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UNMASKING INTEGRITY: THE CHALLENGE BEFORE CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE

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Abstract

Clergy sexual abuse and the inappropriate ways of handling the crisis have led the Church to grave crisis of credibility and integrity. The situation is like a sickness that afflicts the health and wellbeing of the body that we call the Church. This pathological condition poses a challenge to the ecclesiastical system, to unmask itself in a manner that will help diagnose the deeper roots this disease and, in the process uncover the integrity of ecclesiastical life and mission. In this paper the issue is addressed taking the sexual abuse of nuns by clergy. The basic problematic underlying this issue is identified as the unresolved gender question and the consequent power equations that exist between clergy and nuns within the gendered hierarchical structure of the ecclesiastical setting.

The privileged positions that priests and bishops enjoy as the 'head' with spiritual leadership and decision-making powers and the gendered spaces that nuns occupy and the roles they play in the Church make them highly susceptible to abuse. This crisis calls for a

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critical revisiting of ecclesial life in its theology, structural settings, and practices so that in the process of unmasking, the Church could recapture its relevance in keeping with the Christian vision and praxis.

Keywords: Abuse on Nuns; Clergy; Clergy Sexual Abuse; Gender; Indian Church; Patriarchy; Revisiting Theology; Sexual Abuse; Theology of Priesthood; Vulnerability

Wearing a mask has become the new normal in the COVID 19 era. In the time of a pandemic, the use of masks becomes essential in view of safeguarding the health of the human body. While masking is a necessary precautionary step to protect physical wellbeing in an emergency situation, unmasking becomes an equally crucial activity in the face of corruption at the systemic level. Truthfulness is a critical indicator of personal and organizational integrity and this becomes imperative for sustaining the wellbeing of societal life. Unmasking then, becomes a crucial step to uphold the uprightness of an institution if it has to regain its relevance in societal life.

In the face of the scourge of clergy sexual abuse, which has become like a virus that has been eating into the entrails of the Church, transparency is the challenge of the hour. The inappropriate ways of handling this situation in the different parts of the world has led the Church to a very grave crisis of credibility and integrity. If the Church has to recover its vitality as the Body of Christ in this world, it has no other go but unmask its face, so that this malignancy can be diagnosed and uprooted with greater honesty and courage. In the process of unmasking, the deeper integrity of ecclesiastical life can be uncovered in a manner that will safeguard the credibility of the Church as a religious institution, which still has a spiritual and liberative mission in the world today.

In this paper we shall examine the question of sexual violence in the Church concerning the abuse of nuns by clergy. A critical examination of some of the cases that have surfaced signal to the many unaddressed and unresolved concerns underlying gender relations and the consequent power equations in the Church. Improper ways of handling clergy sex abuse by those holding ecclesiastical positions of authority, point to the unredeemed aspects of ecclesial life in its theology, structural settings, belief systems and practices. The praxis of unmasking could enable the Church to recapture its founding vision and spirit and translate it to life in a manner that is relevant for the present times.

Beneath the Mask: Sexual Abuse of Nuns by Clergy

In the late nineties, the problem of sexual abuse of women religious by priests and bishops in Africa, was brought to light in a report based on the documenting of a missionary physician Sr Maura O'Donohue, who had spent six years as AIDS coordinator for the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development. In this report, O'Donohue stated that she was aware of incidents of clergy sexual abuse of nuns in some 23 countries, on five continents though the majority happened in Africa.¹ The crisis of sex abuse of nuns by clergy in the present times was exposed by Lucetta Scaraffia, who was the editor of the Vatican's women's magazine *Women Church World*. In an article, Scaraffia gave a scathing account of the numerous cases of nuns being raped or abused by priests and bishops, or being forced to have an abortion or leave the Church if they became pregnant as a result. A few days after the article was published, Pope Francis acknowledged the issue of widespread abuse against nuns for the first time. While pointing to the action taken by Benedict XVI against a French order after nuns there had been reduced to "sexual slavery" by priests, the Pope agreed that more needed to be done to confront the issue.²

In the Indian context, there is a greater hesitation about reporting sexual abuse particularly when it affects women because of the cultural taboo regarding sexuality in its gendered dimensions. In this cultural setting, rape is generally seen as a crime where the victim is accused of having invited trouble upon herself because of her ways of dressing or for being out at odd times. However, over the past decade, reporting of clergy sex abuse has been on the increase particularly in South India with many cases of molestation, rape and even murder of victims coming to light.³ Within the ecclesiastical framework, nuns are beginning to say things aloud and they do so mostly when they are cornered. It is reported that at one meeting of the bishops of a certain region in India with the major superiors of religious women working in that region, one bishop complained to a

¹John L. Allen Jr. and Pamela Schaeffer, "Reports of abuse: AIDS exacerbates sexual exploitation of nuns," https://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601a.htm accessed on 10 May 2020.

²Angela Giuffrida, "The Vatican Editor who Exposed the Sexual Abuse of Nuns and Took on the Pope," <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/08/vatican-editor-sexual-abuse-lucetta-scaraffia-nuns-misogyny>, accessed on 12 May 2020.

³See M.G. Radhakrishnan, "Rising Cases of Sexual Abuse within the Church in Kerala Force Clergy to Rethink on Homosexuality," *India Today*, 17 September 2011; See also "Priestly Predators," *The Outlook*, 20 January, 2017.

provincial that she transferred her young religious every year. And she seems to have retorted: "You are right. I do it to protect my sisters from your rapacious priests!"⁴

In my work with nuns as the national convener of the Streevani project for the empowerment of women religious in India from 2001-2005, many sisters have shared experiences of molestation and abuse by priests, when an environment of openness and confidentiality was created for critical reflections on the issue.⁵ At that time, it was not taken as an issue that needs to be brought into the public view. This was in view of safeguarding the image of the Church and more so because it did not strike us at that stage that we were dealing with the symptoms of a cancerous growth that had affected the health of the ecclesiastical system in a deeper way.

In 2014, when a case of voyeurism was reported to the FORUM⁶ by the victim, a religious sister and the accused, a seminarian,⁷ the FORUM took up the issue with the concerned Church authorities. Even at this stage, the major concern of some of us who intervened in the issue was to protect the Church's image in the public sphere. Since the seminarian was sent for higher studies abroad and fearing that it would set a very wrong precedent in clergy formation, the issue was raised up again at different platforms of ecclesiastical leadership in India, including the Nuncio. Silence and indifference on the part of the Church leadership clearly indicated that 'covering up' had become a means of dealing with the issue. When masking becomes a strategy before concerns of this nature, perpetrators get protected and in the bargain the Church loses its credibility as a religious institution that has a moral standing in a religiously plural society like India.

Among the many cases of clerical sexual abuse in India, one that has caught global attention is the alleged rape of a nun by a bishop,

⁴Subhash Anand, "The Rape of Nuns," *Sathyadeepam* (Eng. ed.), 16-30 April, 2015, 2.

⁵"*Streevani*," which means 'voice of women' is an organization founded in the early eighties with its base in Pune, Maharashtra, India, with the purpose of empowering women in the Church and in society. In 2001, it initiated a project for the empowerment of women religious in India and I coordinated this project from 2001-2005.

⁶Forum for Justice and Peace is a national organization of religious women and men who are involved in justice issues.

⁷Meti Amirtham, SCC, "The 'Silenced Half' in the Church Dares to Speak," *The New Leader*, March 1-15, 2015, 10-13.

who was the patron of her Institute, for two years between 2014-16. It is to be noted that before she approached the Civil Courts for justice, she had appealed to ecclesiastical authorities at different levels—first her parish priest, who directed her to the local Ordinary of the diocese where she was based, who in turn directed her to speak to the head of the local Church, which is one of the three Catholic rites in India. This prelate washed his hands off, saying that the accused bishop belongs to another rite that is not under his jurisdiction. Nevertheless, before approaching the civil courts of justice, she wrote to the higher authorities in the Church—first to the Nuncio and on being confronted by silence, to the Holy See: the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and to Pope Francis himself. Again, silence was the response though she knew on tracking the couriers that the letters were delivered at the Vatican. Finally, she mustered courage to file an FIR against the patron bishop when he began threatening her family members by filing false cases against them.

While this case has triggered very many protests and debates across India, and the investigation is still going on, what has really provoked a deep ecclesiastical crisis is the fact that the official Church leadership took a 'safe' distance from the case and the victim/survivor. Masking in this case became evident in their failure to set up a fact-finding commission to assess the truth of the allegations. The irony of the case is that while there is a defensive silence on the part of Church leaders before the accusations meted out against the alleged offender, the victim/survivor and her companion nuns who dared to take the issue to public attention stand accused of crossing the limits of ecclesiastical conduct.⁸ They and those who support them are blamed for tarnishing the public image of the Church, though the real damage comes through the offenders and those in hierarchical positions who protect them by masking the story in a defensive manner.

Gendered Underpinnings of Clergy Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse by clergy men cannot be seen purely as a sexual problem. It is basically a gender problem in the sense it has to do with the gendered socialization of women and men in a culture

⁸The Kerala Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCBC) issued a Statement on 12 September 2018 saying that the protest against the accused bishop has crossed the limits and the stir is unacceptable. See *The Hindu*, 13 September, 2018.

informed by patriarchy that privileges men's needs and interests over and above that of women. Gender expresses 'socio-cultural definitions of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles.'⁹ Women, for their sexual difference are expected to possess a specific set of capacities deemed 'womanly' or 'feminine,' self-giving, caring, compliance and the like being the defining features of femininity. Men on the other hand are expected to be 'manly' or have 'masculine' qualities such as assertiveness, rationality, boldness and the like, these being the characteristic traits of masculinity. When people live with a gendered consciousness, hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity have to be relentlessly performed by male and female bodies, as anyone attempting to transgress the boundaries of appropriateness, can be highly threatening to the social order.¹⁰

Religion is generally seen as a constitutive part of the 'gender order' in any given society, as it plays a decisive role in shaping the consciousness of women and men and in legitimizing women's social subordination. This is more so because women are socialized to be more 'religious' than men and they tend to assimilate and observe dogmatically the gendered prescriptions of religious traditions, beliefs and practices in an uncritical manner without being conscious of its detrimental effects on their growth as persons. We need to situate the issue of nuns' vulnerability to clergy sexual abuse against the backdrop of the gendered socialization that accompanies their growth processes right from childhood years.

Gender hierarchy being a characteristic feature of the structuring of the Church, while priests enjoy the privileged position of being the 'head' with spiritual leadership and decision-making powers associated with headship, for nuns, compliance to priestly commands and desires becomes a necessary tactic for ecclesiastical survival. Gender conformity within the religious setting becomes more problematic since religion as a system of symbols act to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in people.¹¹ In this context, it is not surprising that priests take it as their divinely ordained privilege to be demanding and nuns consider that through their acquiescence to clerical

⁹Kamla Bhasin, *Understanding Gender*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2005, 1.

¹⁰Shilpa Ranade "The Way She Moves: Mapping the Everyday Production of Gender-space," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 28, 2007, 1519-26.

¹¹Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973, 90.

demands, even when it might seem unreasonable, they are fulfilling God's will for them.¹²

Within the gendered structuring of the ecclesiastical social fabric, sexual predators are usually people in power who wait for an opportunity to exploit their victim's vulnerability, observes Astrid Lobo Gajiwala. In a Church setup, priests and bishops have a fiduciary relationship with their parishioners based on trust that does not have to be earned, but comes with the position and with early conditioning. While all the baptized experience this power structure, for women it is worse because the priests are men and like all men, society privileges them and socializes them to hold power over women. In India particularly, most women are victims of this socialization and do not have any personal agency over their bodies, their speech, or their lives. It is not easy for them to claim power or to resist power. Gajiwala finds the woman religious with her vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to the bishop at the bottom of this power pyramid and argues that too often obedience is understood as subservience. Since religious congregations have to depend on the goodwill of the local bishop for their existence in a diocese, life is much easier if they say, "Yes, your Lordship."¹³

Religious socialization makes of nuns a category of women who are one of the most 'taken for granted' groups within the ecclesiastical setting. Nuns are wanted in the Church, mainly to be at the beck and call of the priests in the parishes. In many Church institutions, women religious especially of diocesan congregations are used as cheap labour force. This was acknowledged also at the international level in an article that brought out the servitude of nuns who work for a pittance to cook and clean for clerics.¹⁴ Some nuns become easily vulnerable before priests who demand sexual favours in return for monetary help if they are in situations of dire need like providing some critical financial assistance to their families and they are not in a position to receive this help from their convents.¹⁵ At the global level, the same concern was expressed that in many cases, sexual favours have been required of nuns who are dependent on

¹²For a detailed study on the impact of religious socialization of women, see Kochurani Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy: Intersectionalities, Negotiations, Subversions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

¹³Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "Gender sensitivity and the Catholic Clergy," *JIVAN*, May-June, 2019, 6-8, at 7.

¹⁴Nicole Winfield, "Vatican Magazine Denounces Nun's Servitude," <https://apnews.com/b224527fd8de462c81eee69ca8d11bbb>, accessed on 10 May 2020.

¹⁵Anand, "The Rape of Nuns," 2.

priests for finances or other help and their subservience makes them vulnerable to abuse.¹⁶

Vulnerability of Catholic women to sexual abuse is apparently higher for the manner in which sexuality is understood in the Church. Women's sexuality has been seen traditionally as dangerous for its association with the "temptress" or "adulterous" imagery, which women themselves have internalized. When there is sexual abuse, the woman feels *she* must be the cause of this "holy man of God" falling from grace and breaking his vow of celibacy. There is fear about speaking up and accusing someone who has a "good" name in the community. Sometimes a priest may spiritualize the entire abuse. By the time the victim realizes what is going on, the feeling of responsibility and guilt is so strong that she does not know what to do. Thus, the experience of sexual abuse lies in a grey zone, and too often it is shrugged off as "consensual sex." However, it is unequivocally argued that a sexual relationship between a cleric and anyone under his physical or spiritual care can *never* be consensual because the power differential is too great.¹⁷

Revisiting Theology for Unmasking Integrity

Catholic theology is primarily a gendered theology. This means to say that the basic Catholic theological framework continues to be coloured by gendered notions of God, human identity, Church life and the like. The fundamental principles of Catholic theological thought have not changed so far in a liberative manner taking into account the developments in theological thinking that have evolved over the last five decades from the feminist and other liberative perspectives. Hence, revisiting theology is imperative if the Church has to strike at the roots and remove the malignancy of clergy sexual abuse from ecclesiastical life.

Theological revisiting is called for when a certain theology or theologies that have sustained Christian life over the ages do not serve to nourish the living of faith or when they contradict the knowledges that have evolved with the times. Just as any sickness affecting the physical body demands a diagnosis and treatment beyond a mere acknowledgement of the symptoms, diseases afflicting the ecclesiastical body calls for interventions at different levels with deeper care and sensitivity that the wellbeing of the Church can be restored. The focus of this paper being the sexual

¹⁶Giuffrida, "The Vatican Editor who Exposed the Sexual Abuse of Nuns and Took on the Pope."

¹⁷Lobo Gajiwala, "Gender Sensitivity and the Catholic Clergy," 7-8.

abuse of nuns by clergy men, it is good to examine if there is any aspect of the theology of priesthood and of religious life that may not be conducive to living healthy relationships among members who constitute the Church, though different groups would be playing different roles in ecclesiastical life.

Theology of ministerial priesthood is founded on a basic principle that the priest functions in *persona Christi*/ in the person of Christ. This theology is based on the understanding of the Church as a body of which Christ is the head,¹⁸ and the ordained priest acts in the person of Christ, the head.¹⁹ Acting in *persona Christi* endows the priest with *Potestas Sacra* or sacred power, as explained in *Lumen Gentium* that the ministerial priest, by the sacred power that he has, forms and rules the priestly people, with the authority of Christ.²⁰ This theology is founded on scriptural argument that just as 'Christ is the visible representation and manifestation of God to created beings' (Col 1: 15), the priest, through his consecration, becomes the visible representation and manifestation of Christ.

This being the case, the priest is meant to be '*Alter Christus*' or 'another Christ' as expressed by Pope Pius XI.²¹ While this theology of priest becoming 'another Christ' holds the possibility of affirming the sacredness of the priestly vocation, it is potentially dangerous for the possible abuse of the 'sacred power' that they are vested with through these titles. Even if the priests do not abuse this power, the exaltation of the priest as '*Alter Christus*' can be very imposing in a spiritual sense on the Christian faithful. For those who are religiously socialized to see the priest as another Christ, it gets imprinted in their minds to attribute a divine status to him and consequently to please him without counting the cost. In such situations, the priest could very well abuse the '*Potestas Sacra*' that becomes his privilege through the rite of ordination.

Commenting on the abuse of religious power by priests who make sexual advances on nuns, a report observes that "some even ask their resisting victim: "Do you want your priest to go to the red-light area?"²² In such situations, some nuns may sacrifice their

¹⁸*Lumen Gentium*, n. 7.

¹⁹*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 2.

²⁰*Lumen Gentium*, n. 10, n. 27.

²¹Pius XI, *Ad Catholici Sacerdotti* cited in Jerome F. Thompson, "*In Persona Christi*": Its Significance for the Theology of Ministerial Priesthood in the Documents of Vatican II, An Unpublished Thesis, Marquette University, Wisconsin, 1987.

²²"The Rape of Nuns."

integrity as religious and become victims of sexual abuse in order to preserve someone in his priestly vocation, argues a psychologist nun.²³

The '*Alter Christus*' theology of priesthood could be problematic when seen in relation to the traditional theology of religious life, particularly of women religious who were called 'Brides of Christ.' The idea of consecrated women being called 'brides of Christ' emerged from the medieval times, when mystical religious experiences were expressed through sexual imageries or marriage metaphors. The patristic literature on consecrated virgins by Ambrose and Jerome became the main source of medieval formational literature for religious women. The Sermons on the Song of Songs by Bernard of Clairvaux became very influential in this development and this found a greater echo in the writings of the mystics.²⁴

While the 'bride of Christ' theology could have an appeal for individuals who have such mystical experiences, applying this terminology for nuns today can be seriously problematic as many women religious do not find themselves within such a romanticized theological framework. For an average nun who is engaged in the institutional charitable apostolate of her religious Order, the 'bride of Christ' label becomes nothing more than a pious identity construction that gives an outwardly aura of their character as consecrated women. Such romanticized construction of the consecrated identity of women could make them all the more vulnerable to sexual abuse under the cover of piety. This observation was made by feminist writer Sharadakutty on referring to the scandal of clergy sexual abuse of nuns in the Indian Church. In her opinion, the labelling of nuns as 'brides of Christ' can be inviting danger as a priest or bishop whose identity is projected as '*alter Christus*' will only be exercising his conjugal rights when he

²³ Rosamma John, "Hierarchical Structures and Gender Relations: A Psychological Appraisal," in ed. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala et al., *Gender Relations in the Church: A Call to Wholeness and Equal Discipleship*, New Delhi: Media House, 2012, 149-158, 153.

²⁴ Beguines like Beatriz of Nazareth, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude of Helfta, and Hedewig of Antwerp, who were all virginal mystics committed to a lifelong religious vocation and later great mystical saints like Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, and Bridget of Sweden expressed themselves as brides of Christ in their writings. See Rabia Gregory, *Marrying Jesus: Brides and the Bridegroom in Medieval Women's Religious Literature*, an Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2007.

uses a nun, since she is expected to be the 'bride of Christ.'²⁵ The way religious obedience is understood and practiced also makes religious women very vulnerable to abuse.

The elevation of the priest as 'Alter Christus' paves the way for another grave crisis as it becomes a fodder for clericalism, which is a triggering factor behind clergy sexual abuse. As observed by Thomas Doyle, a noted Canon lawyer, clericalism is grounded in the erroneous belief that clerics form a special elite and, because of their powers as sacramental ministers, they are superior to the laity. Although these clergy constitute a minuscule fraction of the world's Catholic population, they wield all of the power in the Church. Doyle argues that far from being merely a tragic moment in the Church's history, sexual abuse and related cover-ups are the fruits of a systemic disorder in the church, the toxic clericalism.²⁶ In his opinion, the situation is more critical as Canon law gives the ordained rights and privileges that are not available even to rulers in any democratic country. Within the ecclesiastical framework, accused clerics are not brought before civil courts, but tried by a canonical forum and Canon law is totally impotent in bringing about a just Church and society.²⁷ Some critics opine that clericalism, with its cult of secrecy, its theological misogyny, and its hierarchical power, is at the root of Roman Catholic dysfunction. If the structure of clericalism is not dismantled, the Roman Catholic Church will not survive, and will not deserve to.²⁸ There is a greater realization that the all-male clergy club that the Church leadership has become today excluding women and other sexual minorities is damaging to the very existence of the Church. All the

²⁵Prof. S. Sharadakutty, who is a feminist writer, critic (in Malayalam literature) and translator, made this observation at a seminar on Gender and Religion organized by the Indian Christian Women's Movement (ICWM) on 29 October 2019 at Thiruvalla, Kerala. In her opinion the 'bride of Christ' labelling is all the more problematic in India as the country has had the tradition of *devadasi* system, of dedicating young girls to the service of the temple and its deity but they were extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse by temple priests.

²⁶Thomas Doyle, "Clericalism: Enabler of Clergy Sexual Abuse," in Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea and Virginia Goldner, ed., *Predatory Priests, Silenced Victims, The Sexual Abuse Crisis and The Catholic Church*, The Analytic Press Mahwah, New Jersey London, 2007, 147-162.

²⁷ Thomas Doyle, "The Sexual Abuse Crisis is Not a Crisis," <https://consciencemag.org/2019/04/03/the-sexual-abuse-crisis-is-not-a-crisis/fbclid=IwAR0t3u2woDiyfCLtWRWftWoZobymJF>

In many countries, as also in India, the accused clerics are tried by courts of law only in cases where civil suits are filed against them by affected parties.

²⁸James Carroll, "Abolish the Priesthood," *The Atlantic*, June 2019.

same, as noted by Rosemary Radford Ruether, inclusion of women into these structures of clerical power is not the answer but the 'dismantling of clericalism,' as a feminist understanding of ministry and clerical ecclesial structures are diametrically opposed to each other.²⁹

To be an ecclesiastical community that can be a sign and sacrament of Christ in the world today, the Church needs to be 'born again' in the true scriptural sense of the word. This entails dying to the old and birthing the new, and in this call we hear the patristic idea of rejuvenation of the Church, which found a resonance in the affirmation by the Second Vatican Council that "the Spirit by the power of the Gospel rejuvenates the Church."³⁰ This process of rejuvenation can be an *ecclesiogenesis*,³¹ where "a new Church is taking shape in the womb of the old."³² However, this new way of being Church cannot be like the new wine poured into the old wineskins, but requires new skins. This implies old structures giving way to the new, hierarchy giving way to democracy and new forms of Christian leadership emerging where persons imbued with the spirit of Christ and sufficient preparation are elected by the people of God to lead them in matters of faith.

In this new way of being Church, *persona Christi* will not be the prerogative of clerics but of every person who lives the Christian commitment in its radicalism. When the Church is 'born again,' it will be inclusive and non-hierarchical whereby women and other excluded persons will find their rightful space once again. Then, women religious do not have to be objects of romanticized domestication as 'brides of Christ' but they can reclaim their subjectivity and true identity. As women who live their spiritual and theological agency and continue the liberative mission of Christ, they can also be *alter Christus*. This *ecclesiogenesis* can happen when the Spirit hovers over the chaos triggered by the crisis of clergy sexual abuse. Midwifing the birth of this *ekklesia* is the challenge posed before every Christian and the Church as an institution.

²⁹Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Women-Church: Emerging Feminist Liturgical Communities," in Norbert Greinacher and Norbert Mente, ed. *Popular Religion*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986, 75.

³⁰Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 4.

³¹This expression I borrow from the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff who introduced the term *ecclesiogenesis* to show how the base communities in the Latin American context reinvent the Church. See Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1986.

³²C. Rene Padilla, "A New Ecclesiology in Latin America, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*," 11, 4 (1987) 156-164.

Conclusion

Clergy sexual abuse and the failure on the part of Church leadership to handle this crisis needs to become a serious turning point in the life story of the Church. This crisis becoming a turning point implies a radical return to its founding vision, which would have drastic implications on the way the Church understands its identity, its structures, its theology, its anthropology, organization of leadership and mission. A vital principle that is fundamental in 'returning' to the founding vision of the Church is the question of power, how it is understood and exercised in its organizational structures and functioning. The interplay of sex, power and money being at the core of the scandals afflicting the Church, the possible structures facilitating the abuse of religious power needs to be identified, deconstructed and re-envisioned so that structured inequalities and power differentials are tackled at the roots, taking the Gospel vision as the founding charism.

The scriptures make it explicit that Jesus Christ blatantly opposed hierarchical thinking in forming his early community of disciples. The Gospel imperative "It shall not be so among you" (Mt 20:26), is illustrative of the counter-cultural vision of Jesus, who envisaged the community of his disciples in radically inclusive and egalitarian terms. It is also evident from the Gospels that Jesus did not call himself nor his disciples priests and that his horizons were clearly prophetic. He did not belong to a priestly family and is never shown functioning as a priest in the temple cult. In fact, Jesus vehemently opposed the Jewish structures of priestly domination. Jesus was called a rabbi in his functions as preacher, teacher and exegete in his hometown synagogue (Lk 4:15ff). Clerical priesthood as a necessary condition for Christian leadership is a later development in the historical process of the institutionalization of the Church.³³

Against the backdrop of this counter-cultural Christian vision of Jesus Christ that laid the foundation stones of the early Church, it

³³It is noted that the term "priest" (*sacerdos*/ *hiereus*) is used in the New Testament either for the whole "priestly people" of God (1 Pet 2:5) or for Christ alone in reference to Melchizedek (Heb 7:15). Most scholars recognize Tertullian (165-225 CE) as the first writer to explicitly name the bishop a priest (*sacerdos*). It is by the end of the third century that the terms *hiereus* (Gk, in the East) and *sacerdos* (Latin, the West) came to be used to designate the bishop and/or the presbyter in a universally accepted way. See Karl Rahner et al., ed., *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 5, New York: Herder & Herder, 1970, S.v. "Priest," 97.

becomes imperative that models of leadership that have evolved in the Church in response to certain socio/political and historical contexts need to be deconstructed if they become a counter-witness to the original Christian vision and if the changing times demand different structures. This is the unmasking process that will enable the Church to recover its deeper integrity in keeping with the Christian spirit and vision of inclusion, equality and freedom. Subsequently, the Church will be born again and become a family where the marginalized sections particularly women and other gender-nonconforming persons find their rightful place and mission.