

The Violated Body of Christ and the Voices of Young Catholic Women: A Call to Ecclesial Action

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In the United States, there is growing awareness of violence against women in the aftermath of media coverage of numerous cases of high-profile men implicated in sexual harassment or assault and the viral spread of the “#MeToo” movement. There has not been, however, a corresponding degree of ecclesial attention to the child abuse, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and rape prevalent in our society. The authors recommend the establishment of opportunities for ecclesial listening to women who are survivors of sexual violence. This listening will strengthen the communion of the church and generate constructive recommendations for pastoral ecclesial action. As the ecclesial Body of Christ, the church has both a graced capacity through the power of the Holy Spirit and a moral responsibility to act in response to the body’s violation.

Keywords: ecclesiology, pastoral theology, child abuse, rape, domestic violence, sexual violence, trauma

THEY stood before a room with only a few familiar faces. Most of the people in the audience were persons they had never met before—including professors, professional clinical workers, and representatives of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (hereafter USCCB). Strong and courageous, these young Catholic women stood tall and testified to their experiences of abuse and assault at a consultation on ecclesial responses to sexual violence sponsored by the Division for Mission of Saint

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Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN.¹ Opportunities of this character for listening to young women in an ecclesial context are rare.

As participants in the consultation, we were privileged to hear the voices of these courageous and holy women. Their testimonies are confidential, but in the wake of this experience, we offer the following theological and pastoral reflections. First, the biblical narrative of the rape of Tamar is expressive of our own twenty-first-century ecclesial reality not only in that it is the story of the rape of a young woman, but also in that Tamar's voice is missing from a major portion of the narrative, just as the voices of young Catholic women such as those who spoke at Saint Mary's are missing from much of our liturgical experience and public ecclesial discourse. Second, a church in which members suffer sexual abuse and assault is an ecclesial Body of Christ that has been profoundly violated. Finally, the testimonies of young Catholic women are an urgent call to the Catholic Church to expand its pastoral programs for the prevention of sexual violence in all its forms and the pastoral inclusion of its survivors. As the ecclesial Body of Christ, the church has both a graced capacity through the power of the Holy Spirit and a moral responsibility to act in response to the body's violation.

The Missing Voice of Tamar

Tamar's story appears in the second book of Samuel within the narrative of David's reign as king of Israel. After taking Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, as his own, David fathers a child with her and orchestrates Uriah's death at the siege of Rabbah. The prophet Nathan, speaking to David in a parable, communicates the Lord's displeasure and decrees that the child born to Bathsheba will die. David acknowledges his sin and fasts in sackcloth, and the child whose name is unknown to us perishes.

"Some time later," 2 Samuel continues: "David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister named Tamar, and David's son Amnon [presumably, son by a wife other than the mother of Absalom] loved her. He was in such anguish over his [half-]sister Tamar that he became sick; she was a virgin, and Amnon thought it impossible to do anything to her" (2 Sam 13:1-2). But it happened that Amnon had a friend named Jonadab, son of David's brother Shimeah, who

¹ The consultation took place in March 2017 and was organized by the Saint Mary's College Division for Mission under the leadership of then vice president for Mission Judith R. Fean (now retired) and then Center for Spirituality director Arlene Montevecchio. For more information on the consultation, contact Judith R. Fean at jfean@saintmarys.edu. The coauthors express our gratitude to the Division for Mission at Saint Mary's for the opportunity to participate in the consultation, to all the participants, and to *Horizons'* anonymous peer review readers for their constructive comments on this article.

“was very clever,” (2 Sam 13:3) and he proposes a treacherous ruse. Amnon feigns illness and asks his father David to send for Tamar. When she approaches Amnon to care for him, he seizes her and demands: “Come! Lie with me, my sister!” (2 Sam 13:11). Tamar resists. “No, my brother! Do not shame me! That is an intolerable crime in Israel. Do not commit this insensate deed” (2 Sam 13:12). She warns that he too will be discredited. The honorable thing, she appears to suggest, is to ask David if he may wed her: “Please, speak to the king; he will not keep me from you” (2 Sam 13:13). Amnon blunts her voice with brute force. “Not heeding her plea, he overpowered her; he shamed her and had relations with her” (2 Sam 13:14). After the rape, he has no compunction nor remorse. Rather, “Amnon conceived an intense hatred for her, which far surpassed the lust he had had for her” (2 Sam 13:15). He orders her to “get up and leave,” and she again pleads with him to reconsider, fearing social ostracism: “to drive me out would be far worse than the first injury you have done to me” (2 Sam 13:16). Amnon commands his attendant: “Put her outside, away from me, and bar the door after her” (2 Sam 13:17).

In this text, Episcopal theologian Pamela Cooper-White observes, Tamar’s voice is blunted not once but three times: Amnon twice ignores Tamar’s pleas and proceeds to rape and expel her, and then the narrative itself eclipses her voice.² Tamar’s words of resistance were strong: “No, my brother! Do not shame me! That is an intolerable crime in Israel.” After Amnon drives her out, she rends her tunic, places ashes on her forehead, and walks away “crying loudly” (13:19). We are told that she remained “grief-stricken and forlorn” in the house of her brother Absalom (13:20). But from this point on, Tamar’s own voice is absent—and her entire character disappears from the narrative. We do not know if she experienced complete social ostracism or if she received care and compassion from Absalom, from her mother, from other women in the household, or from her father, King David. Did the rape result in the conception of a child? Did it cause genital injury or the transmission of a sexual disease? Does Tamar have nightmares or sleeping disorders? Does she have flashbacks or memory intrusions? Does she experience panic attacks, disassociation, or depression? Does she attempt to harm herself or even to kill herself? We do not know.

We do learn more about the other protagonists. King David, the narrator tells us, is angry but favors Amnon because he is his first-born son. Absalom, however, “hated him [Amnon] for having shamed his sister Tamar” (13:22). Two years after the rape, Absalom persuades David to allow Amnon to go to

² Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 29–33.

Baal-hazor near Ephraim for sheep-shearing, and there he prepares a great banquet. Absalom ordered his servants to keep his brother in their sights, and when Amnon is merry with wine, he orders them to kill him (13:28). When King David learns that his son Amnon is dead, he and all his servants weep bitterly (13:36). We do not know if David ever shed a tear for his daughter Tamar.

This account of an incestuous rape during the reign of King David some 3,000 years ago lamentably is still very timely. Since the era of David's monarchy, there have been dramatic religious, political, economic, and cultural changes in the land of Israel and around the globe, but rape and other forms of sexual abuse and assault continue. These crimes are perpetuated against children, against youth, and against adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in the United States in 2016–2017, more than one in two women and almost one in three men had experienced sexual violence involving some form of physical contact during their lifetimes.³ One in four women and about one in twenty-six men have experienced completed or attempted rape.⁴ Meta-analyses of fifty-five studies undertaken in twenty-four countries between 2002 and 2009 found prevalence of the experience of some form of child sexual abuse among 8 to 31 percent of women and 3 to 17 percent of men.⁵ In the United States in 2016–2017, more than four in five female survivors reported that they were raped before the age of twenty-five and about half reported rape before the age of eighteen.⁶ In 1990, the United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect described child abuse in our country as a “national emergency”; thirty years later, this is still the case.⁷ According to clinical psychologist Christauria Welland, the incidence of abuse rose even further in the context of the social isolation necessitated

³ Centers for Disease Control, “Fast Facts: Preventing Sexual Violence,” Violence Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html>. We use “sexual violence” as a broad term encompassing sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse. The precise legal definition of these crimes varies from state to state. See <https://www.rainn.org/about-rainn>.

⁴ K. C. Basile, S. G. Smith, M. Kresnow, et al., “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 Report on Sexual Violence” (Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Cited in Centers for Disease Control, “Preventing Sexual Violence” factsheet, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/SV-Factsheet.pdf>.

⁵ J. Barth, L. Bermetz, E. Heim, et al., “The Current Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse Worldwide: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *International Journal of Public Health* 58 (2013): 469–83, doi:10.1007/s00038-012-0426-1.

⁶ Basile et al., “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.”

⁷ Patricia Schene, “Child Abuse and Neglect Policy: History, Models, and Future Directions,” in *The APSAC Handbook of Child Maltreatment*, ed. J. Briere et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 386.

by COVID-19, precipitating a sexual violence “pandemic within a pandemic.”⁸ Persons of all socioeconomic and ethnic groups perpetuate and experience sexual violence, but poverty and economic stress contribute to its incidence. These conditions also limit the resources available to survivors in need of medical care, counseling, and legal support. These costs are considerable: one study estimates the financial toll of rape to be \$122,461 per person, including medical care, lost productivity, legal expenses, and other costs.⁹

The story of Tamar’s rape in 2 Samuel is germane not only in that sexual violence continues to afflict our society but also in that this is a narrative with a blunted voice. We hear Tamar’s strong plea: “No, my brother! Do not shame me!” And, after the rape, we are told that Tamar is grief-stricken and forlorn. But then her voice slips behind the scenes and only Amnon, Absalom, and David remain on the narrative stage. Analogously, there are missing voices in discussions about sexual violence in the Catholic Church today. In the aftermath of the January 2002 *Boston Globe* report on clerical sexual abuse, Catholics in the United States have begun to hear the voices of persons who were sexually abused by Catholic clergy. Since 2002, there have been additional reports on clerical abuse in the United States and all across the globe. The scandal now spans the United States, Canada, Ireland, England, Wales, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Poland, Australia, Chile, France, and other countries. Some of the survivors of clerical sexual abuse have given testimonies, published poetry, and spoken at forums.¹⁰ We must continue to create opportunities to listen to those who wish to speak publicly. Meanwhile, there are other voices also deserving of our ecclesial attention: the voices of survivors of sexual abuse and assault in all of its forms. The majority of these survivors—like Tamar—are female.

⁸ Gina Christian, “Catholic Psychologist Calls Domestic Violence ‘Pandemic within a Pandemic,’” Catholic News Service, May 26, 2020, <https://www.catholicnews.com/catholic-psychologist-calls-domestic-violence-pandemic-within-a-pandemic/>.

⁹ Cora Peterson, Sarah DeGue, Curtis Florence, et al., “Lifetime Economic Burden of Rape in the United States,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 52 (2017): 691–701.

¹⁰ Examples include several 2002 testimonies to the USCCB, <https://www.usccb.org/offices/child-and-youth-protection/presentations>; Gary Bergeron, *Don’t Call Me a Victim: Faith, Hope & Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Lowell, MA: Arc Angel Publishing, 2005); Norbert Krapf, *Catholic Boy Blues: A Poet’s Journal of Healing* (Nashville, TN: Greystone Publishing, 2014); and Juan Carlos Cruz’s testimony in the 2019 Forum “The Church Crisis: Where Are We Now?” at the University of Notre Dame, <https://forum2019.nd.edu/events/2019/09/25/the-church-crisis-where-are-we-now/>.

A Violated Body of Christ

“My name is Elizabeth,” states one of these women. At the age of fifteen, she met a man who was “sweet to me and supportive.” They started dating, she became pregnant, and “he was excited and happy about us starting a family together.” She moved in with him and initially he was kind. Then one day, while at a social gathering, Elizabeth told him she was hungry and needed to go home. He responded with anger. “When he finally drove me home,” she continues:

He slammed on the breaks [*sic*] and started to hit me in the face with the back of his hand. I reached for the door knob and was almost out of the car when he pulled me back in by the hair. He hit the gas pedal and turned so hard the door closed on its own. The entire time he called me a bitch, a ho, and [*said*] that he hated me. This became my life for the next seven years. He was in and out of jail, and I was in and out of shelters trying to survive with our three children. I went through so much physical and emotional abuse I started to believe I was worthless. My third child was conceived on a night he treated me like his property. I cried the entire night, and I remembered all the nights I cried wishing it would all just end. The day I finally left, he physically hurt me for the last time. After all the times he hit me, dragged me by my hair, left me to deliver our three children on my own and sexually abused me, I was finally done. I used all the days he told me I was ugly, worthless and all the times he abused me as strength to leave.¹¹

In the United States, there is growing awareness of violence against women in the aftermath of media coverage of numerous cases of high-profile men implicated in sexual harassment or assault and the viral spread of the “#MeToo” movement following the public allegations against Harvey Weinstein in 2017.¹² However, there has not been a corresponding degree of ecclesial attention to the child abuse, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and rape prevalent in our society. The opportunity afforded us to hear the voices of young women who are survivors in the company of ecclesial leaders is rare.

The testimonies that we heard were confidential. In what follows, we summarize not those personal accounts but some of the published literature on the lives of survivors of sexual violation. Every person has a distinct experience and story, shaped by a unique personality, relationships, and culture. Drawing from the large volume of studies on sexual violence that does

¹¹ “Elizabeth’s Story: ‘A Better Chapter of Our Lives Begins,’” Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, <https://catholiccharities.org/elizabeths-story-a-better-chapter-of-our-lives-begins/>.

¹² Me Too, <https://metoomvmt.org/>.

exist, it is evident that various factors influence the character of the wounds that a survivor carries, including: 1) the age at which the abuse or assault took place; 2) its duration and frequency; 3) its nature; 4) the form and degree of support that a survivor receives from family and others; 5) the broader social and cultural context.¹³ In the immediate aftermath of an act of sexual violence, persons who are survivors commonly experience shock, fear, agitation, confusion, social withdrawal, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and feelings of stigma. Over time, many meet diagnostic criteria for depression, 72 to 82 percent develop fear or anxiety, and some become dependent on alcohol or drugs.¹⁴ Sexual abuse and assault can result in despair, self-hatred, and a desire to cease living. Studies find that anywhere from 23 to 44 percent of female survivors experience suicidal thoughts, and research also correlates sexual violence with suicide attempts.¹⁵ Pregnant women who experience sexual violence or domestic abuse may undergo miscarriage or premature labor with harmful or even life-threatening consequences for the children they carry in their wombs.¹⁶ Rape can also result in the conception of a child. According to the Division of Violence Prevention of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, survivors report pregnancy in 26 percent of cases in which the perpetrator is a current or former boyfriend or spouse, 6.9 percent of cases of stranger rape, and 5.2 percent of cases of acquaintance rape.¹⁷

In many cases, sexual violence can result in a state of trauma. The younger the survivor, the more vulnerability there is to this possibility. The duration or frequency of the sexual violation, its character, a survivor's social and cultural context, genetic predispositions, and other factors also contribute to this outcome or mitigate against it. Trauma was formally recognized as a medical condition by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 in the wake of a deepened understanding of the experience of male Vietnam War

¹³ Rebecca Campbell and Stephanie Townsend, "Defining the Scope of Sexual Violence against Women," in *Sourcebook on Violence Against Women*, 2nd ed., ed. Claire M. Renzetti, Jeffrey L. Edleson, and Raquel Kennedy Bergen (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 95–108.

¹⁴ Campbell and Townsend, "Defining the Scope of Sexual Violence against Women," 100–01.

¹⁵ Campbell and Townsend, "Defining the Scope of Sexual Violence against Women," 101.

¹⁶ Zakia Zaheen, Fahmida Aqeel, Mohammad Ghazi Asad, et al., "Fetomaternal Outcome After Physical Domestic Violence During Pregnancy," *The Professional Medical Journal* 27, no. 1 (January 2020): 104–14, doi: 10.29309/tpmj/2019.27.01.3515.

¹⁷ Cited by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Understanding Pregnancy Resulting from Rape in the United States," Violence Prevention, [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/understanding-RRP-inUS.html#:~:text=Rape%20and%20Rape%2DRelated%20Pregnancy%3A%20By%20the%20Numbers&text=About%2018%20million%20women%20have,or%20a%20stranger%20\(6.9%25\)](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/understanding-RRP-inUS.html#:~:text=Rape%20and%20Rape%2DRelated%20Pregnancy%3A%20By%20the%20Numbers&text=About%2018%20million%20women%20have,or%20a%20stranger%20(6.9%25).).

veterans and female survivors of sexual assault. It is clinically defined as the enduring state of feeling physically and psychologically overwhelmed or anxious in the aftermath of an external threat. In distinction from painful experiences that can be integrated over time into one's understanding of the world, trauma is an extreme form of suffering that cannot be integrated into one's psyche. Trauma-inducing events are experiences of such terror or helplessness that they shatter a person's basic assumptions about reality and their sense of physical and psychological integrity. The posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that may result is symptomized by flashbacks and memory intrusions, sleeping problems, and emotional detachment. PTSD can alter the immune system, and female survivors of sexual violence report gastrointestinal, muscular/skeletal, cardiopulmonary, neurological, and gynecological problems at a frequency significantly higher than the national average for women.¹⁸

Sexual violence also impedes one's sense of self-worth and personal agency. This is particularly acute in cases in which a child is sexually abused by a parent or guardian. Psychologically unable to conceive that the person on whom one is utterly dependent for care has inflicted harm, the child faults her or his own character. A child trapped in a sexually abusive environment, Harvard Medical School Professor of Psychiatry emerita Judith Herman explains, faces a formidable developmental task. She must find a way to develop a sense of basic trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe ... "ultimately, she must develop a capacity for intimacy out of an environment where all intimate relationships are corrupt."¹⁹ All of this must be done with an immature system of psychological defenses. In this situation, abused children may attempt to cope through dissociative amnesia in which traumatic experiences form disparate personality fragments. They may also attempt to preserve the psychologically necessary trust in their parent or guardian by blaming themselves for the abuse. Children who self-blame may change their behaviors in the hope that if they become "good" the abuse will end. When this does not happen, negative self-perceptions are reinforced. "Even sexually abused children who have fully dissociated the abuse and retain no conscious memories," writes ethicist Jennifer Beste in *God and the Victim*, "feel a profound innate badness at the core of their self-understanding."²⁰ At the age of six, for example, Carla van

¹⁸ Campbell and Townsend, "Defining the Scope of Sexual Violence against Women," 101.

¹⁹ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 101.

²⁰ Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

Raay, a Catholic, was abused by her father, who admonished her not to speak of this in the sacrament of confession. “I was a bad girl,” she reflects, “who could not be forgiven. All I could do was cover up my badness from all the people around me. Even if I succeeded in convincing people that I was all right, I couldn’t win in the end because God knew my badness.”²¹

Sexual violence is an assault against both the body and the soul, and the consequences are not only physical and psychological but also inextricably spiritual. A woman who was regularly abused by her father from a very early age testifies: “I withered away. Not all at once, but in one way or another, piece by piece, and finally my whole person, my body and soul were taken from me.”²² Joan Miller (pseud.) was sexually assaulted as a college student by a friend of a friend of her boyfriend while studying abroad. Her parents met the news with silence, her girlfriends responded with nonchalance, and her own boyfriend rejected her. “The rape,” she writes:

Along with the lack of support from family and friends, made me feel indescribable shame. I became disconnected from the world—from my parents, my friends and from God. I went through my final year of college like an empty shell. I had no one who could meet me where I was. I felt I had no place where this new me would be accepted and loved. I was afraid to open up to others for fear of being judged. I tried praying and turning to God, but it seemed like a waste of time. I felt God had left me just like everyone else—that he had let this happen to me.²³

According to trauma treatment specialist Dr. Christine A. Courtois, survivors of abuse and assault commonly describe themselves as abandoned by God, particularly if they have little support from family or others.²⁴

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it,” Paul wrote of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:26). All members of the ecclesial body are affected in some way by the consequences of the sexual violation of others. In a Catholic household in which a husband perpetrates domestic violence against a wife, the character of their relationship will change in a manner that will

²¹ Carla van Raay, *God’s Callgirl: A Memoir* (Sydney, Australia: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 34. Cited in Beth R. Crisp, “Spirituality and Sexual Abuse: Issues and Dilemmas for Survivors,” *Theology & Sexuality* 13 (2007): 304.

²² Cited in Gerard J. McGlone and Mary Shrader, *Creating Safe and Sacred Places: Identifying, Preventing, and Healing Sexual Abuse* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2003), 44.

²³ Joan Miller (pseud.), “Remain Here with Me: Recovering from the Trauma of Rape,” *America* 211 (October 13, 2014): 27–29.

²⁴ Christine A. Courtois, *Healing the Incest Wound: Adult Survivors in Therapy* (New York: Norton, 1988), 202.

have consequences in the lives of their children and in the relationships of the children with others in their parish and school. In a case in which a Catholic survivor of sexual violence discontinues practice of the faith, the entire body suffers the loss of this person as well as the charisms that she or he could contribute to the life of the Body of Christ. Sociologist Diana E. H. Russell's research found that Catholic women who had experienced incest were twice as likely to leave Catholicism as women who were not victimized.²⁵ Church of England theologian Susan Shooter interviewed women survivors of sexual violence who retained a faith in God tested and transformed by their experiences of desolation, and she emphasizes that they have wisdom to contribute to Christian communities open to receive this.²⁶

A Call to Ecclesial Action

As we have noted, the young women who inspire our reflections courageously shared their stories at a March 2017 Saint Mary's consultation on ecclesial responses to sexual violence. Subsequently, during the summer of 2017, the USCCB conducted a nationwide survey of ecclesial personnel to gather information on the state of the Catholic Church's response to sexual and domestic violence.²⁷ They received responses from 195 members of 112 of the 196 archdioceses/dioceses in the United States (i.e., 57 percent). Nearly one-quarter (24.46 percent) of the respondents indicated awareness of an active ministry at the parish level related in some way to domestic abuse or other forms of sexual violence. At the diocesan level, Catholic Charities often takes a leading role. Their services vary from diocese to diocese and may include professional counseling for survivors, provision of support including affordable housing to members of families afflicted by domestic violence, training workshops for diocesan staff, domestic violence education, and TREM (trauma recovery empowerment model) groups for women. Elizabeth, the woman whose story of domestic violence we shared previously, received counseling and immigration services from Catholic Charities and is now working on her GED. "After years of disappointment, pain, and hopelessness," she testifies, "a better chapter of our lives begins.

²⁵ Diana E. H. Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (Basic Books: New York, 1986), 119.

²⁶ Susan Shooter, *How Survivors of Abuse Relate to God: The Authentic Spirituality of the Annihilated Soul* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012).

²⁷ *Catholic Response to Sexual and Domestic Violence and Abuse: A Report Compiled by the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth* (Washington DC: USCCB, 2017), <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/upload/Catholic-Response-to-Sexual-and-Domestic-Violence-Report-Final.pdf>.

... They [Catholic Charities] have changed my life, and for that I am immensely grateful!"²⁸ In the Diocese of Buffalo, NY, Catholic Charities sponsors Women's Healing and Empowerment Services (WHES); a program for male domestic violence offenders against women; and also "Caring Dads," a group intervention program for men who have abused, neglected, or exposed their children to abuse.²⁹ In some dioceses, the Victim Assistance Coordinator/Counselor Program that was established nationwide to serve persons who are survivors of clerical sexual abuse also provides retreats and trauma recovery support groups for persons who are survivors of other forms of sexual violence. Sue Stubbs, for example, director of the Victim Assistance Office for the Archdiocese of Atlanta, initiated "The Way for Women Retreat," a three-day program for female survivors of sexual abuse.³⁰ The Denver archdiocese has established RISE (Recognize, Intervene, Speak Up, Empower), an apostolate serving women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted,³¹ and the Archdiocese of Chicago has a Domestic Violence Outreach program (ACDVO) to foster awareness, provide services, and work for prevention.³² Catholics for Family Peace is a national lay ministry with a mission to prevent and respond to domestic violence through prayer, online training courses, webinars, and other resources.³³ But there is not yet a program for prevention, intervention, and pastoral outreach to survivors in every parish of every diocese. As the Catholic Church prepares for the upcoming synod, we recommend the convening of parish and diocesan listening sessions designated as safe and confidential spaces for survivors of sexual violence in all its forms to speak. Those who so desire could grant permission for sharing of pseudonymous accounts of their testimonies.

²⁸ "Elizabeth's Story: 'A Better Chapter of Our Lives Begins.'"

²⁹ Catholic Charities, "Family Safety & Stabilization Assistance," Family Safety & Stabilization, <https://ccwny.org/family-safety-stabilization/>.

³⁰ "The Way: A Healing Retreat for Female Survivors of Sexual Abuse," The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, <https://archatl.com/ministries-services/victim-assistance/healing-opportunities/the-way-for-women/>.

³¹ Roxanne King, "RISE: Unique Apostolate Brings Christ-centered Healing to Survivors of Sexual Assault," *National Catholic Register*, November 12, 2019, <https://denvercatholic.org/rise-unique-apostolate-brings-christ-centered-healing-to-survivors-of-sexual-assault/>.

³² "Human Dignity and Solidarity: Domestic Violence Outreach," Parish Vitality and Mission, Archdiocese of Chicago, <https://pvm.archchicago.org/human-dignity-solidarity/domestic-violence-outreach>.

³³ "Hope, Help, and Healing: A Catholic Response to Domestic Abuse and Violence," Catholics for Family Peace, <http://www.catholicsforfamilypeace.org/>. For an interview with cofounder Sharon O'Brien, see <https://www.foryourmarriage.org/interview-3-catholics-working-to-end-domestic-violence/>.

The church professes that we are one body in Christ. But “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted,” cautions philosopher Susan Sontag, “when the subject is looking at other people’s pain.”³⁴ Many Catholics may be unaware of the scope and character of the suffering of persons who are survivors. Those of us who have been spared abuse or assault need to listen deeply to the experiences of the violated in order to live more fully the communion of Christ’s ecclesial body. The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church emphasizes that the Holy Spirit “makes the body one” and “produces and urges charity among the faithful” such that “if one member suffers in any way, all the members suffer along with that member.”³⁵

We are confident that a practice of ecclesial listening will generate constructive ideas for the expansion of existing ecclesial programs that address sexual violence and the development of new initiatives. Shooter emphasizes that churches should embrace survivors not simply as “receivers” of ministry but also as givers who have much to contribute to ecclesial life.³⁶ Their testimonies constitute a moral imperative to execute programs that can contribute to the prevention of abuse and assault and intervention in cases where abuse is ongoing. Catholics have learned from our response to the clerical sex abuse scandal that screenings, education, and accountability practices make a very important contribution to prevention.³⁷ In addition to the reforms undertaken

³⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 7.

³⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* §7, in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:852–54, with reference to 1 Cor 12:26. Also available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

³⁶ Shooter, *How Survivors of Abuse Relate to God*.

³⁷ In 2021, the USCCB published the eighteenth annual independent audit of their implementation of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, which was adopted in 2002 and updated in 2018. One hundred percent of dioceses and all but two eparchies participated in the audit. During the audit period (2020), there were 4,228 allegations of clerical abuse of minors, 95.5 percent of which were historical in nature, and .5 percent of which (i.e., 22 cases) were current to 2020. All current cases were referred to law enforcement and, at the time of publication of the report, about one-quarter of these allegations had been substantiated, resulting in the removal of the offender from ministry. Deacon Bernie Nojadera, executive director of the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, observes that the protective measures outlined in the *Charter* “are working on a national level” and that vigilance and commitment of both clergy and laity remain necessary. According to Suzanne Healy, Chair of the National Review Board (NRB) for the Protection of Children and Young People, the audit “provides a wealth of information that can guide our efforts moving forward.” She notes that the NRB’s Research and Trends Committee is in contact with leaders

to end clerical sexual abuse, we must ask: What can the ecclesial body do to protect Catholics from *all* forms of sexual abuse and violence? Dominican Joseph Guido, professor of psychology and senior staff psychologist at Providence College, has pastoral and clinical experience with survivors of childhood and adolescent sexual abuse. He is struck by their strength of character and willingness to persevere, a testimony to “their resilience and to the grace of God.”³⁸ Although the circumstances of their abuse vary, he observes, they typically have in common two questions: “Why did this happen to me?” and “What can be done to prevent this from happening to others in the future?”

Ecclesial initiatives that could foster the prevention that these survivors advocate include mandatory age-appropriate abuse-prevention education programs for children in Catholic parishes and schools.³⁹ “Talking About Touching,” for example, is a research-based curriculum for children ages four to six that could be supplemented with theological enhancements in a Catholic context.⁴⁰ Empirical studies of public school programs such as the “Childhelp Speak Up Be Safe Prevention Education Curriculum” demonstrate the capacity of this kind of curriculum to increase students’ knowledge of safety and resistance strategies.⁴¹ Other initiatives could include parish

in the field of child abuse education and research; affirms the positive contribution of the bishops in creating the Catholic Bishop Abuse Reporting system; and encourages the creation of an audit process for this system as well as the establishment of a system of parish audits. *2020 Annual Report on the Implementation of the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People”* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2021), vi, viii, and vi-vii. There is a large body of literature on the clerical abuse scandal and the ecclesial response. We do not include a bibliography because our intent is to draw attention to forms of sexual violence other than clerical abuse.

³⁸ Joseph J. Guido, “The Importance of Perspective,” *America* 186 (April 1, 2002): 23.

³⁹ We conducted an anonymous survey of 129 Catholic students in introductory courses at the University of Dayton. Fifty percent said their formation in a Catholic school or parish included education in warning signs of abusive relationships; 45.5 percent said it did not. Just over half of respondents (50.4 percent) said their Catholic formation included education in how to seek help if they found themselves in an abusive relationship, whereas 46.5 percent said it did not. We are grateful to University of Dayton graduate assistant Elise Abshire for administering this survey, tabulating these and other results, and offering important constructive reflection on this article.

⁴⁰ Committee for Children, “Talking about Touching: A Personal Safety Curriculum: Teacher’s Guide,” 3rd ed. (1985, 2001), <https://www.cfchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/previous-programs/talking-about-touching/tatPreKTeachers.pdf>.

⁴¹ See, for example, Marisol J. Diaz, Wendy Wolfersteig, Diane Moreland, et al., “Teaching Youth to Resist Abuse: Evaluation of a Strengths-Based Child Maltreatment Curriculum for High School Students,” *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 14 (2021): 141–49, doi:10.1007/s40653-020-00304.

programs of home visits to families with children.⁴² Every member of every parish should be trained to recognize warning signs of child abuse and to follow appropriate protocols if abuse is suspected such that Catholics can act on behalf of children in our social circles if this is warranted.⁴³ For the protection of youth, the Archdiocese of Chicago is piloting the “Dating Matters” curriculum on sexual violence prevention in high schools in Illinois.⁴⁴ Marriage preparation programs can follow the example of those that incorporate mandatory domestic violence prevention education, including reflection on sacramental marriage as a relationship of mutuality, equality, and communion. Every member of every parish should be trained to recognize warning signs of domestic violence such that we can act on behalf of friends, coworkers, and neighbors if warranted. “Parishes,” theologian Denise Starkey recommends, should not only educate congregations on bystander responsibilities but “need to have trained first-responders readily available to talk with women—being put off by the need to make an appointment risks the woman will not ask for help again.”⁴⁵

When sexual violence in some form has occurred, the church has a moral responsibility and a unique and irreplaceable role to play in response to this violation of the ecclesial body. The church as the Body of Christ is a paschal communion where violation can be remembered and mourned. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the ecclesial body can also mediate the love of God, reaffirm the human dignity and baptismal holiness of violated members, stand for justice, and witness in Christ to the eschatological reality of God’s ultimate victory over sin and death. We briefly elaborate on each of these points in the following.

Memory and Mourning within a Paschal Communion

Memory and mourning are foundational to the long process of healing, particularly in cases where sexual violence has resulted in

⁴² See Judy Krysik, Craig Winston LeCroy, and Jose B. Ashford, “Participants’ Perceptions of Healthy Families: A Home Visitation Program to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 30 (2008): 45–61.

⁴³ Decades ago, a twelve-year-old girl told me (Elizabeth Gropp) that she was having multiple health problems. I thought this was odd in someone so young. I asked her if she was seeing a physician and she said yes. Had I known what I know now about sexual violence and had I received intervention protocol training, I would have asked additional questions. Years later, I learned she was being sexually abused by her stepfather.

⁴⁴ “Human Dignity and Solidarity.”

⁴⁵ A. Denise Starkey, “The Roman Catholic Church and Violence Against Women,” in *Religion and Men’s Violence Against Women*, ed. A. J. Johnson (New York: Springer, 2015), 177–93, at 189.

trauma.⁴⁶ A fundamental tenet of trauma therapy is that direct engagement with traumatic memories is necessary if any healing is to take place. Memory of sexual violation may be repressed or, conversely, may become a focal point of consciousness to such a degree that it can become obsessive. In cases where strong memories dominate a survivor's consciousness, release from domination by these memories typically requires the aid of a witness other than oneself who receives and validates the survivor's testimony. There is evidence that the very act of expression of sensory memories into language can have a salutary effect.⁴⁷ This difficult work of attending to traumatic memory, writes Episcopal theologian Flora Keshgegian, requires a supportive community context.⁴⁸ For example, remembering as an adult sexual abuse that happened when one was a child evokes emotions that can be unbearably painful, and members of the violated ecclesial body can bear this memory with one another. Karen, a survivor of both sexual abuse perpetrated by her father in her childhood and acquaintance rape in her young adulthood, testifies of her ecclesial support group:

When we were together, I knew I was in a safe place to be me, to tell and re-tell my story, to be heard and believed. I looked forward to our meetings every two weeks. The time spent together gave me the encouragement and hope I needed to run the race. In between meetings, members of the group would call or stop by to see me. We cried together, prayed together, and celebrated victories and growth.⁴⁹

Those persons who serve as witnesses for survivors may also experience salutary effects. "We continue to meet on a regular basis," Karen says of her ecclesial support group, "however, the support has widened to include us all."⁵⁰

The ecclesial Body of Christ places memories of violation within the stories and images of the liturgical reading of Scripture, a shared public narrative that can open a space for grace. There are psalms, notes Reformed

⁴⁶ For further reflection on the importance of memory and mourning, see Julia Feder, "Edward Schillebeeckx and Sexual Trauma: Salvation as Healing," in *Salvation in the World: The Crossroads of Public Theology*, eds. Stephan van Erp, Christopher Cimorelli, and Christiane Alpers (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 215-27.

⁴⁷ James W. Pennebaker and Lauri D. Stone, "Translating Traumatic Experiences into Language: Implications for Child Abuse and Long-Term Health," in *From Child Sexual Abuse to Adult Sexual Risk: Trauma, Revictimization, and Intervention*, ed. L. J. Koenig, L. S. Doll, A. O'Leary, et. al. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004), 201-216, at 206-07.

⁴⁸ Flora A. Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ Karen's account is included in James N. Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 39-40.

⁵⁰ Cited in Poling, *The Abuse of Power*, 40.

theologian Serene Jones, that correspond to Judith Herman's stages of healing from trauma: psalms of deliverance appropriate to the stage of establishment of safety, psalms of lament that can give form to an experience of abuse, and psalms of thanksgiving that can celebrate a survivor's reintegration into daily life and social relationships of care and respect.⁵¹ A woman who has survived assault, Jones continues, may recognize something of her own story as she participates in the liturgical remembrance of the passion narrative.⁵² Karen, the survivor mentioned previously, turned not only to the psalms but also to Job and to the Joseph narrative.⁵³ When traumatic memories can be integrated within one's identity in a meaningful way, observe psychology scholars Kate Walsh and David DiLillo and practitioner Michelle A. Fortier, survivors of childhood sexual abuse experience "lower psychological distress, better social adjustment, increased self-esteem, and resolution of the abuse experiences, compared to victims who reported that they were still searching for meaning."⁵⁴ According to neuroscientist and psychologist Julio F. P. Peres and his colleagues, "Neurofunctional studies suggest that psychological integration through a structured narrative seems to be a key factor in resilience to traumatic events," while other studies indicate that in many (but not all) cases religious beliefs and communities contribute to this integration and to other dimensions of mental health.⁵⁵

The overarching narrative that shapes the ecclesial body is the paschal mystery of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When memories of violation are shared within the Christian community and placed in the hands of God, writes ethicist Jennifer Beste in *God and the Victim*:

There is hope that abuse survivors' stories of violence and affliction will be transformed within the context of Jesus' own experiences of crucifixion and

⁵¹ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 55–63.

⁵² Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 96, 101–25. Although our focus is on sexual violence in society at large, it is important to note that for survivors of clerical sexual abuse, participation in the sacraments of the Catholic Church can be very difficult. See, for example, the testimony of Paula Gonzales Rohrbacher, who was abused by a seminarian, in regard to the sacrament of reconciliation: <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/Impact-Statement-of-Paula-Gonzales-Rohrbacher.pdf>.

⁵³ Cited in Poling, *The Abuse of Power*, 39.

⁵⁴ Kate Walsh, Michelle A. Fortier, and David DiLillo, "Adult Coping with Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Theoretical and Empirical Review," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 15 (2010): 8.

⁵⁵ Julio F. P. Peres, Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Antonia Gladys Nasello, et al., "Spirituality and Resilience in Trauma Victims," *Journal of Religion and Health* 46 (2007): 347–348, doi:[10.1007/s10943-006-9103-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-006-9103-0).

resurrection. Just as Christian churches preserve and uphold the memories of Jesus' experiences of betrayal and abandonment, his crucifixion, and his resurrection, so, too, can they validate survivors' memories of violation and traumatization. As Rahner argues, belief in Christ's resurrection can enable Christians to confront with courage the bitterest aspects of human reality—by listening to stories of severe human cruelty and vulnerability, for example—and to repeatedly express hope that greater healing and redemption will also occur for the survivor.⁵⁶

This is not a call to persons in abusive relationships to accept and endure the cross of their suffering, as they have sometimes been counseled to do.⁵⁷ Rather, it is a call to the entire Body of Christ to lament and resist the violation of any of our members. In communion with Karen, we cry:

My God, my God
 Why have you forsaken me?
 My body cries out.
 My hands are in knots
 My neck is pained with tension
 My chest is tight, breathing is labored
 My stomach grows with unrest
 My mouth is dry
 My eyes will not close with sleep
 My ears ring
 My mind is pregnant with unrest
 My legs are curled, the muscles crying with tightness
 My heart beats on while pain abounds
 Oh God, my God
 Where are you now?
 My spirit longs for thee.⁵⁸

Karen's lament begins with the words of Psalm 22 that Jesus Christ prayed on the cross (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46).

In the eucharistic liturgy, the paschal mystery is remembered in the physical assembly of persons within the reverent silence of a church, the raising of voices in song that arches toward vaulted ceilings, the postures of kneeling and standing and sitting, the touch of hands in the sign of peace, the procession together to the altar, and the partaking of the very Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Theologian Erin Kidd emphasizes

⁵⁶ Beste, *God and the Victim*, 121–22.

⁵⁷ Crisp, "Spirituality and Sexual Abuse," 308.

⁵⁸ Cited in Poling, *The Abuse of Power*, 37.

that narrative and cognitive therapies for trauma are often inadequate to the reality of a state in which a survival-induced bodily state of panic overrides the mind.⁵⁹ Drawing from the work of Bessel van der Kolk, the medical director of the Trauma Center in Boston, Kidd notes the importance of a kind of limbic system therapy: persons who are survivors need not only to be able to state verbally “I am safe”—but they need to feel this “in their gut.”⁶⁰ The Eucharist is a sacrament—not a form of therapy—but it is noteworthy that the ritual action of the sacrament employs not only language but also movement, touch, taste, silence, and sound. The body is not only the location of trauma but can also be a location of grace.

Mediating the Love of God in the Body of Christ

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, members of the Body of Christ are incorporated into a divine love so strong and profound that it vanquishes even sin and death. This love is mediated by the sacrament and by the relationships among members of Christ’s body. Recovery from the trauma of sexual violence is ultimately a matter of the restoration of relationships of trust in other persons and in God, a trust that is foundational to human psychological and spiritual development. Herman writes:

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor recreates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. Just as these capabilities are originally formed in relationships with other people, they must be reformed in such relationships.⁶¹

“Joan,” whose story we introduced previously, was spiritually bereft after she was raped during a study abroad program in college: “I felt God had left me just like everyone else—that he had let this happen to me I was deeply angry at God and felt abandoned by him—but even worse, I felt I somehow

⁵⁹ Erin Kidd, “The Violation of God in the Body of the World: A Rahnerian Response to Trauma,” *Modern Theology* 35 (2019): 676, doi:10.1111/moth.12484. Kidd refers to Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

⁶⁰ Kidd, “The Violation of God in the Body of the World,” 676.

⁶¹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.

deserved his abandonment.”⁶² Her relationship to God was restored through the mediation of a female spiritual director who “poured love and kindness into the darkness.” Joan published her story with the title “Remain Here with Me,” invoking Jesus’ words in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁶³

In *God and the Victim*, Beste emphasizes that our relationship with God is mediated in part through our relationships with other persons. It is for this reason that a human person’s act of intimate violence against another can result in a sense of abandonment by God, particularly in cases where a cry for help to friends or family is met with dismissal, shaming, or blame. The participation of other persons in the mediation of God’s love makes us very vulnerable to human sin. At the same time, the reality of human mediation of divine love also means that members of the ecclesial Body of Christ share God’s love with one another. “What is at stake,” Beste elaborates, “in our daily decisions whether or not to love and how to love our neighbor” is “far-reaching and profound.”⁶⁴ The human mediation of divine love implies that “each member of the Church plays a vital role in making present the reality of salvation effected by Christ.”⁶⁵

Because sexual violence afflicts persons in a most intimate way, persons who are survivors may wish to share their stories only with a few trusted ministers or in confidential parish support groups. But there are multiple ways in which a parish community as a whole can offer public expressions of compassion and support, including intercessory prayers on behalf of survivors, homilies that address sexual violence, and collections of material aid to assist with medical and legal expenses.⁶⁶ “The first thing we could do,” survivor Constance Phelps recommends in regard to domestic forms of sexual violence

would be to use the words “domestic abuse” in a church service. I have heard specific prayers for prisoners, the sick, the homeless, the unemployed, victims of street violence, of racism and child sexual abuse, of COVID-19 and poverty, of just about any other type of suffering, but never one mention of domestic violence that was not brought about by my own pestering. This omission sends victims and perpetrators the message that their situation is unmentionable, or not actually a problem,

⁶² Miller, “Remain Here with Me,” 29.

⁶³ Miller, “Remain Here with Me,” 27–29.

⁶⁴ Beste, *God and the Victim*, 112.

⁶⁵ Beste, *God and the Victim*, 112.

⁶⁶ For some examples of homilies from the Archdiocese of Chicago, see “Human Dignity and Solidarity,” <https://pvm.archchicago.org/human-dignity-solidarity/domestic-violence-outreach/news-and-video-library> for sample preaching, see Kochurani Abraham, preaching on the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, August 15, 2018, <https://www.catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/08152018>.

and that it should remain a secret.... Survivors of all types of trauma benefit from the consistency and predictable ritual of daily Mass, which can be a home base of regular connection with divine and human belonging, peace and truth. For people who have been cut off by abuse from social and family connections, their parish and their priest may be the only moral havens from a home life that, like mine, inexplicably turned into a place where right and wrong no longer existed. In entering the literal shrine of the church and Mass, survivors may be looking for some indication from God, through the pastor or other parishioners, that someone will care enough to see them and accompany them back to a moral universe in which they matter as a visible child of God. The parish priest is likely to never know who that is unless he signals that he is open and willing to talk about the issue.⁶⁷

Jesus Christ appeared to Thomas with tangible wounds in his body, and so too the survivor of sexual violence bears the scars of abuse or assault. A person who has experienced child abuse will always be a child abuse survivor, and a person who has experienced rape will always bear this memory in both body and soul.⁶⁸ “My history,” writes Nancy Raine, for example, “had been ruptured—the woman who had not been raped could never return.”⁶⁹ Christianity, Shelly Rambo observes, has often emphasized cross and resurrection and skipped over too quickly the “middle space” of Holy Saturday, the period of Christ’s descent into hell, but it is often in this middle space that the Christian community must remain with survivors of trauma. Grace in the lives of survivors “is the persisting and remaining presence of divine love figured in and through their movements of witness.”⁷⁰ Like the women who remained at the foot of Christ’s cross, persons who accompany survivors are with them through their weariness, their grief, and their experience of a “death-carrying self.”⁷¹ Together, members of the ecclesial body are witnesses to persistence within what theologian Edward Schillebeeckx terms the

⁶⁷ Constance Phelps, “I Am a Domestic Abuse Survivor. Parish Priests Must Do More to Support People Like Me,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/i-am-domestic-abuse-survivor-parish-priests-must-do-more-support-people-me>.

⁶⁸ “We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body.” Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21.

⁶⁹ Nancy Venable Raine, *After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), 80.

⁷⁰ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 99.

⁷¹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 99.

“eschatological borderline” where we experience salvation as already begun but not yet eschatologically complete.⁷²

Both dimensions of this borderline are essential to bear in mind. Salvation is not yet eschatologically complete—but it has begun. Suzanne M. Sgroi, a Catholic physician whose medical practice focuses on helping persons who have experienced trauma, including survivors of sexual abuse, has outlined five stages of healing from sexual violence. In the fifth and final stage, one relinquishes the “survivor” identity.⁷³ This is not an act of denial of a past that cannot be changed but the restoration through relationships of mutual care of one’s capacity for affiliation, affection, and nurturance.⁷⁴ Ecclesially, one is not only a recipient of the compassion of others but also a member of Christ’s body who actively shares God’s love with others.

Healing of the Violated Body

“As for me,” Tamar lamented, “where could I carry my shame?” (2 Sam 13:13). The degradation of being used as a sexual object often leaves the survivor with a deep sense of shame. One of the injustices of sexual violence is that the survivors of sexual crimes often experience self-reproach despite their moral innocence. In the case of young children, as we have already noted, the blaming of oneself for the immoral and criminal actions of adults can be a way of coping with the reality that a parent or guardian has perpetrated harm. This self-blame enables the psychologically necessary trust in the parent or guardian to survive. The result, however, is that those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse typically feel “a profound sense of innate badness.”⁷⁵ Youth and adults, too, for a variety of reasons, may blame themselves for the sinful actions of others. In our culture, for example, young women who have been raped are commonly told by perpetrators, peers, or others that they invited or encouraged the assault.⁷⁶

⁷² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1980), 745.

⁷³ Suzanne M. Sgroi, ed., *Sexual Abuse Treatment for Children, Adult Survivors, Offenders, and Persons with Mental Retardation: Vulnerable Populations*, vol. 2 (New York: Lexington Books, 1989). Cited in Shooter, *How Survivors of Abuse Relate to God*, 12.

⁷⁴ Sgroi, *Sexual Abuse Treatment for Children, Adult Survivors, Offenders, and Persons with Mental Retardation*, 129, cited in Shooter, *How Survivors of Abuse Relate to God*, 14.

⁷⁵ Beste, *God and the Victim*, 48. See also Susan Harter, “The Effects of Child Abuse on the Self-System,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 2 (1998): 149–50, doi:10.1300/J146v02n01_09.

⁷⁶ Eliana Suarez and Tahany Gadalla explain: “An important factor that discourages rape victims from reporting is the nonsupportive reactions that they often encounter after disclosing the assault. Research findings indicate that rape victims may experience postrape

Recent psychoanalytic literature has emphasized the creative resistance of adult survivors and the ways in which they have exercised agency and resourcefulness even in situations of danger and constraint. This research, explain sociologist Kate Warner, anthropologist Agnes Baro, and criminal justice professor Helen Eigenberg, “asks us to shift our perception of women in violent relationships from passive victims to resourceful actors who resist assaults on their dignity and safety.”⁷⁷ Family therapist Allan Wade emphasizes that “Alongside each history of violence and oppression, there runs a parallel history of prudent, creative, and determined resistance.”⁷⁸ Maria, for example, was pushed to such a point of desperation by an abusive husband that one night she almost killed herself and her children. Instead, however, she resolved to start hiding money until she saved enough to procure a safe living space. When asked by another woman in group therapy how she made that choice, she replied, “Loving my children and then realizing I’m all they have, I vowed to be the mother I never had.”⁷⁹

The ecclesial body can celebrate such courage and reaffirm the human dignity and baptismal holiness of its violated members in a variety of ways. These include invitations to exercise liturgical ministries. Beste shares the experience of “Lauren” (pseud.), an incest survivor, who was invited to serve as a lector at her parish. “Feeling completely ‘dirty,’ worthless and ashamed, she had not thought that she was worthy of communicating the Word of God to others. Yet such a simple request on the part of the Christian community conveyed to Lauren that God viewed her as good and holy.”⁸⁰ Lauren described herself as sanctified by this experience, and this, Beste observes, is a radical reversal of “the experiences of sexual abuse, particularly the inherent powerlessness and debasement of being treated as the object of another’s gratification.”⁸¹

trauma as a result of these nonsupportive reactions. Such reactions may emerge from the social network of the victims, from legal services, police, clergy, health care providers, and so on. Rape myths—the false cultural beliefs that mainly serve the purpose of shifting the blame from perpetrators to victims—help to explain the sociocultural context of these negative reactions.” Eliana Suarez and Tahany Gadalla, “Stop Blaming the Victim: A Meta-Analysis on Rape Myths,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25 (2010): 2010–35, at 2011, doi:10.1177/0886260509354503.

⁷⁷ Kate Warner, Agnes Baro, and Helen Eigenberg, “Stories of Resistance: Exploring Women’s Responses to Male Violence,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 16 (2004): 37.

⁷⁸ Allan Wade, “Small Acts of Living: Everyday Resistance to Violence and Other Forms of Oppression,” *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 19 (1997): 23.

⁷⁹ Gale Goldberg Wood and Susan E. Roche, “Representing Selves, Reconstructing Lives: Feminist Group Work with Women Survivors of Male Violence,” *Social Work with Groups* 23 (2001): 14.

⁸⁰ Beste, *God and the Victim*, 122.

⁸¹ Beste, *God and the Victim*, 122–23.

Healing, sacramental theologian Bruce Morrill emphasizes, is distinct from curing. Curing is the repair of a broken bone or removal of a cancerous growth, while healing attends to the spiritual and social dimensions of suffering or illness. "Sickness and health," he emphasizes, are not simply objective realities, not merely somatic entities; rather, as New Testament scholars have come to learn from anthropologists ... illness is a comprehensive social condition, if not a status, that results from a person's coming down with a disease."⁸² The lepers whom Jesus healed had diseased physical bodies but also suffered exclusion from a social body concerned with contagion. "Healing and exorcisms, far from being isolated feats, were ritual events reorienting Jesus himself, those whom he healed, and others who acknowledged the healing in a new context, which he called the reign of God. Deliverance from sickness includes a realignment of social relations and statuses, human and transcendent."⁸³ In the case of sexual violence, what is at issue is not a sickness but a gross distortion of social, familial, and personal relations that afflicts the entire Body of Christ.

Standing as a Body for Justice

Jesus Christ is both a healer and an advocate for justice (Luke 4:16-21). Action on behalf of justice, the 1971 Synod of Bishops affirmed in *Justice in the World*, is "a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."⁸⁴ For a variety of reasons, rape is a crime that is often unreported, and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted. Only an estimated 230 of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to the police.⁸⁵ There are multiple reasons for this, including a

⁸² Bruce T. Morrill, "Christ the Healer: An Investigation of Contemporary Liturgical, Pastoral, and Biblical Approaches," in *Practicing Catholic: Ritual, Body, and Contestation in Catholic Faith*, ed. Bruce T. Morrill, Joanna E. Ziegler, and Susan Rodgers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 115-29, at 126.

⁸³ Morrill, "Christ the Healer," 126.

⁸⁴ 1971 Synod of Bishops, "Justice in the World," in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 288-300, at 289.

⁸⁵ Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation records as cited by RAINN, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>. Other sources estimate that rates of reporting range from 8 to 33 percent. See Judith Lewis Herman, "Justice from the Victim's Perspective," *Violence Against Women* 11 (2005): 573, doi:[10.1177/1077801205274450](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801205274450). Not all cases that are reported are prosecuted, and not all prosecutions are successful. Kimberly A. Lonsway and Joanne Archambault estimate that only in .2 to 5.2 percent of cases does a sexual assault end with a conviction of the perpetrator. See Kimberley A. Lonsway and Joanne Archambault, "The 'Justice Gap' for Sexual Assault Cases: Future Directions for Research and Reform," *Violence Against Women* 18 (2012): 157, doi:[10.1177/1077801212440017](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801212440017).

survivor's sense of shame and fear that the account of the assault will be challenged or that she will be blamed for inviting the act of violation. Moreover, rape is typically perpetrated not by strangers but by someone known to the person violated, such as a boyfriend, family member, or family friend. A survivor may not want to press charges against someone connected to her or his own family or friendship circle, or may be pressured to remain silent. Ecclesial support in advocating for justice could make the difference between silence and public speech. This public speech could contribute to a transformation of a social milieu in which sexual violence is normalized to such a degree that the term "rape culture" was coined to describe our society.⁸⁶ One reason rape culture persists is that the limited number of cases in which perpetrators are prosecuted can be interpreted as the social acceptance of rape. To the contrary, the USCCB emphasizes in their 2002 statement on domestic violence against women, "Violence in any form—'physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal'—is sinful; often, it is a crime as well. We have called for a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence."⁸⁷

In the aftermath of sexual violence, restorative justice includes both restitution for the survivor and attention to the needs of the perpetrator. These needs may include pastoral support for a sacramental process of contrition and conversion complemented by professional support in overcoming abusive and dominating behaviors that may be entrenched in one's character. Christian compassion and mercy do not absolve perpetrators of responsibility for their actions; rather, they enable Christians to accompany perpetrators with love through the ecclesial, civil, and legal levels of work toward justice and restoration of right-relationship. There is evidence that perpetrators of domestic violence are more likely to complete treatment programs when referred by churches, an indication that ecclesial communities can make a

⁸⁶ The term appeared in Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson, eds., *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* (New York: New American Library, 1974) and was the title of the 1975 documentary film *Rape Culture*, which focused on popular media. Emilie Buchwald and colleagues define "rape culture" as "a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women.... A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm. In a rape culture, both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, as inevitable as death or taxes." Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth, "Preamble" to *Transforming a Rape Culture*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2005), xi. The term implies that sexual violence is not inherent to human behavior but a manifestation of cultural formation.

⁸⁷ USCCB, *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence against Women*, 10th anniversary edition, 2002, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/when-i-call-help-pastoral-response-domestic-violence>.

crucial contribution to personal transformation.⁸⁸ Offenders seeking rehabilitation, notes Pegi Taylor, a journalist who covers sexual abuse, “need people who will see them as not defined solely by their crime, people who will stand by them as they go through the corrections system, receive treatment and labor to modify their thinking and behavior.”⁸⁹ This transformation of character typically requires a minimum of one year or more of counseling, accountability practices, and spiritual disciplines. In some cases, the process of conversion from abusive behavior may be lifelong or even eschatological.

The whole Body of Christ is injured by an act of sexual violation against any one of its members, and therefore reconciliation concerns not just the survivor and the perpetrator of sexual violation but others who may be immediately affected (e.g., the children in a family in which one spouse abuses the other) and the entire community who suffers the pain of broken relationships, shattered trust, and complicity in silence and secrecy. Herman writes: “Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*. Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried... Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.”⁹⁰ When an ecclesial community stands with survivors of sexual violence, listens to their pain, accompanies them on their journey toward healing, holds perpetrators accountable, and stands with them in support of their conversion from domination and violence, the entire Body of Christ becomes stronger.

⁸⁸ Nancy Nason-Clark and Nancy A. Murphy, *Celebrating the Graduates: An Exploration into the Nature and Extent of Change in the Lives of Men Who Have Graduated from a Batterers Program* (paper presented to Northwest Family Life Board of Directors, Seattle, WA, 2003). Cited in Nancy A. Murphy, *God’s Reconciling Love: A Pastor’s Handbook on Domestic Violence* (Seattle, WA: FaithTrust Institute, 2003), 22. Studies on the effectiveness of programs for perpetrators include Kate Seymour, Kristin Natalier, and Sarah Wendt, “Changed Men? Men Talking about Violence and Change in Domestic and Family Violence Perpetrator Intervention Programs,” *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 5 (2021): 884–901, doi:10.1177/1097184X211038998; Ntandoyenkosi Maphosa and Shahana Rasool, “The Effectiveness of Perpetrator Programmes in Promoting Positive Gender Relations and Preventing Domestic Violence: A Case Study of NICRO’S PIPV Programme,” *Gender & Behaviour* 15, no. 2 (2017): 9125–32; Derrik R. Tollefson, Kevin Webb, Dirk Shumway, et al., “A Mind-Body Approach to Domestic Violence Perpetrator Treatment: Program Overview and Preliminary Outcomes,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 18, no. 1 (2009): 17–45, doi:10.1080/10926770802610657.

⁸⁹ Pegi Taylor, “Beyond Myths and Denial: What Church Communities Need to Know about Sexual Abusers,” *America* 186 (April 1, 2002): 10.

⁹⁰ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1.

Witnessing to the Eschatological Resurrection of the Body

Christ's descent into hell on Holy Saturday was followed by Easter Sunday; ecclesial ministry for survivors of sexual violence takes place in an eschatological context. The sacraments signify and make present the salvation wrought by Christ, anticipating that day when tears and death shall be no more and mourning, suffering, and pain shall pass away (Rev 21:1-4). Sacraments gift us with a foretaste of the fullness of redemption that we do not yet experience completely in our mortal bodies and imperfect relationships. In an ecclesial and theological context, we can speak not only the clinical language of measurable results but also the biblical and sacramental languages that "give reason for our hope" (1 Pet 3:15) in a God whose power of love exceeds our own human capabilities and timelines. Grace expands the human capacities for courage and hope in the midst of enduring difficulties, enabling movement toward a future good even when this good is presently incomplete. The sacramental life of the ecclesial community incorporates the survivor within the dynamic tension of the "already" and the "not yet" of the reign of God.⁹¹ With Paul, we "groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23). At the same time, gifted with the first fruits of the Spirit, we live in faith and hope that creation will be set free from slavery to corruption and that we will share "in the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21-23).

Conclusion

Given the pervasiveness of child abuse and sexual violence in our society, Lutheran theologian and spiritual director Mindy Makant observes, "An untold number of bodies bruised and bloodied by traumatic violence populate our church pews each and every time the body of Christ gathers for worship."⁹² The Catholic Church is beginning to hear the voices of some of the survivors of the clerical sexual abuse perpetuated over the past century. Essential steps toward the prevention of future clerical abuse have been taken, and the processes of transparent truth-telling, restorative justice, and reform are ongoing.⁹³ At the same time, the Catholic Church

⁹¹ See Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 6.

⁹² Mindy Makant, "Transforming Trauma: The Power of Touch and the Practice of Anointing," *Word & World* 34 (2014): 161.

⁹³ In the United States, for example, ongoing research addressing the clerical abuse crisis includes work supported by the University of Notre Dame's Research and Scholarship Task Force's Church Sexual Abuse Crisis Research Grant Program (<https://research.nd.edu/our-services/funding-opportunities/faculty/internal-grants-programs/church-sexual-abuse-crisis-research-grant-program>) and Fordham University's

must also create opportunities to hear the voices of members of the ecclesial body who have suffered from sexual violence in all its forms. Like Tamar, the majority of survivors in society at large are female. Listening to their voices will strengthen ecclesial communion and can generate constructive recommendations for ecclesial actions that can contribute to the prevention of sexual violence, the execution of intervention programs, and the enhancement of pastoral inclusion of those wounded in body and soul by the sins of child abuse, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and rape. The recommendations of these survivors will complement and enhance initiatives underway in those parishes and dioceses that already have some form of pastoral response to nonclerical sexual violence and domestic abuse and may inspire new initiatives in those that do not.⁹⁴

In addition to pastoral programs, there is an urgent need for greater ecclesial attention to the rape culture of our society. Multiple analyses of clerical sexual abuse, including that of Pope Francis, have identified a culture of clericalism as one of the factors that contributed to the scandal.⁹⁵ Analogously, rape culture contributes to the extraordinarily high rates of sexual violence against women in our society and the low rates of prosecution of sexual crimes. The culture of sexual objectification, domination, and violence that permeates our society is evident in Elizabeth's account (cited previously) of the father of her children, who physically and sexually abused her while calling her "bitch, ho, worthless, ugly." From the young women who spoke at Saint Mary's, we received a glimpse of what it is like to grow up in a society in which language and actions such as these permeate media

"Taking Responsibility: Jesuit Educational Institutions Confront the Causes and Legacy of Clergy Sexual Abuse" (<https://takingresponsibility.ace.fordham.edu>). In France, the Institut Catholique of Paris, the Collège des Bernardins, and the Centre Sèvre have joined forces with the French Bishops' Conference and the Conference of Men and Women Religious of France to hold a series of public conferences in response to the October 2021 report by the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church. See <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/theologians-begin-in-depth-treatment-of-sexual-abuse/15839>.

⁹⁴ For a summary of what is already being done, including identification of some best practices and resources, see Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, *Catholic Response to Sexual and Domestic Violence and Abuse*.

⁹⁵ Pope Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God," August 20, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html. See also Susan A. Ross, "Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis," *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 632–52, doi:[10.1177/0040563919857186](https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563919857186); Michael L. Papesh, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 12–15.

culture and social discourse. We also witnessed the leadership, courage, and faith young Catholic women can contribute to the cultivation of what the Catholic social tradition terms a “society worthy of the human person” and a “civilization of love.”