the Pontifical Council for the Protection of Minors. This was a powerful example of the difference that listening to survivors can make. These existing practices and recent precedents could go far to address the unhealed wounds explored in the first session and may support some of the truth-telling and memorializing ideas discussed in the second.

Going forward from the consultation, one focus that emerged was an emphasis on how to change the response of the institutional Church to victims of clerical sexual abuse such that they know they are just as much a part of the Church as the clergy themselves. Toward this end, participants were hopeful to continue the conversations begun with the group. They were hopeful that some kind of truth-seeking process might be initiated, even perhaps through Notre Dame, where the local bishop may be open to participating. If there are to be further discussions with the group that participated in this consultation, it was suggested that two or three bishops who are open and have demonstrated care about this issue should be invited to listen and to brainstorm what we might do together to make progress both structurally and culturally. The group also planned to continue speaking over email, with those interested, regarding seminary formation around better understandings of sex and sexuality, sexual abuse, and speaking/listening to survivors.

In closing, the organizers of the consultation and the participants alike voiced gratitude for our time together. Some spoke of the peace they felt hearing their own concerns affirmed by the words of the other participants. While the consultation stressed the importance of solidarity, it also demonstrated it for many of the participants. Laughter and personal anecdotes came easier as the afternoon went on, and some spoke of feeling unburdened. The organizers said they were humbled to have been able to facilitate such a meeting and ended the consultation in hope for what may still come out of the discussions of the day.