

**“The problems of our own making...
born from the sins within the Church”**
**A Reading of Benedict XVI’s
Admission of the Crisis of the
Church’s Corporate Identity**

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No less than Pope Benedict XVI has admitted of “sins born from within the Church” that “we see today in a truly terrifying way.” A theological-ethical reading of such sins would uncover at least three unresolved issues, namely: the wide gap between Church teachings and its laws, the conflicting accounts of authority in the Church, and the hegemony of the clerical *ethos*. Further analysis would show that the roots of such issues go down deep into the “ways of being church” that we have inherited from the pre-Vatican II era. The current crisis could not be transformed into a *kairos* by a mere restoration of such ways. In fact, it would only make the Church’s present sins more terrifying than they now are. What is at stake is the future of our corporate identity as the body of Christ in a world very different from ages past. And much would depend on how the whole church, particularly the episcopal college, would make innovative institutional and systemic changes commensurate to the papal admission of guilt and according to the vision of renewal set forth by the Second Vatican Council.

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The Crisis of our Corporate Identity

Our historical evolution as church is said to be a continuous formation and re-formation of our identity. It bears the record of processes and factors, decisions and actions through which we search and grow in the understanding and appreciation of ourselves as a community of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is something peculiar though about us. We are a faith community – perhaps, the only community – that dares to call itself the body, or *corpus*, of its Lord and Savior.

In continuity with the faith-confession of the earliest origins of our Christian faith, we hold the theological conviction that “though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ” (Rom 12:5) because “all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit” (1Cor 12:13). “Under his control all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together by every joint with which it is provided. So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love” (Eph 4:16; Col 2:19). “If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it” and, in the same measure, “if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness” (1Cor 12:26). Our identity as the embodiment of the abiding presence of our Lord and Savior in history is such that we are “the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere” (Eph 1:23).

In recent times, the collective identity of this *corpus* appears to be in deep crisis and the theological conviction that supports it is under closer scrutiny. In the wake of the global phenomenon of clergy sexual abuse, the pattern of negligence if not cover-up by church leaders tasked to deal with it, and the appalling passivity of those who knew about it, no less than Pope Benedict XVI has made a public admission. He recognizes what he calls “problems of its own making,” “born from the sins within the church” which we see today “in a truly terrifying way.”¹ The humble and honest admission, albeit long-overdue, should not be taken lightly. It strikes at the very heart of our corporate identity as it unearths a host of questions that are at once ecclesiological and ethical: If the church is ‘the body of Christ,’ what sort of historical embodiment is it witnessing to the world given the pattern of abuse, cover-up and silence? What sort of body could it be if it is to be the “completion,” rather than destruction, “of him who himself completes all things everywhere” (Eph 1:23)?²

¹ “Pope Benedict places blame for sexual scandals on Catholic Church,” The Washington Post (12 May 2010), A08 in www.washingtonpost.com/...AR2010051104... (accessed on 5/25/2010). Public apologies were also made in the same year, for instance, by the episcopal conferences of Ireland and Belgium. See, “Archbishop Asks Accountability of Colleagues,” America (5 April 2010), 8 and “Bishops Pledge Response to Sexual Abuse by Clergy,” America (27 September 2010), 9.

² In framing the theological-ethical question, we are helped by the study of power in the local church by Frances Ward, “Theological Strand – Power” in Helen Cameron et al. (eds.), *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 221-233.

The aim of this paper is modest. It attempts to give a name to “the problems of (our) own making” and identify “the sins within the church” which have spawned and sustained them. There are at least three frameworks to help us make sense of Benedict XVI’s own admission; these frameworks also help us chart three pathways of turning adversity into opportunity, of transforming crisis into a *kairos*.

Problem No. 1: The Failure to Transpose Vatican II Ecclesiology into Church Law

The most common framework holds that identity is prone to be disordered if not deficient when sound doctrine and its implications are not applied. Nothing is wrong or unclear about the church’s doctrinal self-understanding, while the system of thought that supports it is robust. The weakest link is rather on the failure to apply doctrine and its demands and implications in church life and structures. Michael Fahey, in his study on church governance in modern Catholic theology and in the 1983 code of canon law, notes that while significant strides have been made in ecclesiological principles since the time of Vatican II, there is as yet a huge gap in transposing them into the church’s legal system.³

The principle of “equality in dignity” of the laity and their ordained ministers

The Catholic Church’s dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, for instance, categorically emphasizes that Christ envisions His body to be “a communion of life, love and truth” as much as “a community of faith, hope and charity” (LG 8-9). To this end, the Church “by divine institution is ordered and governed with wonderful diversity. For just as in one body we have many members, yet all the members have not the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ.” At the heart of this communion in diversity, the document requires the principle of equality in dignity of all the members: “There is, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social conditions or sex” (LG 32).

This equality in dignity, explains John Paul II in his the apostolic exhortation *Christifidelis Laici*, flows from “the newness of the Christian life” which all the members of the body of Christ share by virtue of their baptism and confirmation. The newness is such that “each member of the lay faithful, together with the ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church’s mission” (CL 15). Only from inside this radical newness, he says, “is the mystery of

³ Michael Fahey, “Diocesan Governance in Modern Catholic Theology and in the 1983 Code of Canon Law,” in James Mallett (ed.), *The Ministry of Governance* (Washington, DC: CLSA, 1986), 121-139.

the ‘identity’ of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed” and “only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined” (CL 8).

In this light, one does not have to belabor the fact that it is not the ordained nor the hierarchical office but Christ, the Head of His body, who calls the lay faithful to full participation and responsibility in the life and mission of the Church. “In their own way” the lay faithful “share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ” (LG 31) because, according to *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, they too are incorporated into the “royal priesthood and holy nation” (AA 3; also CL 14). In this sense, their aspirations to participation and responsibility are two fundamental expressions of the true equality in dignity that they share with their ordained ministers. It is therefore a divine imperative to respond to these aspirations in a manner commensurate to the radical newness of the baptismal dignity.

However, all this need not be construed as making the office of the ordained ministers a thing of the past or a mere rubber stamp. Participation and co-responsibility rather re-assert the radical importance of the hierarchical office. The conciliar teachings do this by embedding the office where it should be, namely deep in the heart of the common priesthood of all (see LG 18; PO 2). Embedded therein the office of the ordained has no other purpose than to exercise its service to the whole body in a manner that respects and nurtures, rather than circumscribes and stifles, the fundamental equality in Christian dignity of all members. That is why in *Christus Dominus*, the decree concerning the pastoral office of bishops in the Church, we read that, “in exercising (their) pastoral care, they should preserve for their faithful the share proper to them in Church affairs” and “respect their duty and right of actively collaborating in the building up of the Mystical Body of Christ” (CD 16).

Equality in the realm of doctrine, not as yet in the eyes of the law

Nowhere is the gap between doctrine and practice as blatantly clear as in the fundamental equality in dignity of all baptized and the divine right of the lay faithful to full participation in the life and mission of the Church. The Church has been very clear on the priestly, prophetic and royal office of all baptized, but its legal system does not explicitly mention what laypersons do to participate in the royal or governing office of Christ (c. 204, 1). The present code of Canon Law, contends Fahey, restricts them to the role of lector and acolyte – on a stable basis in the case of laymen, only by temporary deputation in the case of laywomen (c. 230, 1-2). Moreover, while the 1983 code has separate Books on the teaching (*munus docendi*)

and sanctifying (*munus sanctificandi*) offices, it is very telling that the code does not have a separate Book on the governing office of the Church (*munus regendi*).⁴

While the Church has been very emphatic about the equality in dignity of all baptized, the requirements of collaboration and participatory governance remain much to be desired. For instance, only one of two consultative bodies deemed obligatory by law can include members of the laity, and that is the finance council. The lay people may also be part of two of three other structures of consultation, namely: the diocesan synod (c. 460) and the diocesan pastoral council (c. 511), but both bodies are not obligatory by force of law. This means, consultative bodies are not only less participatory but also their mere existence if not robust functioning is always at the mercy of the bishop's discretion. To add insult to injury, these consultation mechanisms cannot in any way take on a deliberative status in the church's decision-making processes.⁵

Although Church teaching embeds the ministry of bishops as service to the common priesthood, the 1983 code, says Fahey, "does not take into consideration the importance of the laity's participation, particularly in the selection process of bishops. It remains under the veil of secrecy and systematically excludes consultation among the lay faithful that is as broad and transparent as possible. The current process does not only fall short of the conciliar vision, it also runs contrary to the spirit set by the apostolic church. The apostles, Luke tells us, involved the participation of "the whole group of believers together" as they chose Matthias to be "added to the group of eleven apostles" (Acts 15-26) and, later on, their seven helpers (Acts 6:1-8).

Co-responsibility is mere lip-service where procedures for the accountability of bishops are very circumscribed in participation. At the moment accountability hinges primarily if not exclusively on their formal *ad limina* visits to the Pope in Rome. Through this procedure a bishop becomes accountable to the head of the episcopal college to which he belongs. But, unfortunately, it makes him virtually exempt from any mechanism where the quality of his episcopal ministry is regularly evaluated by the priests and lay people, or their representatives, of his local church. If responsibility in the entire mission of the church is commonly shared, it behooves that a local ordinary is also subject to the evaluation of his priests being his co-workers

⁴ See, for instance, Robert Ombres, "What Future for the Laity?: Law and History," in N. Timms and K. Wilson (eds.), *Governance and Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Beginning a Conversation* (London: SPCK, 2000), 95, 98; and Nicholas Lash, "Authors, Authority and Authorization," in Bernard Hoose (ed.), *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice* (London: Ashgate, 2002), 59-71, especially 61-63.

⁵ See "Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest," 13 August 1997, article 5, par. 3.

and to the rest of his fellow baptized for whom his episcopal office is ordered. Be that as it may, even if such mechanism is in place, any effort at monitoring periodically a bishop's pastoral effectiveness will seem to be futile as his term of office is basically fixed on biological age rather than based on years of effective service.

A callous disregard for the divine rights of the lay faithful?

The huge gap between doctrine and its legal application that Fahey brings to our attention should not be underestimated. Laws, from the viewpoint of Catholic moral theology, "give expression to the inner reality of the church as a community of love empowered by the Spirit."⁶ Laws help shape and sustain identity by providing the framework within which the community of believers identify and promote the basic values and moral standards which it cannot live without. Although laws may never satisfy the full measure of moral responsibility, they nevertheless serve as "repositories of moral wisdom" and function as reliable guides in the understanding and shaping of a corporate identity. Law and legal systems may never fully reflect the theological ideals and spiritual experiences of a believing community but, nonetheless, they prevent the community from becoming or, better yet, regressing into what it is not.

The yawning gap speaks of a "callous disregard for the rights of the faithful by church authorities." As a problem of our own making, it is "the result of a deeply ingrained bias in the church's legal system" – a bias which, according to John Beal, "makes it impossible for the law and those who administer it to recognize any genuine equality between the ordinary faithful and their ordained leaders or, at least, to give the recognition of such equality any practical effect."⁷ The said provisions in the church's legal system are not as yet commensurate to the ecclesiological principles and ecclesial values they are supposed to embody. This current disparity between doctrine and law embodies an asymmetry of power relations in the one body of Christ. As the first in the list of "problems of our own making," it should be a cause of grave ethical concern for all.

Problem No. 2: The Unresolved Conflicting Accounts of Authority

The second framework to understand the crisis invites us to make a correlation between the church's corporate identity and the authority vested on those who are to nurture it. The apostle Peter, in his first letter, appealed to his fellow elders of the early

⁶ Richard Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 250.

⁷ John Beal, "It Shall Not Be so among You! Crisis in the Church, Crisis in Church Law," in Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (eds.), *Governance, Accountability and the Future of the Catholic Church* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004), 88-102; here at 91.

church “not to lord over those who have been put in your care, but be examples to the flock,” to “take care of it willingly, as God wants you to ... and to do your work ... from a real desire to serve” (1 Peter 5:2-3). In this appeal, one can clearly appreciate that the Christian dignity of the ordained is, as the second Plenary Council of the Philippines puts it, “measured by the sincerity and genuineness of their service rather than by the office they hold” (PCP II, 96). They serve the whole body of Christ so that it “will become the priestly people that Christ wants it to be, and that all who belong to this people, sanctified as they are by the Holy Spirit, may offer themselves ‘a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’” (PCP II, 415).

Authority of office-bearers prior to the authority of the ‘believing Church’?

But such paradigm has been very difficult to come by. Too often the Church is perceived, “both from within and without, as authoritarian, exerting power for the sake of power rather than furthering the demands and ideals of the gospel.”⁸ According to Gerard Mannion, this is due “either to a misunderstanding of what authority entails” or “to a misuse – indeed, often abuse – of authority by some invested with the power it entails.”⁹ The root of the problem, he argues, is that different models and conceptions of authority exist within the Church and they frequently clash.

Some believe that “those in the hierarchy,” like Peter receiving the proverbial key from Jesus, “somehow receive their authority solely (understood as ‘directly’) from Christ and God.” This view asserts the primacy of the authority of the ordained over the authority of the whole ‘believing Church’. Office-holders can bypass the role and participation of the rest in the church community at large, and, while they are answerable to their immediate superiors, they cannot be held accountable by the fellow believers under their pastoral care.

Many have challenged this dominant view. They stress that the ‘believing Church’ as a whole must be the prior condition of the existence of any form of authority in the Church. For them “the general community” or, better yet, the whole believing Church, “is always the bearer of authority” and “the position of those in authority is granted by the community as an investiture of certain rights held by the community, given in trust to the office-bearers to exercise.”¹⁰ In this view, the authority of office-bearers is appreciated as an institutional tool meant to empower those from whom they derive the legitimacy of their power. There is plenty of room for co-responsibility and reciprocity between those who are designated to exercise authority and those for whom such authority has to empower.

⁸ Gerard Mannion, “What Do We Mean by Authority?” in Bernard Hoose (ed.), *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice* (London: Ashgate, 2002), 19-36; here at 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22, 32-33.

The problem of being exempt from its own standards of human authority

As regards the ethical standards in the exercise of authority, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) says “no one can command or establish what is contrary to the dignity of persons and the natural law. The exercise of authority is meant to give outward expression to a just hierarchy of values in order to facilitate freedom and responsibility by all” (CCC 2235-2236). In a similar vein, the Church’s social teaching acknowledges the “aspirations to equality and participation” as “two expressions of human dignity and freedom” that must be promoted and, where opportune and necessary, defended by those in authority (OA 22, 24). And, reminding themselves about the need for justice in the Church, the 1971 Synod of Bishops proclaimed that “anyone who ventures to speak to people of justice must first be just in their eyes.”

The sad irony is that, while the Catholic Church has been very courageous in applying these standards to civil authorities and public officials, it has been too timid in using them to hold its own bishops and priests accountable. For, if these standards were rigorously applied to clerics, the voices of the victims of sexual abuse would not have been muted for decades, the authority of those who helped them find such voice would have mattered, and the institutional pattern of cover-up would have been avoided. There is a theoretical perversion behind this sin of omission. It seems that the Church does not construe authority as one concept whose demands and standards are applicable to any human society by virtue of its single divine origin.

The Church continues to hold on to a concept of authority that is double-faced. There is an authority directly received from God through ordination, such as that of the Church’s office-bearers, and hence of a superior form; and there is another type derived not directly from God but constituted through the instrumentality of a (democratic) process involving human choices, such as the authority of elected civil officials, and hence of an inferior form. The perversion lies in the fact that, in the so-called superior form, God’s self-communication is assumed to be possible apart from the channels of (fallible) human choices,¹¹ while in the so-called inferior form genuinely human factors are not appreciated as pathways to arrive at the truth God would wish to communicate to any human society.

¹¹ The authority of doctrinal statements is, for instance, achieved through the process of investigation, discussion and discovery involving the whole Church. Rahner, however, sadly observes that “attempts are still constantly made to conceal these genuinely human factors in the concrete process by which the Church’s teaching office arrives at the truth.” Karl Rahner, “The Teaching Office of the Church in the Present-Day Crisis of Authority” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12 (London: DLT, 1974), 12.

In light of the preceding, Mannion rightly calls our attention to the fact that every view of authority is “essentially bound up with systems of ideas.”¹² Hence, a critical engagement with the church’s system of ideas that buttress its dominant theory and practice of authority is crucial. It could mitigate or prevent the misuse or abuse of power by those who exercise it or lay claim on it. This is not to say that, in the choice of who will be the best person for the church office, the use of “personal qualities or assumed characteristics (of office-holders)” will no longer be crucial. Neither does it mean that the “claim to be represent a tradition” will not anymore play a role in expecting respect and obedience from the faithful. Both remain important but they are no longer adequate to establish legitimacy of authority in the Church. If authority is to be the institutional tool to shape the Church’s identity as the one body of Christ, office-bearers have no choice but to empower those from whom it derives the legitimacy of its power, namely, the whole ‘believing Church.’ To continue to cling to an outdated system of authority, to a corrupted and erroneous idea, would be self-destructive for, as Mannion warns, it would lead to the loss of all genuine authority in the body of Christ.

Problem No. 3: The Hegemony of the Clerical Ethos

The third theological-ethical framework allows us to see that “the problems born from the sins within the Church” are not merely about legal and authority systems. They are rather more all-pervasive and deeply rooted inasmuch as they refer to a crisis of *ethos* or, better yet, the church’s system of “living processes.” The framework is premised on the incontrovertible fact that the formation of a shared identity that binds people together depends less on reasoning from commonly held principles, mission statements or legal systems. Identity is rather made more by the largely unconscious but resilient power of the very concrete and habitual ways of behaving and thinking that over time give specific shape to a particular body of people.

Take for instance the church in its earliest beginnings. The disciples of the Risen Lord were known less by the faith that their words and writings proclaimed than by the radical quality of their lives. In “close fellowship” they “shared their belongings with one another,” Luke the evangelist tells us. Resources were turned over to the apostles and were then distributed to each according to his need, and “there was no one in the group who was in need.” “Day after day they worshipped in the Temple and had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble

¹² G. Mannion, “What Do We Mean by Authority?,” 31 citing P. Winch, “Authority” in A. Quinton (ed.), *Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 106.

hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people” (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35).

In light of Luke’s succinct description, one can clearly see that the church’s public identity is constituted and made visible by its *ethos* or “living processes.”¹³ Such living processes embrace how power and authority are acquired and exercised as well as how accountability is specified or adhered to. It would also include “how rules and procedures are developed, sustained, and sanctioned.” The specific forms and meaning of membership as well as the specific ways of rendering care and service to members would also be as integral a component as the manner disputes and conflicts are handled or resolved. Also not to be overlooked would be the stances the church takes in relation to the world and its public institutions.

Ethos as constitutive and articulation of identity

Identity, in this sense, is at once a “lived social relation” and a “structural location.” A person’s “social relations become constituted within (his/her) self” even as his/her own “self is constitutive of social relations.”¹⁴ Which is why “much of what impels us to act in this world has already been supplied for us by (the social relations) within which we have been embedded since childhood.”¹⁵ Yet, on the other hand, identity is also constituted as practical response to social locations. A person’s practical responses in terms of access or non-access to power structures in a group or collectivity do not only determine his/her identity but, more importantly, express it. Therefore, following Foucault, “the individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation.”¹⁶ In short, the church’s identity is not only shaped but also expressed by its *ethos*. The lived social relations of clergy and laity and their practical responses to their respective structural locations do not only shape but also publicly articulate the identity of the church as Christ’s body.

Does Benedict XVI’s admission imply that “the problems of our own making” are born from the sinful “living processes” within the Church? It appears to be so, at least in our reading of a public statement of his friend and now Archbishop of Dublin (Ireland). In his homily in response to the pope’s pastoral letter to Irish Catholics on the abuse crisis, Diarmuid Martin said: “The church tragically failed many of its

¹³ On this, we are indebted to LeRoy Long, Jr., *Patterns of Polity: Varieties of Church Governance* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 3, 5-8, 156.

¹⁴ Steph Lawler, “Rules of engagement: Habitus, power and resistance,” in Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs (ed.), *Feminism after Bourdieu* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 111.

¹⁵ George Wilson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98 cited in Sandra Hack Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 40.

children; it failed through abuse; it failed through not preventing abuse; it failed through covering up abuse." And, to explain the trinity of failures, he gave a name to the sin: "the false culture of clericalism."¹⁷

In attributing the threefold abuse to the culture or ethos of clericalism, the courageous Archbishop is inviting us to see that, within the church, there seems to be, what John Paul II has called, a "situation of sin" or, better yet, a "social sin." It is a situation brought about by sinful decisions and actions which have over time become accumulated and, as if having a life of its own, consolidated into a complex system. They are, according to his apostolic exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, the personal sins "of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid or eliminate or at least limit certain evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing (the situation)" and "of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order" (RP 16).

Clericalism as constitutive and articulation of the church's abuse of power

Clericalism, as the dominant system of the church's living processes, is such a situation of sin. First of all, it is fed by a particular theology of ministry which projects to the world a mission so extensive and grandiose in scope that ordinary lay people are thought to have difficulty delivering them. Access to a ministry system falsely projected as such socializes an individual to "act as though (he) must take responsibility for everything," "know everything there is to know about (his) work," and think that "he should be available to those (he) serves seven days a week, twenty four hours a day."¹⁸ For anyone who is located in this nexus of power it would not take long to manifest "godlike strivings" of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Because, even before he is able to demonstrate any competence relative to the tasks at hand, the mere access already gives him an experience of inclusion into an exclusive collective and ready-made identity known as the "clergy."

The corporate name itself creates the power and bespeaks a conferral of "privilege, separateness, status and entitlement."¹⁹ The "privilege" is accrued simply by putting on a ready-made identity. One needs only to be able to fit into this identity in order to accrue him a host of benefits from the actions of the present members as well as those of their predecessors. The name "clergy" therefore has all "the power

¹⁷ "Archbishop Asks Accountability of Colleagues," *America* (5 April 2010), 8.

¹⁸ Len Sperry, *Sex, Priestly Ministry, and the Church* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 66-67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

of an icon” because it sums up and holds within itself the bundle of qualities and characteristics of the group which took long to solidify. To be part of this corporate history and exclusive identity, not necessarily his competence nor the respect and esteem of the faithful, is the cleric’s primary “social capital.”²⁰

The “separateness” of the cleric is conferred by “the power of arcane language.” Where wisdom should have been derived from mutual teaching and learning with people they are called to serve, it is rather replaced by a body of knowledge and language accessible only to ‘The Club.’ The language of the inner circle “is used effectively to take away from the laity decision making and adult responsibility” for choices and areas of great significance for their lives.²¹ An exclusively male language for God, gender and authority is used to also exclude women because they belong to a social and cultural group that allegedly lacks the ability to be an icon of Christ the High Priest.²² Inasmuch as language and participation are interwoven, the exclusion does not only breed alienation and undermine the identity of those who are out; it also makes it quite easy to penalize those who make claims to the contrary.²³

Advancement in “status” accompanies the passage from the ordinary to the supra-ordinary state. It is for a fact that a particular competence may be present in some but not all members of society. Yet, distinctions in competence need not translate into superiority but in complementarity and reciprocity. But, in clericalism, the competence of clerics is “recognized as constituting a distinct identity for one group in society.” The competence “attributed to the ordained is that of unique access to the divine, to God,” and because of that it does not take long for “higher” and “lower” forms of status to emerge.²⁴ The classification, in turn, becomes an instrument of domination and control by the “higher form” and, at the same time, a script for unquestioning dependence and obedience to be internalized and acted out by the “lower forms.”

²⁰ G. Wilson, *Clericalism*, 33-35. For a critique with wide-ranging suggestions to change the clerical culture, see Michael Papesh, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004).

²¹ See *Ibid.*, 25-26.

²² Feminists theologians like Mary Daly call it “christolatry” while Dorethee Soelle warns against “christofascism.” See Margaret Fraser, “Language for God, Gender and Authority,” in Bernard Hoose (ed.), *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice* (London: Ashgate, 2002), 193-215, especially 208. In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, John Paul II declared “that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful,” see *Origins* 24 (9 June 1994), 51.

²³ Together with the crime of “sexual abuse by the clergy”, the Vatican had recently included any attempt to ordain women to the priesthood on the list of the “more grave delicts,” or “ecclesiastical crimes, to which there is attached a canonical penalty, much to the astonishment if not outrage of many Catholics. See Richard O’Brien, “Linking sexual abuse and the ordination of women,” *National Catholic Reporter* (13 September 2010) in <http://ncronline.org/print/20186> (accessed 19 September 2010).

²⁴ See, G. Wilson, *Clericalism*, 29-30.

Finally, clericalism moves and reaches entitlement. According to Donald Cozzens, it consists of the "virtual identification of the holiness and grace of the church with the clerical state and, thereby, with the cleric himself."²⁵ This façade of the sacred reproduces a *habitus*, that is to say, a series of dispositions, attitudes and tastes. That is why any notion about the right of the laity to assess clergy performance is, for instance, called into question if not resisted. To critique the behavior or performance of a fellow priest or bishop is disloyalty at best or anathema at worst. Moreover, "transparency does not come by easily, even when what might be concealed are clearly criminal acts." Last but not least, "the primary loyalty is to the protection of the collective ego rather than the well-being of those for whom the clergy group supposedly exists." All this constitutes a form of corporate expectation to be immune from critique and accountability, and is nothing less than a "form of saving the *image* (or reputation) of the body." Clericalism breeds a collective ego which is "fundamentally unaccountable to any outside power that might shield it from its own worst faults."²⁶

However, "it would be a fatal mistake," Wilson reminds, "to view clerical culture as being generated only by its clergy." It is as much a product of lay people who play their prescribed roles in the single drama. It embraces both those among them who covertly derive rewards from accepting the script assigned to them and those who regress to "a state of unwarranted dependency" on the clergy in significant areas of their lives (such as their relationship with God) even "when in every other dimension of their lives they function as quite mature adults."²⁷

In light of the preceding, clericalism need not be seen only as a cultural phenomenon initiated by ecclesiastical dispositions or fed by theological preconditions. Neither should it be trivialized as merely a set of harmful effects caused by the wrong attitudes and behaviors of those who hold power in the church. Looking at Benedict XVI's problems in terms of "cause and effect" would not suffice to explain the gravity and the global reach of the crimes for which he admitted and apologized. It is only when we confront the complex system of the living processes in the current social form of Catholicism will we be able to see the problems of our making "in a truly terrifying way." The terror consists in the fact that, at present, clericalism is the Catholic Church's dominant system of shaping and articulating the identity of Christ's disciples and the prevailing system of power conferral, allocation and exercise. The global phenomenon of abuse, the failure to prevent it, and the pattern to cover it up are sufficient evidence to show that, in such a system, personal sins can, to borrow

²⁵ Donald Cozzens, *Sacred Silence: Denial and Crisis in the Church* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004), 118.

²⁶ G. Wilson, *Clericalism*, 31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

John Paul II's appraisal of social sin in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, "grow stronger, spread and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior" (SRS 36).

Pathways Out of the Crisis

Our modest theological-ethical appraisal has attempted to give a name to what Benedict XVI calls the "sins from within the church" particularly as they impact "in a truly terrifying way" on the church's identity as the body of Christ. Going back to the terms of the issue, we ask 'what sort of body could we be'? There are, at least, three interlocking pathways:

Overcome institutional untruthfulness

In the failure to transpose doctrinal principles into the church's system of law, one can hear the echo of Michel Foucault rightly reminding us that in every system of thought "the will to knowledge" is not always "the will to truth."²⁸ When the church's theology of church says one thing but its system of law means something else, there is a gap between speech and act, principles and implementation, sign and instrument. And where the bridging of such gap is systematically resisted, there is institutionalized untruthfulness. This type of untruthfulness on the part of church authorities, not the lack of correct doctrine nor the lack of a sound theology of church, explains best why in the eyes and hearts of office-holders the identity of lay people, particularly the victims of church abuse and cover-up, is nothing but ignorant children who may be seen or heard in liturgical celebrations but never in the corridors where power is exercised in the church. To be truthful, says the 1971 Synod of Bishops, "anyone who ventures to speak to people of justice must first be just in their eyes."

To avoid the repeat of the terrifying problems of our own making, the Catholic Church is now hard put to no less than re-examine its system of laws if its provisions are still commensurate to the theological principles, ethical values and spiritual impulses of its self-understanding as "Christ's body, the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere" (Eph 1:23).

Rectify the power asymmetry in authority

In identifying the crisis of corporate identity as intimately linked to the clash of two views about authority, we are reminded that authority in the church is a contested reality and hence an issue that is at once theological and ethical. In the

²⁸ Michel Foucault, "History of Systems of Thought," in Donald Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 199-204.

church, the power held by the hierarchy is not simply a personal power that would depend on the character traits of the office-holder. Above all it is a “social power,” explains Karen Lebacqz²⁹ for two reasons. Firstly, it is “power legitimated into authority and girded by institutions;” secondly and more importantly, it is a “power to define reality” with a scope that includes, among others, how aspects of the church are to be thought of and how policies are formulated around it how needs and problems are defined, and how meaning is given to human experience. In sum, it is an institutional power to socially construct reality.

To frame the power of the hierarchy in such a manner that it allows us to see that a model of hierarchy based primarily on the competence and virtue of office-holders would no longer suffice for the body of Christ.³⁰ It also helps us to recognize that any mechanism of self-regulation within the hierarchical body to address issues of integrity and accountability would suffer the same fate. Because the fact is, “with the power of definition,” says Lebacqz, “comes a significant control over our lives.” Seen in this light, “the question of distribution and use of power becomes a central ethical issue” and thus highlights the importance of the norm of justice and liberation, rather than beneficence, to address the “significant power gap.” In this vein, we could not agree more with Mannion that the church “needs not merely to find some middle way but, indeed, redefine its understanding of the basis and conceptualization of authority altogether.”³¹

Hasten the demise of clericalism

By directing our attention to living processes by which identities are constructed and sustained, we hope we are able to show that the crisis of identity is more than a question of power in church law or authority. Rather, it is rooted in the power of a church *ethos* which is highly dysfunctional and prone to abuse. In clericalism, power appears not as a possession, not as something you or I “have,” but one that “rather permeates institutional life in complex and subtle ways,” particularly in “the relationships of dominance and subordination within the different roles and functions that are exercised within (the) organization.”³² The church, the body of Christ, is transformed into a “herd” of bodies, bodies that are made docile and

²⁹ We are here indebted to the insights in Karen Lebacqz, *Professional Ethics: Power and Paradox* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 109-123 (Chapter 7: Professional Power) and 124-136 (Chapter 8: Justice and Liberation).

³⁰ See, for instance, the model of “participatory hierarchy” as alternative to the “command hierarchy” in Terence Nichols, “Participatory Hierarchy,” in Stephen Pope (ed.), *Common Calling: The Laity and Governance of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 111-125.

³¹ G. Mannion, “What Do We Mean By Authority?” 28-29.

³² We are borrowing the insight of Michel Foucault on power as explained in Frances Ward, “Theological Strand – Power,” 225. A similar idea is found in Karen Lebacqz, *Professional Ethics*, 137-151.

molded into “normality” by a socialization process largely dictated by clerical ways of thinking, doing and being as well as bodies that are compensated for their acquiescence to the prescribed roles in the everyday drama of church life.

To analyze power as “never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth” is to see that, in clericalism, both the clergy and the laity “are not only (the) inert or consenting target” of power; “they are always also the element of its articulation. In other words, (they) are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.”³³ In clericalism both the clergy and laity are articulations of the asymmetrical relations of power in the church. For this reason, as a case of a “situation of sin,” much of its causation is unacknowledged and not easily accessible even to those who live it out each day in their lives. And, notwithstanding the asymmetry, the fact that it can also have the capacity to generate meaning makes clericalism highly resistant to change and resilient enough no one can fully anticipate the mutation or spread of its evils. It may therefore not be easy to critically examine the clerical *ethos* but it is, nevertheless, not impossible to hasten its demise.

Conclusion

The patterns of abuse and neglect, denial and cover-up, passivity and indifference have devastated our corporate identity. But they also offer us yet another chance to transform the crisis into a *kairos* for the church and for the world. If we are correct in giving a name to the “sins from within the church,” it does not bode well, as some have insisted, to restore the church of the pre-Vatican II era or return to the so-called fundamentals of correct doctrine.³⁴ Because, by way of summing up the contentions of this paper, the “problems of our own making” and the “sins from within the church” that we see today in a “truly terrifying way” are factored by the legal system, authority structure and clerical ethos we have inherited from that era. Neither are these problems and sins the tell-tale effects of what others have called the liberalizing excesses and the secular tendencies in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. On the contrary, the said Council has placed the whole Church in the trajectory of deep-going and comprehensive renewal, and there is no turning back if we are to abuse the body of Christ no more!

³³ Michel Foucault, “Pastoral Power and Political Reason,” in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77* (Hertfordshire: The Harvester Press, 1976/1980), 78-108; here at 98.

³⁴ For critical studies on the phenomenon of “restorationism” and “fundamentalism” in the Catholic Church, see Gerard Arbuckle, *Violence, Society and the Church: A Cultural Approach* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007), especially 181-214; R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); N. J. Cohen (ed.), *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990); and J.-G. Vallaincourt, *Papal Power: A Study of Vatican Council Control over Lay Catholic Elites* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

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- AA *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 1965)
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