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ARTICLE

Eucharist and Betrayal

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Recent revelations about sexual assaults of children and professional misconduct by clergy and religious in the Catholic Church have been considerably disturbing to Catholics.

Many people find this challenging to their faith as such behaviour flies in the face of the moral and religious claims the Church teaches. Many people have abandoned their connection with the Church or have modified their practice of the faith. Trust in Church leadership has been eroded and for many people belief in God has been compromised or even lost.

Having lived through the experience of being sexually assaulted at the age of 11 by a trusted priest and after a long career as a religious educator in Catholic schools and committed involvement in my parish, I offer these reflections on how this experience informs my understanding of the Eucharist – the central, defining belief and ritual of the Catholic Tradition.

I have often been asked, “*How can you still believe despite this betrayal?*” To grapple with this question I have drawn on the experiences of other victims and survivors, reflected on the Scriptures and Tradition, sought advice from counsellors and read widely on the literature surrounding the issue. I have also joined organisations dedicated to supporting victims, and engaging with the Church through its leaders and processes.

While no final answer to the question appears evident to me, there are some key insights I would offer.

When the priest says “*Do this in memory of me*” I have often wondered to what exactly *this* refers? Did Jesus mean for us to say these words and do these actions as a memorial of himself? I think not. The “*this*” that Jesus refers to is to imitate his self-giving symbolised by bread and wine. By participation in the Eucharist, Catholics should commit themselves to imitating Christ’s self-giving in their lives.

For this reason, clergy sexual assaults on children betrays the command of Jesus at the Last Supper.

It compromises Catholic identity.

Jesus’ command extends to building an inclusive community committed to serving others. For many survivors, our experience of abuse has resulted in isolation and a sense of exclusion from the community. Many people in the Church are troubled by the experience of victims and survivors and fail to reach out to them.

Some people pass judgements – the antithesis of Jesus’ practice. There is often a significant lack of compassion which again compromises and betrays core Gospel values. This can happen at both the individual and formal Church process levels.

The negative effects of sexual assault on victims and survivors are well known.

These effects challenge the purpose of the Eucharist which is to build community. I have found it difficult to reconcile the experience of community with the feelings and memories that became more pronounced as time went by.

Feelings of loss of self-worth contradict Christ’s embrace of the ineffable value of every person.

Many people attribute the causes of these crimes to the practise of celibacy, to training, to psychological disorders or the failure of Church leadership.

Sexual assault is a crime of power and control. Structures within the Church that lack transparency and accountability have allowed these crimes to flourish and for offenders to evade responsibility.

The presider at the Eucharist must surely be a person of integrity, called to act in Christ’s place.

Catholics believe in a God who enters into our suffering – not a God who imposes it on people.

In my case, the Catholic culture of the time extended an imprudent deference to the clergy, such that the priest who assaulted me was able to have my parents support him in punishing me without ever enquiring into what happened.

I urge priests to reject status and deference: embrace and build a culture of professionalism, accountability, transparency, compassion and service in Church leadership.

When we celebrate Eucharist, let us remember that we are sharing a meal in solidarity.

People harmed by the Church’s ministry should never be re-abused by peoples’ attitudes, words, actions or Church processes. When receiving Communion, St Augustine In the 5th century exhorted people to respond “*I am*” to the priest’s statement “*This is the Body of Christ*”.

The best question is not “*What are we going to do?*” but rather “*Who are we going to become?*”

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