

Understanding the Crisis in the Church

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“Is it wise, is it prudent, that those whose voice is law in everything else, should be made to feel, that in that very thing, in which they are most deeply interested they have no voice at all?”¹

I hope that the last you thing you expect from me at the beginning of our meeting is a blow-by-blow account of “the crisis.” Indeed, I literally would not know where to begin. With the foundation of VOTF? With the arrest of John Geoghan? With a look at seminary life in the 1950s? With a thoughtful review of *Going My Way*? With the Code of Canon Law? In fact, I am emboldened not to take a purely chronological approach to my assigned task of “reviewing” the crisis by the fact that so many of the gory details are so well known to all of us, and by the observation that sprang to my mind when I ran my eye down the list of conference participants, that so many here present know so much more about this or that dimension of the crisis than I do, and that it would therefore be the height of folly to belabor you out

of my ignorance with what you collectively if not individually know in such profundity.

That said, I am also an obedient presence, and long enough in the tooth to know how irritating it can be when the speaker gives the paper they wish you had asked them to present instead of the one they were contracted for. So I will attempt a review of the crisis. I propose to approach it in three ways, each of which takes a somewhat different approach to the same essential question: what, in essence, *is* the crisis? The first and most pedestrian step, perhaps of most value to those few among us who may know little more than they have read in the press about the crisis, will be to look at it somewhat journalistically as a series of concentric circles around the anything-but-still point of child sexual abuse by some clergy. The second step will shift the metaphor slightly, from concentric circles to layers, moving from the shallower to the deeper layer, in search of what is at the core of the problem. This will abandon journalism in favor of a little ecclesiology. And the third and final step, mixing theology and history, will be to ask, in effect, just how new this crisis is. I shall suggest three potentially useful directions in which to search for an understanding of the roots of the crisis

¹ Early 19th century Philadelphia Catholic, quoted in Jay Dolan, *In Search of American Catholicism: A*

Phase One: The scope of the crisis

No one would argue with the statement that at the heart of the sex abuse scandal that has been front and center for the past two years stands a sizeable number of victims of abuse. Just how many there are, no one will ever know. Those who came forward may be most of the victims, but they cannot be all. Moreover, just as a large number of the abusers are deceased, so there must have been many victims who died unknown, and a church which takes seriously the communion of saints and the resurrection of the body must be ready to recognize that solidarity with victims extends especially to those who died unrequited. Whatever we go on to say as this paper comes to its conclusion and the conference takes up its specific agenda, however much the focus seemingly shifts from victims, the value of what in the end we do here can be simply measured. Have we made it at least a little less likely that people will be victimized and suffer injustice at the hands of the church?

The response to victims and abusers alike must be marked by justice, mercy and sound pastoral practice. Obviously this means somewhat different things for the two groups. The church has made some progress in the last

History of Religion and Culture in Tension (New York: OUP, 2002), pp. 33-34.

few years in bringing justice and mercy to the victims, though it saddens me to see that the greatest progress seems to have been made under the threat of litigation. Justice for the victims requires appropriate redress of their grievances, whether that means financial compensation or the provision of therapy or the prosecution of their abusers, or all of the above. Mercy for victims translates into compassionate reception of their complaints. And sound pastoral practice goes beyond this to an effort to draw them back into the community of faith from which they may have become alienated through no fault of their own. This last is the most difficult, perhaps the most important, and has thus far been least attended to. When we turn to the abusers, we can readily see that justice is most directly going to mean bringing them to account for their crimes. However, justice does not stop there. Justice for abusers needs to go on to ask to what degree their criminal behavior was facilitated by the church itself. A dysfunctional family can all too readily be in denial about the failings of its members, and moving them from parish to parish or diocese to diocese is as plain a case of enabling as I can imagine. Then justice may also lead into mercy, and we face the need for rehabilitation of the abusers. Obviously, this is a sensitive point. “Rehabilitation” of a kind has been one of the most scandalous failings uncovered in the last couple of years, as abusers have been pronounced

cured and released once again upon the unsuspecting children. But it is not crystal clear that the mercy and compassion that must accompany the necessary and rigorous insistence on justice is visible in the simplistic expediency of the so-called “zero tolerance” policy, any more than I am sure that the abusers are the only church personnel who deserve to stand in the dock.

Once we step beyond the central circle in a schema of concentric circles, the picture can be completed in a number of different ways depending on what we imagine we are depicting or, perhaps, who is doing the drawing. Looked at as a map of responsibility for the scandal, the central circle would be occupied by the abusers alone. The next circle must be the episcopacy, followed by the Vatican, then the parochial clergy and after them the laity. Beyond that, perhaps, we could find a place for contemporary American culture and even the press. The only ones who must be pronounced innocent and without any responsibility for the scandal are, of course, the victims. But this is a liberal drawing of the picture. If George Weigel sketched it, he would probably agree that the bishops occupy the second circle, but then our diagrams would differ: next would surely come the permissive culture of America since the sixties, then the press, and only after that a minor place for Vatican, clergy and laity. I am not sure where

Weigel himself would stand, but some conservative commentators would want the victims occupying a circle of responsibility somewhat closer to the center than my picture. After all, weren't at least some of them responsible to some degree, and hasn't their litigiousness been a major contributor to the crisis? And more than one individual has tried to lay the blame on parents for putting their children in harm's way!

If we adopt a different approach and draw the circles as a measure of who is hurt most by the scandal, the picture is not the same. In my view, the group most hurt—after the victims of course—would be the parochial clergy followed closely by the laity. Next, if hurt means “caused to suffer” rather than simply “damaged,” I would place American society, which surely needs the perspective and priorities that a vigorous Catholicism can bring to the public forum. However, if we stress the element of damage, particularly damage to their credibility, then perhaps next would come bishops and the Vatican, both of whom seem to have isolated themselves fairly successfully from serious psychological trauma, if not systemic harm.

As a third way, we might ask who has benefited from the scandal. Then we have to draw a very different kind of picture. I suppose most people would put the lawyers and the press at the center here, though I would place the victims first myself, since the crisis is fundamentally about redressing

rather than creating their problems. After that, who benefits most depends on how we see the crisis having salutary effects. Perhaps it might be the bishops, whom public scrutiny has forced into action. For myself, I would prefer to say the church as a whole and particularly the laity. Large sections of the laity have been scandalized and energized, and a more adult laity can only be to the benefit of the church. Or can it? Obviously, the question of who benefits can only be answered relative to a vision of the good. In this case, the good of the church. How do we envisage the good of the church? There is no consensus on this. Ecclesiologies are deeply and increasingly reflective of positions drawn on the ideological battle-lines of the liberals and the (neo) conservatives. To the latter, the liberals are using the crisis to benefit a vision of the church as just another liberal Protestant denomination, Catholic Lite if you will, and we all know what is happening to liberal Protestantism. To the liberals, more conservative types see the crisis as a chance to re-assert a pre-conciliar vision of the church. Both the liberals and the conservatives, of course, would counter these arguments in a similar way. Both would claim to be in defense of a legitimate understanding of Vatican II's ecclesiology. Who isn't, outside Lincoln Nebraska?

It is pretty clear, then, that if we stay with the story of the scandal as it has unfolded, without going into questions of meaning, there are too many

ends of the stick to get hold of. We can read the crisis in so many different ways, and most of them—liberal or conservative—will tend to confirm our own vision of what the church should be and where it ought to be going if it would only listen to us. Worst of all, and perhaps this is the greatest danger at the present time, we can look at the crisis divorced from issues of deeper meaning, perhaps hypnotized by the evil at its heart, and understand it bureaucratically. Then we draw up report cards for the bishops and check on how they are doing at meeting the standards they wrote for themselves. Right now we are between two reports, the audit and the tally, and I suppose it is not surprising that attention is being paid to “how well has the church dealt with the crisis?” But if there is one thing we can be clear about, it is that the presenting problem is not in the end successfully addressed unless it is placed in the larger context of systemic issues. Get to the systemic issues and the presenting problem will be dealt with. Don’t get to the systemic issues and even if the presenting problem goes away, some other will appear to take its place.

Phase Two: the depths of the crisis

Let me begin this second part of my presentation by plainly stating what others have said before me, namely, that there is no sex abuse crisis in

the church. What the church suffers from is a crisis issuing from the real problem of clerical sexual abuse of minors. Sex abuse itself is a heinous crime and a scandal in the church of the highest order of magnitude. But it isn't in itself a crisis. First, the numbers of abusers are not inordinately large, as far as we can tell, and the statistical evidence puts the rate of abuse among clergy significantly below the rate of abuse by adult males as a whole. Of course, there are two corollaries that give cause for concern. One is that clergy are expected to stand in a particular relationship of trust towards laity and most especially towards children (though one cannot resist saying that parents—who statistically do most of the abusing—are also trampling on an equally solemn trust). And the other is that by far the majority of the victims have been post-pubescent males, whereas in the population at large adolescent girls and young women are the preferred targets of mostly male predators. Second, while one has to treat the statistics carefully, it seems as if the incidence of abuse has declined over the past ten to twenty years.

Whether this is because traumatized victims have not (yet) come forward, or because there are simply fewer priests out there than there used to be, or because they are older, or because seminary training is better than it was, it is hard to say. Third, however late in the day, the bishops do seem to have made some efforts to address the scandal, and to have had some success in

dealing fairly with victims and perpetrators. There is even, apparently, some restoration of confidence among sectors of the laity and the incidence of mass attendance is on the rise again, though for the first time in our history the percentage of Catholics at weekly worship is lower than that of their Protestant counterparts. So the crisis of sex abuse is past. In fact, the crisis was at its worst in the fifties and sixties and early seventies, all the more terrible for being unknown to public opinion and the church at large. But if the crisis is gone, the scandal remains, and the silver lining of the scandal is that it has drawn our attention as a church to the real crisis that we need to address, a crisis of the church itself.

It is a much more accurate statement of the present reality, then, to say that the scandal of clerical sexual abuse of minors has thrown the church into crisis. It is also important to insist on describing the problem this way, and instructive to see that the Vatican and episcopate has a distinct preference for clinging to the language of the crisis of sexual abuse. The good work that the American bishops and the Lay Commission have done to address the problem of sex abuse will hopefully mean that this problem in its current dimensions will never trouble the church again. That would certainly be the hope of all of us. But if we call this “the crisis” and are able to declare it “solved” or at least taken seriously, then it is entirely probable that most

church leaders will want to return to business as before. However, if we can be persuasive in the claim that the scandal has revealed a crisis, then the successful overcoming of the scandal is not at all the same thing as dealing with the crisis. Though, of course, the resolution of the true crisis will hopefully mean that such scandals will not occur again.

Once we have determined that the crisis revealed by the scandal is a structural crisis in the church, then the process of identifying it is one of moving from the fairly obvious to the more fundamental levels. Obvious, beyond dispute in my view, is that the scandal pointed to a crisis in the episcopacy. Poor leadership in dealing with the scandal has led to the kind of public scrutiny to which bishops are not accustomed. The precise nature of the crisis is not something that all will agree upon, but its elements are pretty evident. To name them is not to accuse every American bishop of all the elements, but to point to systemic dysfunctions to which all American bishops must attend. Among the charges that have been made over the past couple of years are the following: a faulty understanding of what it is to be a leader on the part of those who select bishops, and a consequent lack of good leaders within the episcopacy; bad judgment about how the good name of the church can best be assured; secrecy; isolation; ambition and careerism; poor theology; too centralized an understanding of the church, with a

concomitant over-deference to the Roman Curia; excessive bureaucratization of the role of the bishop. Some or all of these may be accurate, but not all qualify as systemic issues. Inappropriate ambition, for example, is something that systemic problems can foster, but in itself it is personal rather than structural sin.

The structural problems to which we can point as the primary causes of the problems of the episcopate are the following: a fundamental imbalance in power relations between the Vatican and the national bishops' conferences; a poor theology of the episcopate; a deeply flawed process for the selection of bishops. The seeds of a healthier understanding of all three are to be found in the documents of Vatican II, but sadly and confusingly interwoven with that far more traditional approach that has stymied genuine theological development of the Council's teaching. In *Lumen Gentium*, for example, you find both a vision of the church in which the Vatican is the head office of a major corporation and the bishops are managers of local branch offices, together with a profound insistence on the local church as the whole church that verges on a federalist understanding of the Roman communion. In the years since the Council, unfortunately, power has intervened to assert the essential character of what is in truth only a relatively recent historical accident of autocratic centralization, to see to it

that bishops act and even think as agents of the Vatican, and make sure that only those willing to do so will even be considered for episcopal appointment. No wonder that collectively the American bishops have shown weak leadership. They were selected to be weak leaders.

Beyond the crisis in the episcopate there is a deeper ecclesiological crisis that is at the same time a cultural crisis. A number of the church historians to whom all of us who try to do ecclesiology today are deeply indebted have pointed out not only that the structures of government in the church have changed over time, and have indeed always been changing, but more importantly that these changes have accompanied changes in secular understandings of government. They have usually needed to stress this in the teeth of those who see the first and last word on ecclesiology to be that “the church is not a democracy.” Thus Bishop Donald Wuerl in his opening address at the Yale Conference last year on Governance and Accountability in the Church, an address that was startlingly and tellingly at variance with the approach of the many distinguished scholars whose presentations followed his. Ah, if only he had stayed to hear Francine Cardman challenge the proponents of what she called “default ecclesiology” to recognize that the church is not monolithic but “a dynamic, evolving, diverse movement,” or Brian Tierney explain that “within the Catholic church there have always

been these three, Peter, the apostles, and the people of God, but the constitutional relationships between them have been defined differently in different ages,” or Marcia Colish point out that secular governments have continued to change throughout history, becoming constitutional monarchies and then representative democracies with no kings or queens, “the church remained trapped in the absolute monarchy time warp of the early modern period,” or Frank Oakley offering up the conciliarist movement as a phenomenon that has much still to teach us, though it has been consigned to the garbage heap of church history by what Oakley calls “an ultramontane politics of oblivion,” or John Beal’s eloquent call for a canon law that restores the balance between *communio* and juridic ecclesiologies.² Now is surely the time to the answer the question with which Oakley ended his presentation: “with what confidence, after all, can we Catholics hope to erect a future capable of enduring if, for ideological reasons, we persist in trying to do so on the foundation of a past that never truly was?”³

The weight of the historical evidence would strongly suggest that it is quite appropriate to ask how democratic sensibilities might have something important to offer to the church today, and that it is entirely probable that the

² The papers delivered at this very important conference have recently been published as *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church*, edited by Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York and London: Continuum, 2004).

³ *Ibid.*, p.87.

church will evolve, willy-nilly, to incorporate some genuine role for the voice of the whole community into its structures of governance. It has been so in the church's past, most recently in the American church of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and it could be so again. The lessons of history also teach us, however, that it is exceedingly rare that an elite in any society will freely give up its own hold on power. And this brings us to what may be a yet deeper level of the crisis, namely, an ecclesiology and a polity that gives no formal role to the voice of laypeople in the church to which they belong, buttressed by the sorry history of theological reflection upon the laity. Here is where the discussion of clericalism belongs.⁴ Clericalism can be damaging and can be petty. It can be ridiculous and it can be scandalous. It can be as sinister as it is in John Gregory Dunne's *True Confessions* and as comic as it is in J.F.Powers' incomparable stories of the lives of clergy. But in the end it is always epiphenomenal to the real issue that for at least three quarters of the church's life the best theological definition the church could offer of the lay person was, "not clergy."

Because we have no serious theological vision of what it is to be a layperson there is no chance that structures could develop through which the

⁴ Handled best by Donald Cozzens, *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church* (Collegeville,

laity could have appropriate active if not passive voice in church affairs. Any such suggestion as this arouses the specter of the Great Terror in the minds of some ecclesiastics and some conservative laity attached to the cozy caste-system prevalent at present. Restive laity are seen as a species of *sans-culottes*, baying for blood and seeking to bring the ecclesiastical aristocrats to their knees, if not to the guillotine. Others not so fearful offer proposals like Brian Tierney's suggestion of a mixed constitution with monarchical, oligarchic and democratic elements, or turn as Bruce Russett does to John Rawls' picture of a "decent consultation hierarchy." Any responsible hierarchy committed to a notion of the common good, suggests Rawls, needs a process of consultation allowing for dissent and requiring official response to disputed points, in the context of an open-ended inquiry committed to the principle, as Ignatius of Loyola might have said, that "the truth shall appear, and not that we shall seem to get the upper hand." But such more liberal proposals are premature. The first step has to be to develop a theology of the laity. Theological reflection upon what it is to be a layperson implies a whole ecclesiology, and this in its turn will point the way towards developing appropriate structures. Right now, polity is the tail that wags the ecclesiological dog, and it has to change.

Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002).

Phase Three: Understanding the Crisis

In the last section of my presentation I want to look beyond description to suggest three potentially helpful directions to turn to in search of an ultimate explanation for the crisis. And I want to put them in the context of a slightly different question, namely, how new is the crisis? It is of course clear that we have begun to address the crisis in the church in consequence of the scandal of sexual abuse, which revealed some episcopal malfeasance, significant episcopal incompetence, and overwhelming poor leadership. This is a new scandal, but how long sex abuse has been a problem in the church is anyone's guess. However, the presenting problem of sexual abuse points to deeper systemic issues that are also much more longstanding. Do they in fact go back to the beginnings of the church itself? Are they merely a couple of hundred years old? Are they peculiar to the church or are they stresses that afflict all human communities?

It is a theological truism to say that the church has an institutional and a charismatic dimension. But in my view, one of the more important points made at last year's Yale conference was in John Beal's address. Having pointed out quite correctly that there are two ecclesiologies alive in the church today, one more juridic and the other a *communio* ecclesiology, he

went on to suggest the need to seek to balance them rather than pit them against one another. One of the most distressing phenomena to me in our present crisis is the rejection of the search for common ground by some members of both liberal and conservative wings of today's church. This can only intensify and prolong the crisis.

A great deal of light is shed on conflicts throughout the church's history when we are alert to the tension between these competing ecclesiologies. Holding them in tension or balance is good, even necessary, for the health of the church. But it is quite apparent even to someone who is not a professional historian that in the course of the last two centuries the institutional element in the church have come to dominate the charismatic to an unhealthy degree. Western cultural history had its French Revolution, its *Risorgimento*, its feast of liberalism, modernism, and socialism. The church of Rome countered with the *Syllabus of Errors*, Vatican I and *Pascendi*, but it hasn't stopped there. As Etienne Fouilloux has shown so brilliantly in his history of the French church in the wake of the Modernist crisis, the institutional church is still in large measure fighting the same battle.⁵ I am sure that the word "neo-modernism" is still muttered darkly from time to time in the corridors of the Vatican.

⁵ *Une église en quête de liberté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998)

The first resource I would offer for our consideration is the work of Yves Congar, especially his great book on the laity, *Lay People in the Church*. Congar's wisdom would be reason enough to read him. Additionally, however, he is a theologian who appeals to both the conservative and liberal temperament. One of the most extensive recent treatments of his work is by a priest of Opus Dei. At the opposite extreme, I found Congar extraordinarily useful in my own most recent book. More importantly, perhaps, in Congar's work more than that of Schillebeeckx or Rahner, one can see the development of his thought, as he goes from a very moderate position in his writings of the 40s and 50s, though not moderate enough to save him from Roman suspicion and exile to Cambridge, England, on to rehabilitation, the great work he did at Vatican II, and work in his later years that adds considerable audacity and creativity to what was always solid historical scholarship. From defining the laity in relation to the clergy and so stressing their "secularity" in *Lay People in the Church*,⁶ thus unintentionally perpetuating the problem he set out to solve, he comes to the point twenty years later where he can announce that "from now on, the priest must be defined in relation to the laity." Symbolically, too, he is significant.

⁶ Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1957, revised edn. 1954. References are to the revised edition.

There can be few, if any, other church figures who were silenced by Pius XII and given a red hat by John Paul II.

Congar's great book draws attention to the distinction between two constitutive principles that together make up a living church, the principle of structure and the principle of life. At times he also calls these the hierarchical and the communitarian principles. In *Lay People in the Church* he discusses the role of lay involvement in authority in the church under the rubric of "kingship as power." Here he is adamant that throughout the history of the church the laity have never legitimately exercised any ecclesiastical rule. It is the bishops' job to give the church "her structure as church." But at the same time Congar stresses that an excessive focus on this truth has occluded the real role of the laity, which resides "in the principle... of consent, as a principle not of structure but of life, as a concrete law of all the great acts of ecclesiastical life, beginning with that of designation to the highest offices."⁷ A healthy ecclesial life, thinks Congar, will be one that balances the hierarchical constitution of the church with the cooperation of the faithful, through which life is breathed into the otherwise true but sterile structure. Unfortunately, the church has tended to overstress the communion of the parts *with* the hierarchy as the principle of structure, instead of the

⁷ *LP*, p. 247

communion *between* the parts, namely, between the hierarchical ministry and the community of the faithful within which all, clergy and laity together, exist. Catholic unity resides above all in the will of the parts to behave as members of one body, regulated by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because this pneumatological emphasis has been played down in the post-Reformation church, omitted entirely from Robert Bellarmine's influential definition of the church, the faithful are unaware of their responsibility to make the church. The passivity of the laity, in other words, often passed off as the historical accident of an unlettered people, is a result of conscious choices on the part of the leadership. The principle of structure, it would seem, does not easily warm to the Spirit that blows where it will.

Congar's later views, where he turns more to the language of "different ministries," only serve to strengthen his case that the church is healthy when it balances the roles of clergy and laity, and not when power interferes to damage this equilibrium. Like many others, Congar brings his vast historical erudition to bear and singles out the juridicization of the church in the middle ages as the primary culprit, since it enshrined into law an already disturbed equilibrium. It is one thing, however, to explain the structures that need to be balanced, quite another to show the convergence of forces that have led in recent centuries to an even more autocratic situation

and a corresponding reaction. Here I want to suggest a second helpful direction in which to search for answers can be found in the insights of systems theory, in particular the communicative action theory of Jürgen Habermas.⁸ Habermas has drawn attention to the ways in which in modernity the two basic components of all societies become uncoupled from one another in potentially damaging ways. An integrated and successful community, he seems to say, would be marked by cooperation and a common purpose between what he calls the “lifeworld” or the human community in all its specifically human interactions, and the “system” of means/ends rationality by which the community manages the whole panoply of its non-human interactions (science, technology, the everyday manipulation of the environment). When, as in modernity, the system shakes off its human parent and driven by imperatives of money, markets and power, comes to have autonomous existence, even impinging on the specifically human, driving human interaction into purely private realms, and asserting the importance of action oriented to success over action oriented to understanding, pathologies arise. The system, in Habermas’s

⁸ I wrote a whole book on Habermas’ value for ecclesiology which was published in 1990 and sank without trace just a year later, but as I return to it now, I still think that Habermas has much to offer us. His theories are complex and his language is sometimes close to impenetrable, so I don’t suppose I will need forgiveness for an effort to paraphrase some of what he has to say that seems significant. For anyone who would like to see the argument in its full complexity, see *Theology and Critical Theory: The Discourse of the Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1990).

challenging phraseology, has come to colonize the lifeworld. That which was an expression of the community has now made the community an expression of itself. The two spheres belong in an equilibrium in which the system is seen to serve the lifeworld. John Paul II came very close to this vision when in his 1982 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) he referred critically to “the instrumentalization of labor to capital,” insisting that a healthy society should show the reverse, the instrumentalization of capital to labor, of “stuff” to people. It is of course, in a parade of irony that we see so often in the life of the church, one thing to promote a democratic social order and quite another to extend it to the workings of the church.

Habermas’s analysis of late capitalist society is relatively easily transferred to the church. The church is a community of faithful people, equal in virtue of their baptism, ordered towards truth that emerges in non-coercive interactions. But like any human community that will perdure in time, it has a public, institutional face. The institutional superstructure or system exists to aid the functioning of the community as what it is, in this case, a faith-community which believes in Jesus Christ. Of itself, the institution/system employs forms of rationality that could be described as instrumental or means/ends, but only legitimately if they are employed in the

service of the lifeworld/community. Unfortunately, the institution has become uncoupled from the community and has come to colonize it, to extend the realm of actions oriented towards success, or means/ends rationality, into the essentially communicative, understanding-oriented, rationality of the community itself. So the open communication that should mark human interactions is replaced by more manipulative practices. One particularly clear sign of such an event in Habermas's view is the replacement of the authority of prestige by that of the authority of influence. The former is leadership based upon fundamental commitment to the communicative character of the lifeworld. The latter is rule by those whose principal tool is power. Prestige is related to "personal attributes," while influence stems from "disposition over resources." Thus, we could explain the often-noted ambiguity of our collective response to John Paul II. He has enormous personal attributes that inspire great respect and cause him in many ways to be an extraordinary leader. At the same time, he often seems to lead in an authoritarian fashion, or in virtue of his "disposition over resources." The more critical judgments made of his pontificate as a whole are rarely if ever challenging his legitimate prestige, but rather pointing to the exercise of influence. His own pontificate, they are saying, has too often

placed the prestige at the service of the influence, in order to shore up the pre-eminence of the system over the lifeworld.

This language of Habermas is one way to describe some of the things that seem to have been going on in the church during the last two centuries. My third and final resource, drawn this time from church history, supports the application of Habermas's theories to ecclesiology. In an article on "Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism,"⁹ Joseph Komonchak argues that the form of the church that prevailed in the century and a half before Vatican II was developed in conscious reaction to the Enlightenment and out of fear of modernity. Nothing new there. But he goes on to suggest that the church very consciously drew on elements of modernity itself in order to create this "counter-modern" church. The authority which it exercised, he says, "represents a classic illustration of that self-conscious, rationalized, and bureaucratized mode of thought in which Max Weber saw the distinctive mark of modernity." "This anti-modern Roman Catholicism," he adds, "was very modern indeed."¹⁰ In other words, in order to protect a pre-modern view of the church against the normal processes of historical development to which the ecclesial lifeworld, like others, is subject, the institution adopted the mechanisms of modernity.

⁹ *Cristianismo nella storia* 18 (1997): 353-385

History was to be managed in the service of an elite whose very continued existence depended upon persuading the community to accept an ahistorical essentialism. The ghost of Karl Marx himself cannot be far from this test case in the construction of a hegemony.

It seems to me that when we place the insights of Komonchak in the context of Habermas's thought about late capitalist society, even without the overtones of Marxist analysis, we come up with a pretty persuasive explanation of the growth of a centralized bureaucratic Catholicism. It additionally strengthens the story, told so well by Jay Dolan in his most recent book,¹¹ of how the remarkably liberal American Catholicism of the late eighteenth century was transformed into the ultramontane empire of the nineteenth. As Dolan charts the story, when the papacy begins to revive in the first quarter of the nineteenth century it increasingly insists on dismantling the American system in favor of a Roman model. But why it does this, and especially why it can enlist the help of so many American churchmen in the execution of its policies, is not satisfactorily explained solely in terms of European lack of sympathy for American culture. When we add the insights of Komonchak and Habermas to the mix, we get a much

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 383.

¹¹ See n. 1 on page 1.

more persuasive picture that puts the American experience in the context of a world-wide effort at centralization.

Komonchak's theory extends to an interpretation of Vatican II that also has considerable explanatory potential in our present crisis. As he sees it, the Council's challenge was to the modern centralized and bureaucratized Catholicism that had emerged in the course of the nineteenth century and become entrenched during the reigns of the three Piuses. It consisted in suspicion of intellectual modernity, controls over the community through the promotion of forms of devotion and worship that had their origins in baroque European piety, and centralized control of the universal church. But the Council produced a much more positive evaluation of modernity, it sought to reform Catholic worship, devotion and practice, and it encouraged "culturally distinct and relevant realizations of Catholicism" in different parts of the world. Though Komonchak does not say it in this article, John Paul II's reign is marked by efforts to undo precisely these three developments. His writings have grown more and more suspicious of contemporary culture, and in particular of the so-called hedonism and ethical relativism of American society. He has advocated traditional forms of piety, especially Marian piety and Eucharistic adoration, in ways that we have not seen since Pius X, and shown considerable suspicion of liturgical variations

that reflect local cultures. And, above all, he has sought to recentralize the church by, among other things, promoting the quasi-infallibility of the ordinary magisterium and undermining the authority of national bishops' conferences.

All this having been said, at the conclusion of my paper I return to John Beal's call for balance and Cardinal Bernardin's hope for common ground. The problem is not that the institution is bad and the faith-community is good. The faith-community will always have an institutional face. The problem is that too much power has shifted to the institution and the church is in consequence off-center. That this has happened because of the church's suspicion of modernity seems to me to be very likely. The result of the imbalance is certainly bad. The historical chickens have come home to roost, and in the end it is not surprising that the center of the crisis is the American church. On the one hand, it remains the most vibrant of churches in the so-called developed world. On the other, its increasingly vocal and well-educated laity, roused to action by the scandal of sexual abuse, represent a movement for potential reform that cannot be controlled in the ways the clergy can, and that is feeding off two centuries of the American experiment in democracy. An open society is always better than a closed society. This is the unshakeable conviction of thinking people in a

society that strives to be democratic. The crisis in the church will not go away until we find ways to make the church into the open society that, at the present time, it is certainly not.

In sum, my suggestion is that the history of the church has shown a tension between the institutional and the charismatic, juridical and *communio* ecclesiologies, the principle of structure and the principle of life, Christology and pneumatology. This is unproblematic until serious imbalances arise, and when they do we have an ecclesiological crisis on our hands. The latest crisis has been brewing for two hundred years, as the church bureaucratized and centralized itself in a defensive reaction to modernity. Oblivious to the role of the Spirit and the principle of life, in the name of defending faith the institution has only defended itself. It has created a professional class, self-perpetuating and self-policing, insulated from the people by lifestyle and the possession of all executive and legislative authority. The evils of sexual abuse are a direct but epiphenomenal consequence of this bureaucratic blindness. But cultural forces cannot be indefinitely withstood, particularly not if they are of the Spirit. The increasingly loud voice of faithful, well-educated lay Catholics demanding a role in the church that, even when they are unaware of it, has a long historical pedigree and considerable theological justification would

seem to be just such a Spirit-inspired initiative. In conferences such as the present one we make an enormously important contribution to these movements when we give the faithful permission to say what they are already thinking. Let us hope we make some progress in some small way this weekend.