

Seeking the Right Side of History: Theology and the Sexual Abuse Crisis

Richard Lennan

I

The *Instrumentum Laboris*, the working text, for the recently-completed Pan Amazon Synod, challenged the church to greater solidarity with both the indigenous people of that region and the precious, but threatened, environment in which they live. The document stressed that the church's presence in the Amazon could be a source of hope only if it offered a contrast to the exploitative forces whose plunder of the region's resources has imperiled its natural and human habitat. The *Instrumentum* made plain that the willingness of the ecclesial community to engage with its own need for conversion would determine whether its actions bolstered or diminished hope for the thriving of Amazonia.

When an official document of the church gives priority to ecclesial conversion it is noteworthy, not least because such texts tend to be circumspect, or silent, in this regard. As important as the candor, however, is the nuanced approach to conversion that the text employs. In addition to associating conversion with both a refusal to be complicit in destructive activities and a renewed appreciation of what it names as "the work of God in creation and its people," the document presents conversion as extending beyond a single action at a discrete moment of time.¹ Conversion, as the *Instrumentum* profiles it, is multifaceted, requiring "unlearning, learning, and relearning."² These three elements constitute an enduring program for every endeavor that seeks to locate itself on the right side

¹ The Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris*, "The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology," article 103; the text is at <http://www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/pan-amazon-synod--the-working-document-for-the-synod-of-bishops.html>.

² Ibid, article 102.

of history, the side that faith recognizes as the province of grace. Taken together, unlearning, learning, and relearning fashion a framework conducive to the ongoing reform and renewal of the Christian community, and so to more fruitful expressions of its mission. This lecture will explore how that framework can be an asset for the conversion of the church in every context.

Conversion is an attractive ideal. It conveys a sense of freedom, possibility, and newness. For this reason, narratives of conversion, from St Paul to Dorothy Day, have long fueled the Christian imagination, instilling confidence that the Holy Spirit, the ultimate agent of conversion, is persistent, thorough, and effective beyond the limits that finite human imagination might impose. Trust in this Spirit fosters expressions of hope that can be wholeheartedly committed to advocacy for change, not least in circumstances where this advocacy is unwelcome, and steadfast in their refusal to concede the final word in the human story to darkness and failure. This hope also enables honest acknowledgment of the devastation that human sinfulness can wreak, including in and through the ecclesial community and its ministers.

Such hope is necessary since no community or individual can close, finally and completely, the gap that exists between humanity's orientation to the fullness of life in the God of Jesus Christ and the tendency to settle for less than God. Grace draws humanity towards the right side of history, but human beings and their activities are not the owner-occupiers of that space. Graced humanity is, but grace works within the complex history that reflects the "not yet ... but already" of God's reign. No human project, therefore, can validly claim exemption from the need for conversion.

As appealing as are the outcomes of conversion, its processes are demanding, often daunting. Far from being a magical incantation, then, unlearning, learning, and relearning entail, as the *Instrumentum* states explicitly, the practice of "a critical and self-critical regard ... to find the attitudes and mentalities that prevent us from connecting with ourselves, with

others and with nature.” Honest self-examination can illuminate not merely obvious wrongdoing, but the more subtle, harder-to-detect forms of concupiscence that breed complacency, compromise freedom, and resist change. Since the product of a self-critical examination is not as immediately attractive as the carefully-curated and “Instagrammed” self, individuals and communities may avoid conversion rather than embrace it. Nonetheless, escapist alternatives to the “self-critical regard” lack the productive potential associated with receptivity to the grace that undergirds conversion.

Through the Spirit, the call to conversion is conducive to freedom from the futile struggle to maintain an illusion of perfection. As a catalyst for liberation from a false self, graced self-criticism can cultivate, as the synod’s text emphasizes, the capacity to “weave links that connect all the dimensions of life and to undertake a personal and communal asceticism that allows us to ‘cultivate a sober and satisfying life.’”³ Grace intertwines the dissolution of individualistic idolatry with a new appreciation of humanity’s communal orientation. As is evident in the response of Zacchaeus to Jesus (Lk 19:1-10), this recognition illuminates the path of discipleship, the path of self-giving that is simultaneously the path to the deepest self-realization. Situated within an atmosphere of grace, self-criticism is an encounter with the merciful God, whose only agenda is to draw humanity more deeply into a life-affirming relationship. The self-criticism that proceeds from grace differs radically from pathological self-denunciation or other self-lacerating behaviors; its outcome is fullness rather than humiliation, as the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee illustrates amply (Lk 18:9-14).

As it does for individuals, so too acceptance of the need for conversion expands and deepens the reach of grace in the community of faith that constitutes the church as a living

³ Ibid. The text here quotes Pope Francis’s, *Laudato Si*, ‘“On Caring for our Common Home,” (2015), article 225, which is at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

body of many parts, rather than an impersonal structure. The Christian community's willingness to acknowledge its failures and need for conversion can, paradoxically, manifest the activity of the Spirit in the church, rather than being testimony to its absence. Both Scripture and the church's sacramental life, the two paradigmatic gifts of grace at the heart of Christian life and mission, stimulate conversion. A community of faith that trusts in the constancy of grace, that understands grace as reconciling and healing, can experience conversion as, in the assessment of Paul Murray, "not a loss, nor a diminishment but a finding, a freeing, an intensification, and an enrichment."⁴

II

The enduring wake of the clerical sexual abuse crisis, the backdrop for this lecture, makes plain that the Amazon is not the only context of the church's life where self-criticism is required. In fact, this practice must have a home in every expression of the ecclesial community. This is so since the profession of faith about the Spirit at work through the church exceeds the history of efficacious grace in each individual member, all communities, and every structure of the church. When Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* describes the church as "a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race," it gives voice to the conviction that the church is never less than a graced community whose relationship to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is more than a historical artifact.⁵ The same document, however, identifies the church as a "pilgrim," a community that must live by faith and not by sight.⁶

⁴ Paul Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6-7.

⁵ The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, "The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," article 9; the text is at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

⁶ *Ibid*, article 48.

As a pilgrim in history, the church “has the appearance of this world which is passing,” rather than of God’s fulfilled reign.⁷ Since the church in history will never be a flawless and unfailingly consistent symbol of grace, the need for conversion is intrinsic to the church. The more the church internalizes this truth, the more this truth pervades every aspect of ecclesial life, the less necessary will be reminders of it. Contrastingly, the clerical sexual abuse crisis epitomizes the harm that accompanies both communal forgetfulness and sinful disregard of self-criticism and conversion. The history of abuse and its cover-up brings into stark relief the suffering that afflicts innocent people when the actions of those who profess faith in God as the church’s sole fulfillment contradict this creed. The breadth and depth of the damage that the church’s consecrated ministers have perpetrated against vulnerable children and adults establishes the present crisis as an unimpeachable witness to the imperative of the church’s conversion.

For this lecture, I will use the Synod’s triad of unlearning, learning, and relearning to explore the possibilities for a conversion responsive to this crisis. Unlearning, learning, and relearning have an explicitly theological value, as pertinent as they may well be to manifold human enterprises. They can be instruments through which the Holy Spirit orients, and constantly reorients, the Christian community towards the right side of history, and so away from all that suggests a group whose actions have an exclusively inward focus, indifferent to its impact on others. Only a church aligned on the Spirit can fulfill Pope Francis’s vision for a community whose members form a “field hospital” for the world’s wounded.⁸ Conversely, the members of a church resistant to conversion will see themselves as “arbiters of grace

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pope Francis, “Address of Pope Francis to the Parish Priests of the Diocese of Rome” (6 March, 2014); the text is at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco_20140306_clero-diocesi-roma.html.

rather than its facilitators,” as people entitled to act in the world as though their pilgrimage were both complete and radiantly elegant.⁹

Thus far, legal and socio-political analyses have dominated the response to the abuse crisis. This is understandable, perhaps inevitable, since the crisis is the product not only of crimes, but defective practices of authority in the church, practices that sought to suppress knowledge of the abuse, while denying justice to survivors and evading accountability to the law. As part of civil society, all agencies of the church are answerable to the law, but a converted church requires obedience to something beyond the law: it requires obedience to the Spirit.

It is the Spirit who, as Vatican II framed it, “moves the heart and converts it to God.”¹⁰ Through the Spirit, people of faith are able to face honestly the ways in which the church’s history and its present can “constitute a counter-testimony to Christianity.”¹¹ Equally, they are able to pursue alternatives to these contradictions. Since the Spirit works to fulfill God’s expressed desire to make all things “new” (Rev 21:5), efforts to eliminate demonstrated dysfunctions in the church, to develop the ecclesial community as a body of active members, and to respond to the challenges unique to the twenty-first century, can embody the Spirit. The multiple forms of theological reflection directed towards these outcomes can also reflect the Spirit-driven summons of the church towards the right side of history.

It is important to admit that invocation of the Spirit and the turn to the theological have not always borne good fruit. Obfuscation or retreat into a nebulous mysticism that

⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World,” article 47; the text is at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹⁰ The Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (1965), article 5; the text is at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Mysterium Incarnationis*, “Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000,” article 11; the text is at http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html

disassociates the church from life in the world are not unknown in the history of theology and spirituality. Such dangers remain, but are more indicative of the misuse of the Spirit and theology than the guaranteed outcomes of their employment. At its best, theology, as Nicholas Lash, expresses it, involves “the stripping away of the veils of self-assurance by which we seek to protect our faces from exposure to the mystery of God.”¹² Understood in this way, theology itself is a work of conversion, one that cautions its practitioners against blurring the distinction between God and their ideas about God. It does so not because all such ideas are simply incorrect, but because they are always less than God, less than “the truth” into which the Spirit leads (Jn 16:13).¹³ The possibility that theological reflection on the abuse crisis can be as hopeful as it can be forthright, depends greatly on maintaining a focus on the truth that exceeds any particular grasp of it.

Far from being a soft option, endeavors to be receptive to the Spirit prompt the ecclesial community to recognize that its still-to-be-completed pilgrimage can veer onto paths that spiral downwards into actions that conflict with the gospel. In this context, theology provides a stimulus to reform, not an endorsement of a self-congratulatory attitude in the church. In addition, the engagement with demography, psychology, sociology, and a range of other human and social sciences that is characteristic of contemporary theological approaches to the church reminds the ecclesial community that the Spirit transcends its borders.¹⁴ This reminder serves as a check on isolationist tendencies that separate the church from “the world.”

¹² Nicholas Lash, “Criticism or Construction?: The Task of Theology,” *New Blackfriars* 63 (1982): 153.

¹³ Ingolf Dalferth, “‘I DETERMINE WHAT GOD IS!’: Theology in the Age of ‘Cafeteria Religion,’” *Theology Today* 57 (2000): 22.

¹⁴ For examples of the contemporary trends in ecclesiology see, Neil Ormerod, “Social Sciences and the Ideological Critiques of Ecclesiology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 535-72; Paul Avis, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography: An Unresolved Relationship,” *Ecclesiology* 14 (2018): 322-37; Pascal Bazzell, “Towards an Empirical-ideal Ecclesiology: On the Dynamic Relation between Ecclesiality and Locality,” *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015): 219-35.

A theological response to the sexual abuse crisis recognizes that the crisis is not simply an issue of governance, formation for ministry, or pastoral practice, as implicated as are all three in the need for a converted church. The sexual abuse crisis gnaws at faith; it casts a pall of suspicion over belief in the capacity of any human enterprise, let alone the church, to mediate grace. For this reason, it signals the urgent need for theological analyses that are able not only to acknowledge all that blights the church, but to advance alternatives from within the resources that the church claims as its own. As a later section of this presentation argues, such an approach does justice to the specificity of the church as a community of faith, while amplifying the centrality of discipleship to the identity of the church. It accomplishes these goals without removing the church from scrutiny by the wider world.

There is one further prefatory remark relevant to the theological analysis of unlearning, learning, and relearning. While it is helpful for the sake of precision to distinguish the three movements constitutive of conversion, the three are interwoven, such that each one implies the other two. Thus, unlearning creates the space for learning, which may involve something new, but is often associated with relearning what can still be of value in what may have been subject to neglect in the past or present. In this interweaving of the elements of conversion there is an echo of all that medical science and ecological awareness have taught in recent decades about life as an organism: no single part is the whole, but the whole depends on the parts, and on the health of the relationships between them. The wisdom of this perception ought not to be strange to believers in a trinitarian God, nor ought it to be alien to thinking about the church.¹⁵

Accordingly, the effort to articulate how God is present to the world, including how God is present to each person, must emphasize the all-encompassing nature of God's

¹⁵ See an application of ecological language to ecclesiology see, Judith Gruber, "Ec(o)clesiology: Ecology as Ecclesiology in *Laudato Si*," *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 807-24.

trinitarian presence in history. To reflect the comprehensive activity of the God who is the source and sustenance of all people and all times, the God who draws the whole of creation into a fulfilled future, the conversion of the church requires more than the conversion of only one group or of a way of acting particular to only one time or place. There can be no legitimate equivocation about the need for change in manifold facets of ordained ministry, but if change in the church is to engender renewed hope and vitality, it must be interconnected change, change that renews the discipleship of all members. In addition, Spirit-driven change is less likely to involve wholesale demolition and rebuilding from scratch than it is to require the willingness to draw from the past to reform all that shrouds the movement of the Spirit in the present, as well as an openness to the future, the promise of which God alone can fulfill. And so to the unlearning.

III

The unlearning required for the church's conversion has dominated recent discussions about change in the church. The revelations about clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up by the church's officials have sparked multiple demands for the reform or abolition of numerous practices that have developed institutionalized forms in the church. The various demands may not always be identical, but they converge around the priority of unlearning the cluster of dysfunctions for which "clericalism" provides the caption.¹⁶ Similarly, there is a common emphasis on the required dismantling of the patriarchal and sexist, often misogynistic, worldview manifest all too frequently in the words and actions of the church's ordained leaders. No less prominent as candidates for dismantling are the church's restrictive

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of clericalism see, George Wilson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).

structures of governance, which consistently exclude from determinative participation in decision-making all but the tiny minority of the church's members who are ordained.

These topics are most especially highlighted in those parts of the world where participatory democracy is the norm, and where there have been multiple decades of struggle against restrictions born of discrimination between races, classes, genders, physical abilities, and sexual orientations. From the perspective of societies that have come to value not merely equality, but the richness that diversity generates, the church is an unwelcome anomaly. This status derives from a range of perceptions: the church is a body whose authorities are not accountable for their actions or inactions; the church is a body whose culture of secrecy thwarts transparency; the church is a body that mistrusts ideas that do not emerge from the dominant group; the church is a body where the emphasis on unity, narrowly defined, occludes the possibility of a fair-minded assessment of difference; the church is a body with a gulf between leaders and those who are to accept all that comes "from above." Each item on that list, let alone the entire list, depicts the church as the negation of all that an open society treasures.

The contrast between the church's internal operations and contemporary social values is not merely a public relations problem for the church's leaders. The role that the church's governing structures and practices played in the cover-up of clerical sexual abuse is catalogued explicitly in the material on the Catholic Church in the final report of the *Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (2017). In its considerations of the church's organization, the Commission recommended that the Catholic Church seek "ways in which structures and practices of governance may be made more accountable, more transparent, more meaningfully consultative, and more

participatory.”¹⁷ In the agenda that the Commission details for the learning of the Catholic episcopate, there is also a clear implication that the church’s leaders must unlearn not only prevailing ways of proceeding, but the attitudes that underpin them.

It is conceivable, likely probable, that Catholics at large, with the possible exception of the bishops themselves, would affirm enthusiastically the specific items that the Commission identifies as conducive to a more open church. The same majority of Catholics may accept that the bishops’ history of failure in relation to transparency and accountability has resulted in the need for agencies beyond the church to become initiators of change in the church. What such intervention means for the integrity of the church as a self-governing body, and whether it signals a new stage in the relationship between the church and the state, are questions that will have an impact on the church’s future, as Massimo Faggioli has signaled in recent writing.¹⁸

From the perspective of a theology of conversion, the immediate concern that the Commission’s recommendations raises has less to do with religious freedom and the role of the state, or with the likely efficacy of the proposed changes, than with the notion of mandated change. Enforced changes may ultimately facilitate a change of heart, may come to be perceived as a movement of grace, but they can also sit uncomfortably atop unreconstructed attitudes. In the latter situation, the mandated changes may even stiffen resistance to thoroughgoing reform, and so fail to be agents of a broad and deep conversion. Since the most comprehensive conversions proceed from the inside out, rather than vice versa, a fundamental change of heart must always remain the goal. Yet, how is such a change

¹⁷ *Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, (volume 16; book 1; recommendation 16.70), [December, 2017], 44; the text is at: <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/religious-institutions>.

¹⁸ See Massimo Faggioli, “The Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis as a Theological Crisis: Emerging Issues,” *Theological Studies*, 80 (2019): 586-88.

to come about? More especially, what mechanisms other than intervention from beyond the church might facilitate the necessary unlearning in the church?

Anger at the repeated failures, and at times demonstrated duplicity, of so many bishops has generated, understandably, a sense that there are no viable alternatives to outside agents, that only judicial or legislative authorities can bring about change in the church. This conviction is a clear measure of the loss of trust in the church's authorities. The damage to this trust is a core element of the impact that continues to ripple out from the revelations of the long history of clerical sexual abuse. The church, and particularly the church's bishops, stand now alongside "the big banks," "big pharma," and many other "big" exploiters, that are the exhibits in a gallery of shamed institutions exposed as having no commitment except to their own survival, interpreted without regard to society at large.

In the current atmosphere an appeal to the church's capacity to self-correct, to be self-critical and open to conversion, will sound naïve, perhaps troublingly misguided, not least because "unlearning" has so often been resisted by various segments of the church or stigmatized as the church succumbing to worldly values. On the other hand, unless the church's own resources can prompt and sustain self-criticism and reform, the church has no future. This is not to say that the church will simply cease to exist—although demographic trends are unfavorable on this point as well. Rather a church unable to direct itself will cease to be a community whose defining features derive, in their source, sustenance, and fulfillment, from an explicit relationship between baptized believers and grace.

The emphasis on the relationship between the church and grace is not a ploy to place the church beyond the law or beyond any need for accountability to the wider society, of which the church is always a member. It is, however, a way to accentuate what is particular to the church's identity as a community of faith. Integral to this particularity, to the church's dependence on the God who became incarnate in humanity, the God who continues through

the Spirit to be at the heart of history, is the instinct to oppose all that distorts the hope that the gospel engenders. Even more, this instinct must necessarily be a self-critical one, one that must home in first on life in the church itself before challenging social structures that imperil the wellbeing of the vulnerable.¹⁹ In short, the church's own resources not only enable unlearning, they require it.

In this self-critical vein, Pope Francis warns that "excessive centralization" in the church "complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach."²⁰ He amplifies that observation with the direct contention that bishops must allow members of the church "to strike out in new paths"; within a church characterized by such freedom, a particular obligation for bishops is to be attentive to more people than "simply those who would tell him what he would like to hear."²¹ A renewal of trust in the church's bishops may seem at present to be an unlikely prospect. If such a renewal is ever to be possible, it will require the church's authorities to show by their actions that they can "unlearn." This includes the need for bishops to demonstrate that they understand that the exercise of their office is not synonymous with either disregard for the dignity and rights of vulnerable people or separation from the communities they are to serve. The unlearning that may be required for the development of such practices will not distort the office of bishop, not impose extraneous interpretations on it, but correct what was itself the distortion of the authentic episcopal role.

An obvious objection to the claim that the church has resources available for unlearning and self-reform would be to ask why these resources were not effective in the past. Although this question defies an answer likely to dissolve the hermeneutic of suspicion,

¹⁹ For the primacy of the church's self-criticism before it critiques the world see, Karl Rahner, "The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society," *Theological Investigations* (vol. 12), trans. D. Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1974), 230-32.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World" (2013), article 32; the text is at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

²¹ *Ibid*, article 31.

there are two responses that may till the ground for at least the seed of a different hermeneutic. The first is to recognize that the need for unlearning is contextual: it becomes evident when light arising in particular circumstances, often from beyond the church, illuminates dysfunction in the church. This process is not indicative of an obstinacy unique to the church, but rather displays the irreducibly human reality of the church. Human beings, in the church as much as elsewhere, recognize the truth partially and over time, not in a single moment of insight. Today, the light generated by the desire for accountability in the church has exposed the flaws inherent in certain styles of episcopal leadership. Similarly, other lights are exposing the need for unlearning in manifold areas of the church's life, most notably the treatment of women in the church, where, as Pope Francis acknowledged recently, there has been "a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse and sexist violence."²²

The second point arising from the church's history is that it is impossible to "failure-proof" the church. Indeed, from the moment that St Paul realized that there was a need to write a second letter to the Christian community in Corinth, the church has not been free of dissension, division, and numerous other ways of acting that contradict the urgings of the Spirit. This fact is not an excuse for inaction, much less a tactic to minimize the reality of harm that these failures cause, but it too indicates an inescapable consequence of the church's existence as a living body of human beings. The only perfect church, then, would be a church without members, a church that would render incomprehensible both the incarnation and all expressions of embodied grace. Members of the church cannot legitimately retreat into the bumper-sticker smugness of "Christians aren't perfect; just forgiven," but nor can they ever outgrow their need for conversion, and for the self-criticism that prompts it. This is

²² Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God" (2019), article 42; the text is at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

indisputably true for bishops and priests, who are perhaps the group with most to unlearn at present, but it is also true for every baptized person. To the extent that all members of the church focus on this truth, unlearning can become a communal activity.

IV

Since unlearning creates space, what fills the vacancy that follows from it? The thirtieth anniversary of the breaking-down of the Berlin Wall provides an instructive backdrop for consideration of this question. The evolution from 1989 until today of various countries in the former Soviet bloc cautions against an unbridled enthusiasm that the end of a tainted system inevitably ushers in the millennium of unrestrained happiness and universal wellbeing. In fact, long before the rise of the nationalistic populism and xenophobic attitudes that presently scar so many of the nations that rejoiced at the end of Soviet domination, Jesus himself pointed out that, ironically, the removal of one demon may establish the conditions for the reign of manifold demons (Lk 11:24-6). There is certainly a need to fill the space that results from unlearning and the rejection of destructive practices, but filling it constructively, filling it in ways that demonstrate that genuine conversion is taking place, requires both vigilance and the willingness to learn. Vigilance is necessary to protect the longing for change from usurpation by anything less than a vision that stretches towards God's comprehensive vision. Learning is necessary in order to recognize that God's vision may differ from, and certainly will exceed, even the most cherished convictions individuals and groups may hold about their desired changes. Without the vigilance and the learning, hopes for a brighter future can crumble as competing interest groups fight over the newly-available space.

So how and what do members of the church need to learn in order to produce a more hopeful, life-giving church than the one whose characteristics provided a base for clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up? What will help the ecclesial community to avoid a future

marked either by schism or an escalation of the estrangement from the church that is now so glaring across multiple social groups? Consistent with what I have just been arguing about the limits of every vision, I will refrain from suggesting that scheme X or initiative Y offers the best way to structure the church or to decentralize power and authority in the church. What I would propose is that all learning must begin with listening.

As necessary as “listening” can be for learning, it is crucial to clarify what one hopes to hear. In this regard, Karl Rahner offers an intriguing suggestion: fruitful listening, he contends, requires being attentive to “the perhaps possible possibility of a revelation” from God.²³ Rahner is not proposing that God is likely to go beyond the giving of self that has already taken place in Jesus Christ or beyond what the Spirit continues to offer through word and sacrament within the community of faith and, in a related way, in the world of the everyday. Far from asserting any inadequacy in God’s historical revelation or claiming that it is no longer pertinent, Rahner’s formula highlights an incontestable truth: human beings have not and will never appropriate exhaustively all that God’s presence in grace enables. This truth establishes the need for attentiveness to possibilities that the Spirit of the risen Jesus continues to unfold.

Rahner is not alone in giving priority to the need for listening to God, for being attentive to grace. Indeed, Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* identifies listening as the primary task for theologians within the community of faith. Theologians, it claims, are “to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.”²⁴ Pope Francis likewise acknowledges that listening can be a means by which the church as a whole might hear the Spirit speaking through young

²³ Karl Rahner, “The Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World,” *Theological Investigations* (vol. 3), trans. K-H. and B. Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 283.

²⁴ The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World,” (1965), article 44; the text is at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

people, who might then experience the church as something other than moribund: “there are times when [the Church] needs to regain her humility and simply listen, recognizing that what others have to say can provide some light to help her better understand the Gospel. A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum.”²⁵ In this regard, the “listening process” associated with preparation for the Plenary Council in Australia in 2020 is an important example. Rather than impose a “top-down” agenda, the process for the Plenary Council began with a nationwide opportunity for people, without discrimination, to submit their views on reform in the church. This process yielded a quarter of a million responses, which have determined the priorities for the Council.²⁶

A church that has become a museum is beyond the need for listening. It is also beyond the need for self-criticism and conversion, since it has no capacity for life. A museum may offer a record of what God did in the past, but cannot engage with what the Spirit is doing, and will continue to do. Listening not only subverts a sense that the church is complete, it reminds the ecclesial community of its pilgrim status, of the fact that it is movement not stasis that defines the church. In so doing, listening reminds the church also of its obligation to explore creatively responses to the challenges of the present. Of course, listening for the Spirit in contemporary society is no simple matter. In the cacophony of the good, bad, and the ugly that is the world of social media, and in the era of hyper-partisanship that dismisses as “fake news” any truth that discloses the insufficiency of one’s preferred worldview, does the Spirit have a distinctive voice? If so, where do we hear today the call to the right side of history?

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, article 41.

²⁶ For details of the Plenary Council in Australia see, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>.

Those who suffer, who remind the strong and content of the vulnerabilities that that they may prefer to ignore, may well be the clearest symbol of the Spirit in the present-day world. If this is so, it is a truth with definite implications for the need of the ecclesial community to hear the voices of survivors of clerical sexual abuse. It is the survivors who unmask for all the members of the church the gap that exists between what the Spirit desires the community of faith to be and the reality that often prevails. The voice of survivors becomes, therefore, not merely a summons to the compassion of the ecclesial community, but to its conversion. As Eboni Marshall Turman notes in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, “when ecclesial practices silence, invisibilize, and demonize some, namely by racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism, they smother the reality of the Holy Spirit that ‘blows where it chooses’ (John 3:8) as Advocate for the outcast.”²⁷ Turman stresses that authentic listening to the Spirit has as its corollary the willingness to move in response to what is heard.²⁸ Likewise, the conversion in and of the Catholic Church at this moment of history calls for being attentive to voices that current ecclesial practices “invisibilize.” This group includes the survivors of abuse, as well as the many people who live on what Pope Francis refers to often as “the fringes” that members of the church tend to avoid.²⁹ Authentic listening requires that action for reform, the “movement” that is a necessary part of listening to the Spirit, follow from such encounters.

V

²⁷ Eboni Marshall Turman, “The Holy Spirit and the Black Church Tradition: Womanist Considerations,” in *The Holy Spirit and the Church: Ecumenical Reflections with a Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Thomas Hughson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 107.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, “On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World” (2018), article 135; the text is at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

When it comes to the relearning that is integral to conversion, the preceding sections have cited repeatedly its most important feature: relearning implies a continual return to the God who is different from humanity, even while sustaining human life. Unless this difference is kept in mind, awareness of the provisional nature of the church's structures and practices loses its place to a faulty conviction that all members of the church, and all elements of the church's life, are beyond the need for further pilgrimaging.

More specifically, relearning the dynamics of the human relationship to God has implications for thinking about tradition, the category that functions often as a barrier to change. Here, the crucial task is to relearn that the fullness of tradition is eschatological. This fullness applies only to God's fulfilled reign, rather than to any moment in human history past, present, or to come. As a community of tradition, the church must relearn, in the wonderfully evocative phrasing of Janet Soskice, that "to stand in a tradition is not to stand still but to stand in the deep, loamy soil that feeds further growth."³⁰ It is incorrect, then, to invoke "tradition" as if the term gave permission to ignore new questions or to persist in "business as usual" when the "usual" may pose an obstacle to the Spirit. Consequently, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza highlights in relation to the treatment of women in the church, there is a need to guard against equating "cultural and anthropological frameworks" with "the content of divine revelation."³¹ This danger is most acute when references to tradition assume uncritically that the term represents all that proceeds directly from God without the involvement of any human agents.

A church willing to relearn that tradition involves human activity as well as God's activity, willing to relearn that tradition can inform the church's present while also summoning the church into the future that God shapes, will be a church that appreciates

³⁰ Janet Soskice, "Tradition," in *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 29.

³¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 101.

tradition as an instrument of reform as much as of perseverance. Re-appropriating the Spirit at the heart of living tradition ensures that the church, as Shawn Copeland argues, is able to “repudiate all exclusionary symbols, values, criteria, and practices,” while also supporting “creative initiatives in the development of new symbols and practices, in the articulation of new values and criteria for a life of human flourishing.”³² If the ecclesial community is to do so effectively, it must relearn what it means to be a community of discernment, a community alert to the Spirit. The capacity to discern, to hear and move in response to the Spirit, is at the heart of the church’s DNA. It shines lustrously through the declaration of the first ecclesial gathering in Jerusalem that freeing gentile converts to Christ from unnecessary burdens “has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28)

Pope Francis has made the focus on discernment a principal theme of his time in office. For the pope, the commitment to discernment is an integral aspect of discipleship; it is a way to discover again and again the God who is the opposite of the complacency that blunts the call to conversion. As Francis portrays complacency, “it tells us that there is no point in trying to change things, that there is nothing we can do, because this is the way things have always been and yet we always managed to survive.”³³ The opposite of this complacency, and of the “torpor” that it induces, is the willingness to be “unsettled by the living and effective word of the risen Lord.”³⁴

Allied to Pope Francis’s emphasis on discernment is his project to promote synodality in the church. This too is not a “new” direction for the church to move, but a relearning of what has deep roots in the Christian community, even if monarchical forms of government have overshadowed it in the more recent past. The focus on synodality echoes the renewed interest in the *sensus fidei* and the *sensus fidelium* of all the baptized, the terms that focus on

³² M. Shawn Copeland, “Knit Together by the Spirit as Church,” in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women’s Strategies for Reform*, ed. Colleen Griffith (New York: Herder & Herder, 2008), 22.

³³ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, article 137.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the Spirit-driven capacity of all the baptized to recognize and respond to what comes from the Spirit.³⁵ Here too learning and relearning meet in the recognition that “the church listens to the Spirit when all listen to one another.”³⁶

VI

Today’s celebration of All Saints, stands in dramatic contrast to all the sexual abuse crisis says about the church. The saints are those whose lives, taken as a whole, illustrate something of what it can mean to be on the right side of history. In the saints, grace has been efficacious; it has resulted in lives transparent to the Spirit. The saints, in a rich variety of ways, present a life that is the opposite of what Pope Francis terms “a dull and dreary mediocrity.”³⁷ For this reason, the saints embody “an undreamed of possibility for love,” Juan Luis Segundo’s inspiring yet intimidating metaphor to express what grace can bring about through the church.³⁸ The saints, however, were not born as such: they became saints through ongoing conversion. This fact can nurture hope for the present-day church. Through self-critical reflection, through the unlearning, learning, and relearning that conversion requires, and through a renewal of the discipleship that characterizes effective conversion, the church can be a more authentic embodiment of the good news it proclaims. This good news can change the world, but it must first, and always, change the church.

³⁵ See, for example, Bradford Hinze and Peter Phan (eds.), *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016) and the International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014); the text is at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

³⁶ Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 321.

³⁷ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, article 138.

³⁸ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Community Called Church*, trans. J. Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973) 82-3.