The Redemptive Role of the Church for the Wounded People of God

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In clear and pastoral terms Hartzler draws on several dimensions of the thought of Bernard Lonergan to shed light on how each member of the church might find his or her voice, join in dialogue, and bring about reconciliation and healing from the clergy sex abuse scandal.

Over the past several years the unending consequences of the sexual abuse scandal has shaped a significant part of ecclesial life in the United States. In the aftermath of the release of “The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States” (the John Jay Report) and “A Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church” (the work of the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People), there have been several responses to the crisis at hand: financial settlements, the genesis of the Voice of the Faithful, bankruptcies, and parish closures. While there have been movements toward reconciliation in a variety of situations: the audits of most dioceses, healing rituals for victims and families, and an outreach for those in need of psychological and medical resources, the Catholic Church in the United States is clearly a wounded church.

The response to a wounded church requires a process of reconciliation for each and every one of us. This process of reconciliation acknowledges “that context

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matters.” In addition to a contextual analysis, those engaged in a process of reconciliation require one feature: “they depart from doing nothing. Dwelling in the frozen space of inability and incapacity is unacceptable, [it’s] unresponsive to victims, [and] unavailing to the waiting future” (Minow, 4). The ecclesial context continues to be plagued with the impact of the sexual abuse scandal.

Reconciliation

As Christians, St. Paul challenges us to embrace reconciliation in our current situation: “God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation . . . entrust[s] to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:18b, 19b, 20).

When asked about the meaning of reconciliation, Desmond Tutu replied, “It is a miracle.” Tutu’s response indicates that reconciliation is multi-faceted; it defies a narrow definition because reconciliation is a gift—it is God’s gift, it is grace. Not only is it impossible to put forward one precise definition of reconciliation, it is in fact not helpful: “A tight definition often goes a long way to bedeviling the reconciliation process. To define hope too tightly, to destroy the metaphor, to overlook the inherent ambiguity of the healing process is to undermine the very goal of reconciliation—which is to bring people together” (Villa-Vincencio, 224).

To speak about reconciliation is to speak of “starting over.” It is not only to speak about dialogue; it is actually to engage in dialogue and embark on a process of healing that involves the risk of transparency of all involved. The person, relational by nature, is created for communion with others and with God. Alienation within the community, be it the ecclesial community or other communities, is to be incomplete and in need of conversion and reconciliation.

Bernard Lonergan and Reconciliation

As a generalist, Bernard Lonergan “belongs to that class of thinkers, not very numerous, who have aimed at fundamental ideas, ideas of a type that should have wide-ranging implications, ramifications, applications, and adaptations” (Crowe in Lonergan 1985, 14). Appropriating Lonergan in light of the current ecclesial situation is not the easy path of simply adding conclusions to premises. In other words, it is not Lonergan and the sex abuse scandal. Rather Lonergan’s work both promotes and facilitates a deeper understanding of the current crisis, and offers a limited response to the current ecclesial context. Drawing on several of Lonergan’s themes—the shift from the classicist worldview, his anthropology,
and his understanding of the redemptive role of the church—provides for a critical engagement of the ecclesial context.

**Anthropology**

To understand Lonergan’s anthropology and the redemptive role of the church necessitates acknowledging his shift from a classicist worldview to historical mindedness. This transition from classicist to historical mindedness is the shift from a static and fixed worldview to a changing and developing world. This in turn requires an understanding of the human person as dynamic and historical. This transition effects a shift from starting from static first principles about an abstract human person to the transition to a dynamic **method** that has come to be named “transcendental” (Lonergan 1996, 6). Lonergan’s method ascribes the qualities of developing, emerging, dynamic, and historical to the human person; this dynamic structure lends itself to describe the human person as a “living question.”

While Lonergan can be daunting at times, we can discover this dynamic method as a result of our own self-reflection. First, there is the empirical level on which the person senses, perceives, imagines, feels, moves, speaks, and experiences. Second is the intellectual level when we inquire, organize, understand, and articulate our understanding of our experience. On this level the person raises the question, “What is it?” and grapples with the presuppositions and implications of our expression. Third, on the rational level the person, having questioned his or her own understanding, asks the further question, “Is it so?” After reflecting critically and weighing the evidence, one passes judgment on the truth or falsity, probability or certitude of a statement. One can make a judgment to the effect that one’s insight is correct or incorrect once all further relevant questions have been answered. Once one comes to judgment, however, one’s integrity is at stake. In other words, in the process of coming to judgment the authentic subject has not eliminated relevant data in order to protect one’s own interests. Finally, having made a judgment of fact, the subject asks and then decides what one should **do** in response to that judgment. This is the responsible level on which we are concerned for ourselves and others, our own activities and goals, and so we deliberate and evaluate and decide the course of action which we then carry out. It is the **authentic** subject, Lonergan contends, who acts not...
merely from satisfaction but from true value. For Lonergan, the human person “constitutes both the central and the foundational position for [his] work and achievement. From the position on the human subject all else derives” (Doran, 19). The dynamic structure of the human person leads us from ignorance to knowledge and action for the common good.

Each person lives in the midst of the larger world and the reality is such that each person’s operating is actually “cooperating” with others in a pattern within the larger social framework. Human cooperation is not an abstraction, rather it is manifested in such institutions as the family, society and education, the state and the law, the economy and technology, the church or the sect. We emerge as persons, joined with one another in a common concern for meaning and values, strive to abolish communities of alienation based on competing egoisms, and create in their place authentic communities based on human attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility, lived out in freedom. To be authentic human persons and authentic communities requires that we follow the transcendental precepts:

- Be attentive
- Be intelligent
- Be reasonable
- Be responsible
- Be in love

Through this self-constituting process, we constitute society, culture, and human history.

**History: Progress, Decline and Redemption**

Whether on the part of an individual subject or on the part of communities, the challenge of authenticity moves us to questions for deliberation and discernment for action—the very anticipation of the good. The development of the good, however, is not inevitable. Individuals and communities can fail, neglecting the good in pursuit of egotistic pleasures and positions of power. Divided by special interests and torn apart by hostility and dissension, individuals and communities can refuse to act intelligently, reasonably, and responsibly.

Authenticity is neither a possession to be gained once and for all, nor is authenticity without its demands on the human person and the communities of meaning and value. Human affairs, Lonergan reminds us, result either from the human subject’s move towards authenticity and self-transcendence, or his or her retreat from self-transcendence into what Lonergan names the unauthentic. According
to Bernard Lonergan, “Human affairs are the stuff of history” (Lonergan 1985, 100), and history is not simply a series of dates and events. Rather, “Human history is the story of progress, decline, and redemption, and its principles are intelligence, sin, and grace” (Komonchak, 223).

Progress proceeds from subjects being their true selves by observing the transcendental precepts. Human history is marked by the achievements of persons who in fact have been faithful to the demands of intelligence and responsibility, and to this extent there is true development. If authenticity brings about situations of progress and the common good, then situations both past and present that stymie or resist the common good Lonergan calls decline. Decline exists as a result of inattentiveness, failures to understand, mistaken judgments, and evil choices.

Decline “brings about a personal and social situation where confusion and disvalue abound, and where it is hard to know where to begin to set things moving again in a positive direction” (Gregson, 29). Decline is as much a fact of our human history as is the experience of progress, and Lonergan identifies the root of decline as bias.

For our purposes I will focus on three forms of bias: individual, group, and general bias. Each is rooted in the tendency for immediate physical and psychological gratification. Individual bias is grounded in self-interest. It is the subject’s egoistic choice to attend to matters that pertain to one’s own self-interest and to remain indifferent to the concerns of others. It is a refusal to choose the world of true value in lieu of a self-centered satisfaction.

Group bias is the correlative to individual bias. It occurs when any group eliminates ideas or data that could possibly challenge the group’s own self-interests and self-advantage. A group’s self-interest could be its hold on some aspect of the larger society, its expression of power, or anything that bolsters a group’s egoism at the expense of the greater common good. The group rationalizes its own behavior by promoting and encouraging a justification for its action, an ideology, and thus blinds itself to the real situation.

Finally, general bias is the disregard for the theoretical questions, the long-range consequences and the ultimate issues, and instead the embrace of the short-term solutions that may be more immediately gratifying to one’s self or a specific group. General bias is “a violation of the deepest orientation of our consciousness to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible” (Gregson, 33), and this ultimately leads to alienation. General bias creates situations that result in decline, unauthenticity, and social breakdown.

“To fall in love is to go beyond attention, intelligence, reasonableness, [and] responsibility.”
Lonergan insists, however, that human history is more than the principles of progress and decline: “God has not left the human race to its own devices, but God has intervened to repair the evil we have done, to reverse its momentum, and restore its creative powers” (Komonchak, 225). Human history involves a third principle co-existing with progress and decline. This is the redemptive principle of human history.

Beyond progress and decline there is redemption. Its principle is self-sacrificing love:

To fall in love is to go beyond attention, intelligence, reasonableness, [and] responsibility. It is to set up a new principle that has, indeed, its causes, conditions, [and] occasions. . . . In the measure that the community becomes a community of love and so capable of making real and great sacrifices, in that measure it can wipe out the grievances and correct the objective absurdities that its unauthenticity has brought about. (Lonergan 1985, 10)

Self-sacrificing love transvalues not only human subjects but communities as well. In the midst of a world of both progress and decline, it provides a third principle: redemption. The church “will have a redemptive role in human society inasmuch as love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress” (Lonergan 1979, 55). The transformative mission of the church is a redemptive mission as it attempts to undo unauthentic values that hinder true human progress and exacerbate situations marked by decline, even within the church itself.

Lonergan’s principles of progress, decline and redemption and the theological description of self-sacrificing love as the “law of the cross” converge and elucidate the redemptive role of the church. The church’s redemptive role moves ever more closely to creating situations of the human good and working “systematically to undo the mischief brought about by alienation and ideology” (Lonergan 1979, 361).

The Redemptive Role of the Church

The church’s redemptive role is within human history and among other communities of meaning and value. The church is the authentic subject, “not some canonized doctrine, policy, authority, or agenda that the reversal of bias, decline, alienation and ideology comes to pass” (Dunne, 122). The redemptive role of the church is to be a witness and instrument of promoting authenticity. It must “labor to persuade people to intellectual, moral, and religious conversion” (Lonergan 1979, 361).
Conversion “is a change of direction and, indeed, a change for the better” (Lonergan 1979, 361). The converted subject “apprehends differently, values differently, relates differently because he or she has become different” (Lonergan 1996, 66). Lonergan speaks of conversion as three-dimensional: intellectual, moral, and religious. An important implication of intellectual conversion is the realization that the world we live in is principally constituted not by sense data, but by human understandings, judgments, and decisions. Conversion is moral inasmuch as the morally converted subject becomes motivated not by satisfaction but by values. It is to think of “the good as whatever is objectively worthwhile, disregarding subjective comforts” (Dunne, 125), as opposed to the good as whatever satisfies and comforts us, and nothing else. Conversion is religious inasmuch as it regards our orientation to God. The religiously converted human subject comes to love God with his or her whole heart and soul; religious conversion is the “fruit of God’s gift of God’s grace” (Lonergan 1979, 268).

Human subjects find their proper fulfillment in the experience of being in love with God, a fulfillment that sets up a new horizon in which the love of God will transvalue our values. Love discloses values that logic and reason can often overlook. Through conversion: “one frees oneself from the unauthentic. One grows in authenticity. Harmful, dangerous, misleading satisfactions are dropped. . . . Values are apprehended where before they were overlooked. . . . Errors, rationalizations, ideologies fall and shatter to leave one open to things as they are and to the person as he or she should be” (Lonergan 1979, 52). Yet, the process of conversion is susceptible to relapse, and whether few or many, they may be corrected or leave their traces in the form of bias.

The church in continuous conversion progresses toward greater authenticity as we examine and seek to resolve situations of bias and strive towards the self-sacrificing love that is redemptive. Without using the term reconciliation, Lonergan’s emphasis on conversion through God’s grace and faithfulness to the transcendental precepts converges with Paul’s plea to be reconciled to God. Thus the church’s constituents become transforming agents in resisting the mischief brought about by alienation and ideology. The church is not only an instrument of Christ’s intention of redemption for history, but also the church is challenged to be a visible witness of the community of self-sacrificing love.

**Beginning Again: Context**

Lonergan understands “theology, as the Christian mediation, or communication, between religion and culture which must operate as a critical resistance to all biases on all levels, including religious” (Mueller, 302). Religion is rooted in time and in place—in culture. The redemptive mission of the church gathers its energies and resources in the mission of undoing the bias within the church’s own appro-
priation of the Christian tradition. Lonergan’s contribution provides a resource for analysis and response to the current crisis. I will conclude with a focus on three aspects of the current context and highlight the operating bias that underpins these situations. The three are: (1) clericalism as an example of group bias; (2) general bias and the proclivity to short circuit dialogue; and (3) a classicist mentality in light of structural changes in the church. These reflections are more of a springboard for conversation and discussion than an exhaustive analysis of these situations.

Donald Couzzens describes clericalism as:

The conscious or unconscious concern to promote the particular interests of the clergy and to protect the privileges and power that have traditionally been conceded to those in the clerical state. Among its chief manifestations are an authoritarian style of ministerial leadership, a rigidly hierarchical worldview, and virtual identification of the holiness and grace of the church with the clerical state and thereby with the cleric himself. (118)

Group bias illuminates the reality of clericalism. The silence surrounding the abuse of minors by clergy reflects a protection of image, role, and the bolstering of hierarchical power and prestige at the expense of both the vulnerable victims and the common good. The impenetrable “wall” that was created to deflect dialogue and communication with victims and others reflects a moral collapse through the disregard of true value. Lonergan maintains group bias eliminates ideas or data that could possibly challenge the group’s own self-interests and self-advantage. Regard for the “image of the church” does not outweigh the moral imperative of the common good and true value. In fact, the justification of the hierarchy’s concern for the image of the priesthood or the church at large rationalized its own behavior by promoting and encouraging a justification for its action, an ideology—clericalism—and thus blinds itself to the real situation.

Second, general bias is the disregard for the theoretical questions, the long-range consequences, and the ultimate issues, and instead the embrace of the short-term solutions that may be more immediately gratifying to one’s self or a specific group. The emphasis on the short term, as opposed to the ultimate issues, seems to be reflected in a statement attributed to then Bishop Wilton Gregory upon the release of the February reports. Richard Major, American correspondent for The Tablet, states: “Wilton Gregory, president of the American bishops’ conference was quick to insist, the terrible history recorded here today is history” (Major, 7). Lonergan’s understanding of history differs from the statement attributed to Gregory. Unlike Lonergan, Gregory’s use of the word history seems to indicate a closure, an end to the crisis. Kathleen McChesney, at the time the executive director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection of the United States Conference of Bishops, however, emphatically stated that in answer to the question, “Where are we with the sexual
abuse scandal at this point?” She replied, “We are not at the end, we are not at the middle, we are not even at the beginning of the middle, we are only at the beginning of the issue of the sexual abuse scandal” (McChesney). Although it may be tempting to embrace satisfaction over true value, to short-circuit an inclusive process of dialogue and discussion concerning this ecclesial crisis is to capitulate into general bias. To do anything less than promote continued dialogue among all concerned is to resist the questions that foster reconciliation.

Third, Lonergan’s rejection of a static, classicist worldview lends itself to critique the entrenchment and impenetrability of some current ecclesial structures. Lonergan reminds us that human agency is the genesis of structures, tasks, institutions, culture, and history itself. Authentic structures that foster the common good are the result of human cooperation and authenticity. Bias and unauthenticity create division and structures falling short of the common good. Many are calling for the present system of the Vatican’s selection of bishops to be decentralized so that the local church is restored to a central role. Citing past precedents within the tradition for a more inclusive and dialogical selection of bishops seems to be eclipsed by a mindset that “what we are doing now, is what we have always done.” This is but one example of the classicist worldview—unchanging and static.

All Need Conversion

Jay Dolan, noted scholar of the church in the United States, reminds us:

For American Catholics the challenge of the 21st century will be to remain faithful to Catholic tradition while adapting to modern American culture, a key ingredient of which is a love for democracy. Because of this affection for democracy, people today expect more consultation and collaboration when it comes to the government of the church at both the parish and diocesan levels. . . . To deny such a voice . . . is to mortgage the future of Catholicism in this country to a model of church that is theologically and historically out of date. (310)

Throughout the present crisis and perhaps in any situation of abuse there is the overwhelming and debilitating aspect of “silence” and “denial.” Healing and reconciliation often are the finding of one’s voice. The need for true dialogue is not simply an option but a requirement for healing in the church. Lonergan reminds us we are all in need of conversion. Conversion is a change of horizons, and dialogue is a fundamental means to a shift and change of horizons. Dialogue can lead to reconciliation as one’s horizon, through the free gift of grace, and the embrace of the lifelong project of authenticity through the transcendental precepts—be
attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be in love—becomes the
dynamic of becoming reconciled to God and being true ambassadors of reconciliation.

References


