



## Towards a Theological and Synodal Response to the Abuse Crisis

Gill Goulding CJ 

---

### Abstract

Beneath the appalling incidents of sexual abuse in the Church, there are key theological issues. Along with Pope Francis, I argue that central to this crisis is the abuse of power. I propose that part of the way to address this is through a discussion of the appropriate use of power; and perhaps the best way to think about the appropriate use of power is through the notion of the appropriate use of authority - as service. Here, I suggest there could be the beginning of an ecclesial response that would involve the wider Church along the developing lines of synodality that Pope Francis promotes. After an initial introduction focusing the abuse of authority and the call for a greater synodal way of relating in the Church, there is consideration of the vital foundation of authority rooted in intimacy with God. This leads to an exploration of the centrality of the example of Christ for authentic exercise of authority. Dialogue is seen as a healthy expression of authority, while living the tensions in the exercise of authority suggests a true witness to authority could be the formation of communities of discourse bearing many of the hallmarks of the synodal process.

### Keywords

authority, service, hope, dialogue, synodality

Beneath the appalling incidents of child sexual abuse by clergy and religious in the Church, made known in recent times, there are key theological issues concerning the way authority is exercised and the use and abuse of power. It is these matters that this article seeks to address. Within the meeting of the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences February 2019<sup>1</sup>, clearly a focal point of their engagement was the discussion of

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis called all the Presidents of Catholic Bishops Conferences throughout the world to a meeting at the Vatican from 21-24 February 2019 to discuss the situation of abuse in the world wide church and the measures being taken to deal with this, including the acknowledgement of culpability and confession of failings.

policies and procedures that need to be in place to secure accountability and oversight both of clergy and bishops. Such a pragmatic focus is understandable, but if the church does not consider the more profound theological issues at stake, then it will only be scratching the surface of what needs to be addressed, namely the way power and authority are exercised within the church and the inability of some to resolve issues in a truly Christian manner. Pope Francis in his address to the participants at the end of the gathering stated that abuse: “is always the result of an abuse of power, an exploitation of the inferiority and vulnerability of the abused, which makes possible the manipulation of their conscience and of their psychological and physical weakness.”<sup>2</sup>

This article raises some of those key theological concerns regarding power and authority. To clarify, along with Pope Francis I am arguing that at the heart of the sexual abuse crisis is the abuse of power. I am proposing that part of the way to address this is through a discussion of the appropriate use of power; and perhaps the best way to think about the appropriate use of power is through the notion of the appropriate use of authority - as service. Here, I suggest there could be the beginning of an ecclesial response that would involve the wider Church along the developing lines of synodality that Pope Francis continues to promote. After an initial introduction focusing the abuse of authority and the call for a greater synodal way of relating in the Church, there is consideration of the vital foundation of authority rooted in a certain intimacy with God. This leads to an exploration of the centrality of the example of Christ for authentic exercise of authority. Dialogue is seen as a healthy expression of authority, while living the tensions in the exercise of authority suggests that a true witness to authority could be the formation of communities of discourse that might bear many of the hallmarks of the synodal process.

There are many instances of the abuse of power and authority other than the deplorable instances of physical and sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults. For the most part these abuses are not illegal and therefore do not lead to criminal charges.<sup>3</sup> Yet in the way the Church understands itself these are also wrong or sinful and impede

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis 24<sup>th</sup> February 2019.

<sup>3</sup> These experiences of hurt and abuse range from comparatively minor matters to more serious and even tragic experiences. There can be a dimension of radical suffering present when the negativity of a situation is experienced as an assault on the integrity of the person. Such suffering is particularly acute because it often strikes at the response of an individual's own response of faith. Cf. Various studies across the years have highlighted the empirical reality including: Eamonn Conway, “The Service of a Different Kingdom: Child Sexual Abuse and the Response of the Church,” in eds. Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy, Attracta Shields, *The Church and Child Sexual Abuse; Towards a Pastoral Response*, (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999), 76-88; Joseph Veale SJ, “Meditating on Abusing – and Repenting”, *Doctrine and Life*, Vol.50, No. 5, (May/June 2000): 296-303; Eric Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Michael W. Higgins & Peter Kavanagh, *Suffer the Children*

the church's unique mission to the world. They dim the light the church is called to be as an authentic witness to faith and charity in the darkness of exploitation, injustice and the violation of human dignity. "The Church has a unique vocation within society to proclaim the unconditional love of God to all, and to exemplify that love. When this vision is distorted through perceived injustice and abuse, the very nature of the church is undermined."<sup>4</sup>

Across generations there has been an honorable exercise of authority within the Church. The fact that authority is sometimes dishonored does not negate that reality. Engaged theological reflection could enable such authentic authority by a dialectical process, that also identifies and seeks to reform the dishonorable. It can also enable the developing process of synodality within the Church, a walking together that includes many more voices as it is capable of integrating differences without annulling them, because it is based on transcendence. As Pope Francis emphasized: "Synodality is a style, it is a walk together, and it is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third Millennium."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a document issued by the International Theological Commission September 2019 rooted the very understanding of synodality in the teaching of the second Vatican council, although it was not a term or even a concept that was included within the Vatican II documents, nevertheless "it is fair to say that synodality is fundamental to the work of the renewal the Council was encouraging."<sup>6</sup> Indeed as Cardinal Ratzinger made clear "Being truly 'synodal' means moving forward in harmony, spurred on by the Holy Spirit."<sup>7</sup>

### Foundation of Authority in intimacy with God

At the heart of all theological endeavor is the conviction that the Spirit of God continues to work in our world, the author of both plurality and unity; inspiring diversity, plurality and multiplicity and at the same time

*Unto Me*: (Ottawa: Novalis, 2010); Jo Renee Formicola, *God Weeps: Papal Policies on Clerical Sexual Abuse*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Gill Goulding CJ *Creative Perseverance: Sustaining Life-Giving Ministry in Today's Church*, (Ottawa: Novalis, 2003) 19.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis Address to the International Theological Commission, November 29<sup>th</sup> 2019.

<sup>6</sup> International Theological Commission *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019, par. 6. The document continues: "The ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptized, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. . . . In this ecclesiological context, synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission."

<sup>7</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Le funzioni sinodali della Chiesa: l'importanza della comunione tra i vescovi", in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1996, 4.

creating unity; forming ever anew a diverse and unified people in the universal church. The desire of our Trinitarian God for a deep relationship with human persons is mirrored in our own human need to relate in depth to one another. “The Church is *de Trinitate plebs adunata*, called and qualified as the People of God to set out on her mission to God through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. In this way, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit the Church shares in the life of communion of the Blessed Trinity, which is destined to embrace the whole of humanity.”<sup>8</sup>

This call to intimate relationship with God and with one another is a life-giving word of hope for ourselves, and all with whom we come into contact. But hope is no easy option. Hope is a double-edged sword, which can cut with the purifying voice of lament. Hope “offers eternal life secure in a loving God; at the same time it jerks the rug of false security from beneath our feet. It begins in disorientation often in the face of the collapse of all that is familiar, but it is God’s word of hope that speaks within the half-light of our uncertainty.”<sup>9</sup> It is a word born in the eager desire of God to share our vulnerability through the Incarnation. It finds its fullest expression in the weak gestures of love from a man dying upon a cross in the paschal mystery. It is sustained in our daily recognition of God’s presence among us, nourished by sacramental life and the trajectory of our lives towards the fullness of Trinitarian life.<sup>10</sup>

### Centrality and Exemplarity of Christ for all authority

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel”<sup>11</sup> Here we have the supreme example of the exercise of authentic authority as service in the way Jesus taught his disciples. Rooted in the profundity of his relationship with the Father,<sup>12</sup> Jesus was always reaching out to his

<sup>8</sup> Idem. 43 The paragraph continues: “Exercising synodality makes real the human person’s call to live communion, which comes about through sincere self-giving union with God and unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

<sup>9</sup> Gill Goulding IBVM, *Creative Perseverance: Sustaining Life-giving Ministry in Today’s Church*, (Ottawa: Novalis, 2003), 16.

<sup>10</sup> “In this context the concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church, whose source and summit is the Eucharistic synaxis. This is the *res* of the *Sacramentum Ecclesiae*: union with God the Trinity and unity between human persons, made real through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus.” Ibid. C.f. also how the Eucharist is “the centre of the whole of Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually.” *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> John 13:3-5

<sup>12</sup> “In him everything is a listening to and acceptance of the Father (cf. *Jn.* 8:28-29); all of his earthly life is an expression and continuation of what the Word does from eternity: letting himself be loved by the Father, accepting his love in an unconditional way, to the point of deciding to do nothing by himself (cf. *Jn.* 8:28) but to do always what is pleasing to the

disciples and beyond them to the poorest and most forgotten. This is the form of the exercise of authority that all those in leadership within the Church are called to, as Pope Benedict indicated: “Total and generous availability to serve others is the distinctive mark of those in positions of authority in the Church ... (as) the first servant of the servants of God is Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

Pope Francis expanded this understanding in his General Audience address of March 26<sup>th</sup> 2014 when he stated: “Those who are ordained are placed *at the head of the community*. They are “at the head”, yes, but for Jesus this means placing one’s authority *at the service* [of the community], as Jesus himself showed and taught his disciples with these words: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:25-28/Mk 10:42-45). A bishop who is not at the service of the community fails to perform his duty; a priest who is not at the service of his community fails to perform his duty, he errs.”<sup>14</sup>

There is a two-fold dynamic here: to depend upon God, which also “sets us free from every form of enslavement and (secondly this) leads us to recognize the great dignity [of human persons].”<sup>15</sup> This encounter with Christ in prayer is the primary imperative and is elaborated by

Father. The will of the Father is the food which sustains Jesus in his work (cf. *Jn.* 4:34) and which merits for Him and for us the superabundance of the resurrection, the luminous joy of entering into the very heart of God, into the blessed company of his children (cf. *Jn.* 1:12)” Pope Benedict XVI, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Benedict XVI Consistory for Cardinals March 24<sup>th</sup> 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience St Peter’s Square Vatican March 26<sup>th</sup> 2014. He continued: Another characteristic which also derives from this sacramental union with Christ is a *passionate love for the Church*. Let us think of that passage from the Letter to the Ephesians in which St Paul states that Christ “loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (5:25-27). Through Holy Orders the minister dedicates himself entirely to his community and loves it with all his heart: it is his family. The bishop and the priest love the Church in their own community, they love it greatly. How? As Christ loves the Church. St Paul will say the same of marriage: the husband is to love his wife as Christ loves the Church. It is a great mystery of love: this of priestly ministry and that of matrimony are two Sacraments, pathways which people normally take to go to the Lord. A final aspect. The Apostle Paul recommends to the disciple Timothy that he not neglect, indeed, that *he always rekindle the gift that is within him*. The gift that he has been given through the laying on of hands (cf. 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). When the ministry is not fostered — the ministry of the bishop, the ministry of the priest — through prayer, through listening to the Word of God, through the daily celebration of the Eucharist and also through regularly going to the Sacrament of Penance, he inevitably ends up losing sight of the authentic meaning of his own service and the joy which comes from a profound communion with Jesus.”

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis *Gaudete et Exsultate*: Apostolic Exhortation on the call to holiness in today’s world, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2018, 32.

Pope Francis in *Gaudete et Exsultate*. This primacy of prayer is also fundamental for the effective operation of synodal assemblies. “In the synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God’s will.”<sup>16</sup>

It is essential that those in leadership are those who have had the experience of encountering Christ, who have seen the Lord. “If our vision does not witness to having seen Jesus, then the words with which we recall him will be rhetorical and empty figures of speech.”<sup>17</sup> From this ongoing prayerful encounter with Jesus there comes the imperative to reach out to those most in need.<sup>18</sup> The personal encounter with Christ is fundamental. It is as true for those who exercise authority within the Church as for every member of the faithful that “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”<sup>19</sup> From this encounter comes the impetus for dialogue with others, because the contemporary call to dialogue is rooted in the call to be holy. Growth in holiness is the seed of authentic dialogue, enabling us to hear the creative voice of God and the co-creative voice of others. This gives a renewed challenge to individuals and communities. For David Schindler “only sanctity enables us truly to confront the fragmentation in Christ’s body that is the heart of our crisis and only sanctity enables us truly to participate in the dialogue between Christ and the Father that is the heart of the answer to our crisis.”<sup>20</sup>

### Dialogue as an exemplary expression of authority

Fundamental<sup>21</sup> to all dialogue is the call made present in Christ himself, the word of God in whom God initiates the dialogue. It is this

<sup>16</sup> International Theological Commission *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019, 68. The document continues: “So, in coming to formulate their own decisions, Pastors must listen carefully to the wishes of the faithful. Canon law stipulates that, in certain cases, they must act only after having sought and obtained the various opinions according to juridically established procedures.”

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis address to the Bishops of Mexico February 13, 2016. This was also quoted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* Apostolic Exhortation, November 24<sup>th</sup> 2013, 8

<sup>18</sup> “only a church able to shelter the faces of men and women who knock on her doors will be able to speak to them of God. If we do not know how to decipher their sufferings, if we do not come to understand their needs, then we can offer them nothing. The richness we have flows only when we encounter the smallness of those who beg and this encounter occurs precisely in our hearts, the hearts of Pastors.” Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*: Encyclical, December 25 2005

<sup>20</sup> David L. Schindler, “On the Catholic Common Ground Project: The Christological Foundation of Dialogue,” *Communio* Vol. 23, No. 4, Winter 1996, 825-851.

<sup>21</sup> Dialogue as a vital pre-requisite has been espoused within the Church for some considerable time, for example: “Dialogue with God. Dialogue within the Church. Dialogue

Christ-centred perspective that we must explore further, as it is the primary basis upon which all dialogue stands and to which all dialogue ultimately refers. It is necessary, to recall the art of ‘openness’ of all human truths to the unity of the truth of the mystery of Christ, showing that all words, finally, are a single Word.<sup>22</sup> It becomes clear then that the recapitulation of all truth in Christ is the single word capable of expressing itself in all human words. Such a Christ centred perspective also implies that we enter the domain of conversation with a recognition that we are all in need of that fundamental stance of ongoing conversion to Christ. The gospel imperative insists on a lifetime of conversion and the vibrancy of our witness demands it. Conversion is necessary for all of us but it is hard. It involves confronting our own blindness and unwillingness to be engaged with people whom we find threatening to us, yet at the same time, conversion, as Bernard Lonergan indicated<sup>23</sup>, results in a changed vision both of oneself and of the world. It is to see the gracious reality that is God’s creation and to share in the indiscriminate generosity that characterizes the divine interaction with human beings. Conversion always involves the divine initiative of love that calls forth a human response. This pre-eminent divine call is both a mysterious gift of grace, as well as an ongoing condition (or dynamic disposition) of dialogue with God. This work of prevenient grace is also intrinsically personal because the core action of all conversion is the dawning awareness of one’s own reality and sinfulness through an encounter with Christ. It involves divesting the disguises and subterfuges that have become accretions to the ego, as well as renouncing self-seeking, which ultimately brings peace to the soul.

Conversion is precipitated by a call from God; it is not a monologue but a dialogue between an individual and Christ. As Hans Urs von Balthasar stated: “*Lumen Gentium cum sit Christus*. The great light

amongst yourselves. Dialogue with the world, with people with the culture of our days with the poor, with those who have no hope, with those who are seeking a pathway and a meaning for their lives. Without a broad-based dialogue we run the risk of closing ourselves in a museum, as yet another memory of the past.” Archbishop Pablo Puente, Nuncio to the United Kingdom, Homily to the Conference of Religious of England and Wales, Swanwick 31<sup>st</sup> January 2001

<sup>22</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio-Pope Francis, “Significato importanza della formazione accademica”, 2009, in Bergoglio-Francis, *Nei tuoi occhi è la mia parola*, 971, n9.

<sup>23</sup> “By conversion is understood a transformation of the subject and his world. Normally it is a prolonged process though its explicit acknowledgement may be concentrated in a few momentous judgements and decisions. Still it is not just development or even a series of developments. Rather it is a resultant change of course and direction. It is as if one’s eyes were opened and one’s former world view faded and fell away. . . . Conversion is existential, intensely personal, utterly intimate. But it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many, and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation and to help one another in working out the implications and fulfilling the promise of their new life.” Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 130.

of the world, for which people are searching today is Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Following from this, in *Lumen Gentium* we encounter the *telos* of such conversion with the assertion that all Christians are called to the perfection of love and holiness. Conversion is, of necessity, an individual process, and yet it is also situated within the larger drama of redemption. Conversion is focused in a dialogue between God and human persons where the entire Trinity is involved, where infinite and finite freedom engage, and where the role of the Church is made manifest.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, such an understanding of conversion should pre-empt the possibilities of arrogance or dominance and facilitate a dialogue that is marked by courtesy, humility and compassion in a common search for truth and reconciliation. In the attentive listening that forms a key dimension of such dialogue there will be an ongoing reverence of the good in the other(s) to whom we attend.<sup>26</sup>

### Living the tensions of life – the exercise of authority

Pope Francis reminded us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, that there are constant tensions in every social reality and this also includes the Church. He set forth a series of four principles that can guide the development of life and the exercise of authority in the Church enabling the people of God to live their baptismal promises in fullness. The first principle is that time is greater than space where we continue to live in the tension between fullness and limitation. “Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces”<sup>27</sup>. Such possession of space can also lead to the abuse of power and authority. The second principle is that unity prevails over conflict, which is not to deny conflict but to assert that it is possible to build

<sup>24</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Test Everything: Hold Fast to That Which is Good*, An Interview with Angelo Sola, trans. Maria Shradly, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989) 17.

<sup>25</sup> For a more fulsome elaboration of the importance of conversion see: Gill Gouling “Holiness of Mind and Heart: The Dynamic Imperative of conversion and Contemplation for the Study of Theology” in ed. James Keating, *Entering into the mind of Christ: The True Nature of Theology*, (Omaha NE: Institute of Priestly Formation, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> This presupposition of good in the other, is also the presupposition of the *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola*, which all members of the Society of Jesus undertake during their initial formation of as novices, returning to make the Exercises again for Tertianship. Pope Francis, himself an experienced retreat director was formed by the Exercises.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 223. He continues: “This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. . . . Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety but with clear convictions and tenacity.”



communion amid disagreement.<sup>28</sup> That realities are more important than ideas forms the third principle emphasizing the constant tension between the two necessitating a continuous dialogue so that ideas do not become detached from reality. Finally, the fourth principle is that the whole is greater than the part, and, as Pope Francis maintains, “it is also greater than the sum of its parts”. Accordingly, “there is no need, then, to be overly obsessed with limited and particular questions. We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all.”<sup>29</sup>

This polar tension between the universal and the particular forms is a gap that is bridged by ongoing discernment and it is here that Pope Francis has introduced the image of the polyhedron “which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.”<sup>30</sup> So there can be proper balance between the whole and the parts, between the universal and the particular. The climax and indeed the culmination of all these tensions, made known in the four principles, is the mystery of the cross. Here we find a freedom from the abuse of power and the most profound image of authority as service. Indeed, the final hermeneutic is always the cross. As Pope Francis stated: “When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of his love which exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze burning with love, expands to embrace all his people.”<sup>31</sup>

### A community of discourse – the witness of authority

Within such an ecclesial community, it is vital to be aware of the dangers of Gnosticism and Pelagianism two constant risks to faith and

<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium*, 228, he continues: “this can only be achieved by those great persons who are willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity. . . . Solidarity, in its deepest and most challenging sense, thus becomes a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity. This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism, for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides.”

<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 235.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid 236, He continues: “Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked. It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone.”

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 268, He continues: “We realize once more that he wants us to draw closer to his beloved people. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; without this sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity.”

the life of the Church. Pope Francis has spoken significantly about both and the effect of both is to diminish a sense of reverence both for God and for others. He indicated that both fuel a sense of spiritual worldliness because they are deeply interrelated. “One is the attraction of Gnosticism, a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings. The other is the self-absorbed promethean neo-pelagianism of those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past.”<sup>32</sup>

The truth arises and is affirmed in a living dialogue among the members of the church. Such an inclusive dialogue within the church may also assist the promotion of that spirituality of communion that Pope John Paul II advocated in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* at the close of the Jubilee Year for the new millennium. “A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as ‘those who are a part of me.’ This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.”<sup>33</sup> If this is indeed to be the case then there is a clear need for authentic dialogue grounded in authentic listening.<sup>34</sup> These both need to become part of a more integral self-constituting identity and self-understanding of the Church. This need is particularly acute in the case of individuals who have suffered in some way from an abusive exercise of church authority. We must hear the voice of lament in the midst of the Church, and paradoxically, as we acknowledged earlier in this article to hear the voice of lament is fundamental to an appreciation of hope.

To hear the voices of lament from within the Church is to follow an honourable tradition. We have only to peruse the book of psalms to

<sup>32</sup> Idem, 94. He continues: “A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others. These are manifestations of an anthropocentric immanentism. It is impossible to think that a genuine evangelizing thrust could emerge from these adulterated forms of Christianity.”

<sup>33</sup> Pope St John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter, Jan 6<sup>th</sup> 2001, 16. He continues: “A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a ‘gift for me’”

<sup>34</sup> In certain spheres of religious life, authentic listening and authentic dialogue are termed ‘generative listening’ and ‘generative speaking’ in an attempt to emphasize the life-giving nature of such listening and dialogue as any exchange calls for more profound receptivity and consideration for the other.

know the biblical origins. The voices raised in recent years include survivors of sexual abuse; people who have suffered from other types of abuse of authority; people who feel social justice issues must be heard and many more. The voice of lament is vital because it is more powerful than the voice of mourning. “The voice of lament recalls the original creative word of God spoken at the dawn of time, to the watchword for all creation. In the face of the loving, creative word of God, the voice of lament acknowledges the brokenness of the present. The voice of lament is as primal as a child’s need to cry. It is a way of bearing the unbearable. In is in essence supremely human, for it refuses to accept things as they are. The voice of lament is not an end in itself, but is undergirded by the hope that God will act with mercy and compassion.”<sup>35</sup> In this way lament and hope come together and issue forth in a cry of faith. Such faith may often be obscure. Much of what we term faith I suggest is reasoned assumption. Faith itself is a gift of God given to us, not just once but continually throughout our lives if we continue to pray for it and are receptive to it. Faith can still exist in the depths of our own darkness and doubtfulness and the obscurity of occluded vision, if there is a humble willingness to ask for it. Where faith is corrupted is when it is seen as a possession and therefore a power to be used over against others and therefore becomes a source of abuse. Listening to the stories of the survivors of sexual abuse by clergy gives indications of this kind of corruption of faith.

Nevertheless, Christianity when well lived is attractive. It is this witness value that lies at the heart of both proclamation and daily living. Also “reason by itself is capable of grasping the equality between people and of giving stability to their coexistence, but it cannot establish kinship,”<sup>36</sup> which is that profound understanding of belonging to one another. I wonder if we have lost a sense of ourselves as ‘kin’ as the people of God ontologically united as the body of Christ. Perhaps this moment of the Church’s most profound humiliation is a radical call and opportunity to an openness and purification that we might become once more authentic witnesses to the one we proclaim as head. May we envision the church as a more truthful people of God? In a new community of discourse this moment in the church might be in, and through all, a liberating one. Is it time to reclaim the virtue of solidarity, which is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to every person? Also, the principle of subsidiarity is closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa. Perhaps key determining principles in the relationship between solidarity and subsidiarity are the virtue of humility and the practice

<sup>35</sup> Gill Goulding IBVM, *Creative Perseverance: Sustaining Life-giving Ministry in Today’s Church*, 138.

<sup>36</sup> Pope Benedict XVI *Caritas in Veritate*, 19

of kinship. These when embraced might awaken the appropriately deepened synodality that I suggested earlier in this paper.

In the attentive listening and discernment to which the Church is called at this time, to listen to the Spirit at work within the church and beyond, we may be brought by the Lord to a more profound conversion. During this period when Pope Francis insists that we should not be disheartened “the Lord is purifying his church and is converting us all to him,”<sup>37</sup> a disciplined re-appropriation of the virtues of vulnerability, humility and compassion could assist that disposition of faith and fidelity. This disposition might then find expression in the exercise of an authority of service grounded in humble repentance, which by the grace of God is the beginning of our holiness<sup>38</sup>, and that holiness is a power that empowers the whole church for ever more profound service in the world.

*Gill Goulding CJ*  
*Professor of Theology*  
*Regis College, University of Toronto*  
*100 Wellesley Street West*  
*Toronto*  
*Ontario*  
*M5S2Z5*  
*Canada*

*gill.goulding@utoronto.ca*

<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis, Address to Priests of the Diocese of Rome, Basilica of St. John Lateran, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2019. He continued: “Sin disfigures, and we have a painful, humiliating experience of it when we ourselves or one of our brother priests or bishops falls into the bottomless pit of vice, of corruption, or even worse, of crimes that ruin the lives of others. I would like to share with you the pain and the unbearable suffering that the scandals — which fill newspapers throughout the world — cause in us and in the entire ecclesial body. It is evident that the true meaning of what is happening is to be found in the spirit of evil, in the Enemy, who acts with the pretence of being master of the world, as I said in the eucharistic liturgy at the end of the Meeting on the Protection of Minors in the Church (24 February 2019). Yet, let us not be disheartened! The Lord is purifying his Bride and is converting all of us to Him. He is making us experience the trial so that we may understand that without Him we are dust. He is saving us from hypocrisy, from the spirituality of appearances. . . . Our humble repentance, which remains silent amid tears before the monstrosity of the sin and the unfathomable greatness of God’s forgiveness; this, this humble repentance is the beginning of our holiness”.

<sup>38</sup> “At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. In consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him. But it can also entail reproducing in our own lives various aspects of Jesus’ earthly life: his hidden life, his life in community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love.” Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Apostolic Exhortation on the call to holiness in today’s world, March 19<sup>th</sup> 2019, 20.