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Testimony, Responsibility and Recognition: A Ricoeurian Response to Crises of Sexual Abuse

ABSTRACT

How can we, as individuals and as members of religious, educational, and/or social institutions, more adequately respond to the crises of sexual abuse that have come to light in recent years? This paper will address this question through the philosophical lens of Paul Ricoeur. The argument proposed here is that through Ricoeur's hermeneutics of testimony, responsibility, and recognition, we can begin to approach, address, and evaluate the crises of sexual abuse we face by grounding our ethical reflections, and actions, within a more robust philosophical framework. Therefore, this paper will proceed as follows. The first three sections will investigate Ricoeur's writings in order to glean from them three distinct hermeneutical approaches to three different sets of criteria at play in contemporary crises of sexual abuse: first, a hermeneutics of testimony, related to memory and history; second, a hermeneutics of responsibility, related to authority and justice; and, finally, a hermeneutics of recognition, related to forgiveness and forgetting. Insofar as each of these hermeneutical approaches offers us some insight into the problematics underlying crises of sexual abuse, the fourth section will offer an evaluation of these approaches by focusing on the specific case of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. The final section will consider possible avenues for resolution of these crises through Ricoeur's notion of exceptional "states of peace," at the heart of which lies mutual recognition. My hope is that this contribution provides new avenues for conversation and deliberation, as well as new resources and frameworks for articulating and implementing responsible action in the face of sexual abuse.

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION AND THESIS

In 2002, the Boston Globe broke a story about allegations of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Boston (“Spotlight Investigation: Abuse in the Catholic Church”).¹ Not only did these allegations prove true, but the sexual abuse scandal in Boston turned out to be a watershed moment for victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church worldwide. Not only have individual cases of sexual abuse come to light in diocese around the world, but compounding this scandal is the fact that, since 2002, it has come to light that for decades before, and since, the public exposure of this abuse, the Church—at the local and international levels—actively pursued a strategy of “cover-up” and sought to keep this information from being publically revealed (see Hamilton 67–96). Since 2002, the Church has remained ineffective in addressing its sexual abuse crisis, and unable to provide an adequate explanation for its secrecy.

In 2010, the Boy Scouts of America were ordered to pay over \$18.5 million to a Scout who had been sexually abused in the 1980s by a Scout leader (Associated Press). Once again, what made this case problematic—beyond the sexual abuse—was the evidence presented in court that indicated the organization’s knowledge of the problem, and, consequently, the actions they took, not to protect the scout in question, but to protect the reputation of the organization (McGreal). Secrecy and cover-up prevailed, where responsibility and justice should have been the order of the day.

In 2011, a former assistant football coach at Penn State, Jerry Sandusky, was indicted by a grand jury for sexually abusing a number of young men while employed at the university (“Times Topics”). Once again, the scandal of Sandusky’s sexual abuse took on new life when it came to light that when brought to the attention of Sandusky’s superiors in the football program, as well as to a number of administrators at the university, the decision was made to cover up the situation, and keep it out of the public eye, rather than report it to the proper authorities. These individuals chose to protect their own interests and their own personnel, at the expense of the young men who continued to be abused.

The aforementioned examples of sexual abuse point to two things: first, the phenomenon of the sexual abuse of minors—a phenomenon that

¹ The source is the Boston Globe archive page dedicated to the unfolding of the sexual abuse crisis in the Archdiocese of Boston. It begins with the original two-part story from 6 January 2002 on Fr. John J. Geoghan and documents the unfolding of the crisis in the years after 2002. See also *Betrayal* by the Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe (Boston: Back Bay, 2003).

is both shocking and frightening; second, each of these institutions, when faced with the reality of sexual abuse within their ranks, chose to actively conceal this information from the public eye, and cover up the transgressions of their respective communities. The sexual abuse of minors is a tragedy in and of itself, but the compounding of this tragedy through decisions and actions taken to cover up, rather than address and end, the problem of sexual abuse calls for pause—at the very least—from all those involved in these, and similar, communities.

The question must be asked: how can we respond to crises of sexual abuse more adequately? What are the resources we can enact to achieve this end? This, therefore, is the question I would like to address in this article, and I will do so from within the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur, however, is not just an accidental conversation partner in these deliberations. The philosophical resources Ricoeur provides—specifically through the concepts of testimony, responsibility, and recognition—shed light, not only on the challenging phenomenon of sexual abuse itself, but on the potential avenues for attending to these crises latent within the dialectical tensions grounding these hermeneutical possibilities. Thus, the question from this point of view becomes: what resources does Ricoeur provide to help us approach crises of sexual abuse, understand—as much as possible—what happened, and evaluate potential avenues for us to move forward in the shadow of these crises?

In order to address this question, this article will proceed along the following lines. The first three sections will investigate Ricoeur's writings in order to glean from them three distinct hermeneutical approaches to three different sets of criteria at play in contemporary crises of sexual abuse: first, a hermeneutics of testimony, as it relates to memory and history; second, a hermeneutics of responsibility, as it relates to authority and justice; and, finally, a hermeneutics of recognition, as it relates to forgiveness and forgetting. Insofar as each of these hermeneutical approaches offers us some insight into the problematics underlying crises of sexual abuse, I will, in the fourth section, offer an evaluation of how the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, for example, can be viewed in light of a Ricoeurian understanding of testimony, responsibility and recognition. My hope is that this contribution can serve to open new avenues for conversation and deliberation, as well as new resources and frameworks for articulating and implementing responsible action in the face of sexual abuse.

PART I: MEMORY, HISTORY, AND TESTIMONY

When we begin to think about the phenomenon of sexual abuse, we must first ask a pair of interrelated questions: “What happened?” and “To

whom?” Without addressing these two questions, any attempts to address crises of sexual abuse would be misguided. This pair of interrelated questions finds a parallel in Ricoeur, who structures his discussion of memory between a similar set of questions: “Of *what* are there memories? *Whose* memory is it?” (Ricoeur, *Memory* 3). The impetus behind these questions becomes important insofar as Ricoeur wants to draw an important distinction—though, admittedly, a fragile one—between memory and imagination. What is the content of this distinction? Pellauer suggests that “it is easy to confound [memory and imagination] in that they both appeal to the idea of an image . . . but in the case of memory [the image] is not absent in the sense of being unreal or feigned [as it might be in imagination], but rather as ‘having been’” (Pellauer 110). Ricoeur himself, in an interview with Richard Kearney, makes the same point:

there is a positing act in memory whereas there is an unrealizing of history in imagination. It is very difficult to maintain the distinction; but it must be kept at least as a basic recognition of two opposite claims of the past, as *unreal* and *real*. (Kearney, *Owl of Minerva* 154)

Memories are therefore related to images and events that “have been”—that were, at one point, “real.” This brings to the foreground the important category of history, without which we would be unable to distinguish between memory and imagination—between the “having been real” and the “unreal.”

This is not to suggest, however, that history is the precursor of memory in a linear sense. The relationship between memory and history is one of dynamic interaction and mutual dependence. Memory can only be distinguished from imagination because of history, yet history can only be understood as a collection of memories. Borrowing from Michel de Certeau, Ricoeur’s epistemological approach to history is that of the “historiographical operation.” Within this operation, Ricoeur distinguishes three distinct, yet interconnected methodological movements or phases. The first phase, the “documentary phase,” is the one that spans the time from “the declarations of eyewitnesses to the constitution of archives” (*Memory* 136). It is in this phase that the historiographical operation concerns itself with the establishment of “documentary proof.” The second phase is the “explanation/understanding” phase, which concerns itself with “the connective ‘because’ responding to the question ‘Why?’: why did things happen like that and not otherwise?” (*Memory* 136). The third phase of the historiographical operation, according to Ricoeur, is the representative phase, in which we encounter “writing that plainly states the historian’s intentions, which is to represent the past just as it happened—whatever

meaning may be assigned to this ‘just as’” (*Memory* 136). This final phase is, very basically, the writing of history. As the historiographical operation moves through each of these phases, we are once again confronted with the question of memory and how we come to know and believe some memories over and against others. How does the historian know what memories are “real,” and thus memory, or “unreal,” and thus imagination? Ricoeur’s response to these inquiries—his articulation of the place where the dynamic relationship between memory and history is located—is in a hermeneutics of testimony.

Testimony takes us with one bound to the formal conditions of the “things of the past,” the conditions of possibility of the actual process of the historiographical operation. With testimony opens an epistemological process that departs from declared memory, passes through the archive and documents, and finds its fulfillment in documentary proof. (*Memory* 161)

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Testimony makes a bold claim to credibility: “I was there! Believe me!” Nevertheless, testimony is not free from suspicion. While testimony declares “I was there! Believe me!”, it cannot escape a nagging question: “Why should I?” For Ricoeur, the criteria for this suspicion are always already inherent in testimony. While testimony is always open, as Pellauer notes, to the retort “‘I don’t believe you’ . . . this does not disprove it, and . . . Ricoeur thinks in the end we must appeal to the conviction expressed by some testimony . . . if we are to say anything at all” (Pellauer 119). Greisch agrees with Pellauer when he suggests that “the credence which characterizes attestation is also the ‘trust’ which copes with suspicion” (Greisch 86). As for Ricoeur, while he does acknowledge the centrality and importance of an element of suspicion in the act of testimony, he ultimately comes down on the side of credibility, rather than suspicion, when approaching testimony, and for the following reason:

We must not forget that everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony . . . whatever may be our lack of confidence in principle in such testimony, we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past, which someone attests having witnessed in person. (*Memory* 147)

Testimony, memory and history are crucial for initiating an investigation into crises of sexual abuse, and these themes will follow us throughout this analysis. Before applying these concepts to a concrete example of a crisis of sexual abuse, e.g. in the Roman Catholic Church, we must first develop two additional lines of thinking pertinent to this analysis: first,

a hermeneutics of responsibility, as it relates to the tensions between authority and justice, and, second, a hermeneutics of recognition, as it relates to the tensions between forgiveness and forgetting.

PART II: AUTHORITY, JUSTICE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

86 Ricoeur understands authority to be “the right to command, the power (recognized or not) to impose obedience” (Ricoeur, *Reflections* 91). This definition, he argues, “immediately underscores the dissymmetrical, hierarchical aspect of a notion that brings face-to-face those who command and those who obey. But what a strange power that rests on a right, the right to command, which implies a claim to legitimacy” (91). Through a simple definition of the term authority, Ricoeur is able to articulate the complexity of the issue at hand: authority claims a right to power, but what is this “right” and how is it legitimized? If the power is not legitimized—i.e. the power to command is not the right of the authority—then such power borders on, and in most cases spills over into, violence. In such a case, an authority no longer commands because it has the “right” to do so, but rather it commands through domination. The key distinction Ricoeur makes between, on the one hand, an authority that has a legitimate right to command obedience and, on the other hand, an authority that commands through domination, is the question of credibility. “Authority does border on violence as the power to impose obedience as domination. But what distinguishes it from violence is precisely the credibility attached to its character of legitimacy” (*Reflections* 93). The question of credibility, then, becomes central to any discussion of authority in our contemporary situation. How does an authority earn and maintain such a level of credibility that it can hold the legitimate “right to command” and “power to impose obedience”? One possible articulation of the credibility criteria most pertinent to our contemporary situation would be the criteria of justice. An authority can claim a legitimate “right to command” and “power to impose obedience” if that authority can be seen and understood to be a just authority.

In turning to the question of justice and the just, I want to focus on three pieces by Ricoeur: “Justice and Love,” “Justice and Truth,” and “Justice and Vengeance.” In “Justice and Love,” Ricoeur addresses an age-old question in religious, and specifically Christian, discourse: what is the relationship between justice and love? For Ricoeur, there is an inherent and inevitable disproportion between justice and love because “love [speaks] . . . in a kind of language other than that of justice” (*Figuring* 317). Ricoeur notes that love speaks the language of praise, the complicated language of

command, and the language of feelings, but none of these are the language of justice: “neither the circumstances nor the means of justice are those of love . . . love does not argue . . . justice does argue” (*Figuring* 321). What is more, justice must come to a decision. Both justice and love are directed toward action: justice is directed toward the action of fairness and equality, articulated in the golden rule; love, on the other hand, requires one to go beyond the golden rule to the hyperethical and hypermoral commitment to the love of neighbor manifested in the love of one’s enemy. Ricoeur, nevertheless, offers the following caveat to this articulation of love: “If the hypermoral is not to turn into the nonmoral . . . it has to pass through the principle of morality, summed up in the golden rule and formalized by the rule of justice” (*Figuring* 328). Thus, in the justice/love dialectic, love is greater than justice, but irresponsible without it. Justice, in requiring the argumentation, deliberation and decision making love does not, grounds love in the moral realm. The relationship between justice and love, then, is an intimate dialectic, with each term requiring the other.

Next, in “Justice and Truth,” Ricoeur argues that the quest for justice—particularly as we find it in his practical ethical formulation: “aiming at the good life with, and for, others in just institutions”²—is the quest for “a just distance among all human beings” (Ricoeur, *Reflections* 61). Understood in a framework of “just distance,” the question of truth takes on the force of an injunction for the acting agent, insofar as truth becomes the sieve—or the norm—through which justice must pass. Is Ricoeur speaking of “objective truth” in these cases? No. Rather than “objective truth,” Ricoeur is speaking about “the certitude that in this situation this is the best decision, what has to be done” (*Reflections* 70). Passing through the sieve of truth, justice—and the agent behind the “just” action—becomes, in language Ricoeur adopts from Kant, imputable. That is to say, having passed through sieve of truth, justice—as “just distance”—becomes imputable to the agent acting “justly”: the agent becomes responsible for their actions.

Finally, in “Justice and Vengeance,” Ricoeur analyzes the challenging relationship between these two concepts. The primary aim of justice, Ricoeur suggests, is to move beyond vengeance, yet “the first stage of this emergence of justice beyond vengeance coincides with the feeling of indignation, which finds its least sophisticated expression in the simple cry: ‘It’s not fair!’” (*Reflections* 223) This indignant cry, we can see from the discussion in the previous section, lacks “just distance”—a clear break—“between the initial tie between vengeance and justice” (*Reflections* 223). What Ricoeur suggests, in order to overcome this lack of “just distance,” is the involvement

² This ethical formulation is both articulated and addressed in the seventh and eighth studies of Ricoeur’s “little ethics,” *Oneself as Another*.

of a third party to arbitrate between an offender and their victim (*Reflections* 224). Insofar as both justice and vengeance are action oriented—i.e. directed toward others—a third party is required to ensure that the “rule of justice” is observed. Ricoeur offers a number of “third party” alternatives for maintaining the “rule of law” as the “just distance” between parties: written laws, courts, judges, the trial process, etc. Here again, however, the questions of authority, legitimacy, and credibility come to the fore. Any decision rendered by a third party will be received as violent by the punished, even if the punishment is fair and just. Thus, the third party—as a source of authority—must be legitimate and credible; otherwise the decision rendered will be perceived as violent domination rather than just punishment. Regardless of its justification or objective, however, Ricoeur reminds us that “punishment remains in the grip of the spirit of vengeance, which the spirit of justice has the project of overcoming” (*Reflections* 230).

As previously argued, authority maintains its credibility and legitimacy through a commitment to the just. Thus, it is the concept of responsibility that presents itself as the most reasonable hermeneutical framework for understanding the relationship between authority and justice. Ricoeur admits that the term “responsibility” is relatively new in philosophical discourse, and, as such, is not used with the precision that such a term requires. For example, the term responsibility can be understood within the framework of civil law, where “responsibility is defined by the obligation to make up or to compensate for the tort one has caused through one’s own fault” (*The Just* 11). Additionally, it can be understood in the framework of penal law, where responsibility is “the obligation to accept punishment” (*The Just* 11). Responsibility extends beyond the legal sphere, as well, in a vagueness that, at the limit, articulates a sense of responsibility in which “you are responsible for everything and everyone” (*The Just* 12). For the purposes of our present discussion, the hermeneutics of responsibility we want to develop comes out of the ancient concept of imputation, through Kant, and into the contemporary understanding of responsibility as accountability for one’s words and actions. With such an understanding of responsibility, we begin to see more clearly why it may well be the most appropriate hermeneutical lens for understanding the relationship between authority and justice, and for addressing contemporary crises of sexual abuse, where questions regarding authority and justice are paramount.

PART III: FORGETTING, FORGIVENESS, AND RECOGNITION

In what is probably the most challenging matrix discussed in this paper—particularly when we integrate it into our conversation on crises of sexual

abuse—we turn now to the relationship between forgetting and forgiveness, through a hermeneutics of recognition.

For Ricoeur, forgetting—like forgiveness—designates the horizon of the entire investigation in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, insofar as forgetting exists within a “problematic of memory and faithfulness to the past” (*Memory* 412). Forgetting stands as the challenge *par excellence* to memory insofar as forgetting puts into question the very claim memory makes to reliability (*Memory* 414). This is not to say that forgetting is a category that we must overcome, but rather it is “the enigma constitutive of the entire problematic of memory” (*Memory* 414) that we must understand differently. Ricoeur acknowledges that we cannot remember everything at each given moment in our lives, but notes that this form of forgetting—where something is not lost to memory, but is rather reserved in the mind to be recalled later—can, in fact, be foundational to the phenomenon of memory. As Pellauer notes, this type of forgetting—i.e. memory held in reserve—allows us to “speak of this kind of forgetting as forgetting that founds memory” (Pellauer 124). Thus, according to Ricoeur, we “absolutely cannot speak of a duty of forgetting” (*Memory* 418) because to do so would undercut the entire foundation for memory. Ricoeur suggests, then, that “forgetting has a positive meaning insofar as having-been prevails over being-no-longer in the meaning attached to the idea of the past. Having-been makes forgetting the immemorial resource offered to the work of remembering” (*Memory* 443). What remains to be discussed is the relationship between forgetting and Ricoeur’s three “abuses of memory”: blocked memory, manipulated memory, and obligated memory.

In discussing the relationship between forgetting and blocked memory, Ricoeur turns his attention to Freud, psychoanalytic theory, and the reality that “many instances of forgetting are due to impediments blocking access to the treasures buried in memory” (*Memory* 444). In the Freudian analysis, blocked memory is the result of the mind’s repression of traumatic experiences. While the traumatic experience appears to be “forgotten,” psychoanalysis shows that, despite this “forgetting,” “the trauma remains . . . entire sections of the reputedly forgotten past can return” (*Memory* 445). This is what makes blocked memory, paradoxically, unforgettable. Manipulated memory, on the other hand, does not deal with repressed memories, but rather with memories that have been subject to, and influenced by, ideology. Ricoeur notes that “everything that compounds the fragility of identity also proves to be an opportunity for the manipulation of memory, mainly through ideology” (*Memory* 448). As noted earlier, Ricoeur acknowledges that we cannot remember everything at once. The danger of manipulated memory comes to the fore when higher—i.e. authoritative—powers play on the “blank spaces” of memory and “impose

a canonical narrative [on social actors] by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery. A devious form of forgetting is at work here, resulting from stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves” (*Memory* 448). Forgetting becomes, in such cases, both semi-passive and semi-active. The social agents, while manipulated to a certain degree, still bear certain responsibilities for their situation, especially when forgetting becomes avoidance, or a wanting-not-to-know. Ricoeur, in response to this willingness to allow ourselves to be manipulated by authoritative powers, reformulates the Enlightenment’s *Sapere aude!* into the exclamation, *Dare to give an account of yourself!* (*Memory* 449). Finally, in addressing the relationship of forgetting and obligated memory, Ricoeur turns to the phenomenon of amnesty. As the commanded forgetting of the socio-political authority, amnesty’s aim is “the reconciliation of enemy citizens, civil peace” (*Memory* 453). Expanding on Ricoeur’s definition, Kearney reminds us that, for Ricoeur, “amnesty is never amnesia. The past must be recollected, re-imagined, rethought and worked through” (*Owl of Minerva* 97). This is distinct from, say, pardon, where amnesia is the goal—a forgetting of the past, particularly when that past is problematic for the authority authorizing the pardon. Latent within this conversation on forgetting, and the next topic for discussion, is the challenging question of forgiving:

Against the “never” of evil, which makes pardon impossible, we are asked to think the “marvel of a once again,” which makes it possible. But the possibility of forgiveness is a “marvel” precisely because it surpasses the limits of rational calculation and explanation. (Kearney, *Owl of Minerva* 96)

As Kearney quite eloquently demonstrates, forgiveness is rather distinct from the principle trajectory of Ricoeur’s work in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Nevertheless, it is with a discussion of forgiveness that Ricoeur ends this work. If, Ricoeur suggests, the concept of forgiveness exists at all, then it must exist along the same continuum as memory, history, and forgetting, but as an extension beyond them. The concept of forgiveness presumes that there are, in fact, situations in which “we can accuse someone of something [and] presume him to be or declare him guilty” (*Memory* 460). Thus, the notion of imputability is essential to a Ricoeurian understanding of forgiveness. Imputability allows us to bind an agent to his or her actions and to find fault with particular agents and/or actions. Fault, for Ricoeur, “consists in transgressing a rule . . . [or more] fundamentally, a harm done to others” (*Memory* 461). Thus, suggests Ricoeur, “fault in its essence is unforgivable not only in fact but by right” (*Memory* 466). Yet, in the end,

“there is forgiveness” (*Memory* 466). For this reason, Ricoeur understands forgiveness to be beyond the traditional systems of ethics and morality. Forgiveness goes above and beyond what analytical philosophy can argue for or understand. Quoting Derrida, Ricoeur notes that “forgiveness is not, and it should not be, either normal, or normative, or normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary” (*Memory* 469). Otherwise, were forgiveness understood as normative or normalizing, “it would consist in lifting the punitive sanction, in not punishing when one can and should punish. . . . Forgiveness creating impunity is a great injustice” (*Memory* 470). Nevertheless, insofar as imputability binds an agent to his or her action, forgiveness—without becoming a substitute for impunity—“should release the agent from his act” (*Memory* 489). Thus, under the sign of forgiveness, says Ricoeur, “the guilty person is to be considered capable of something other than his offenses and his faults. He is held to be restored to his capacity for acting, and action restored to its capacity for continuing” (*Memory* 493).

The question, however, remains: how do we navigate the terrain between forgetting and forgiving? How do we know the role of forgetting, and when (if at all) are we to release an agent from his or her action through forgiveness? The most promising way, according to Ricoeur, is through a hermeneutics of recognition. When he speaks about recognition, Ricoeur refers to it “as a minor miracle” (*Memory* 416). Through this “minor miracle,” we “recognize as being the same the present memory and the first impression intended as other” (*Memory* 39). Recognition, however, is not simply limited to images and impressions. For Ricoeur, our understanding of recognition develops beyond this initial stage and, as Pellauer notes, moves “from recognizing a thing to recognizing oneself, to recognizing others, to, finally, being recognized as oneself by others” (127). The danger here, of course, is the threat of misrecognition—a phenomenon which “runs the spectrum from disregard to disrespect, to contempt and even denial of the other’s humanity . . . [this] is always possible because of the fundamental dissymmetry between oneself and others” (Pellauer 133). While we can appreciate the centrality of the concept of recognition in general, how, we might ask, does this understanding of recognition relate to forgetting and forgiveness? With regard to forgetting, recognition allows us to distinguish between the “having-been” and the “being-no-longer” of the past. Recognizing the “having-been,” over and against the “being-no-longer,” makes the space for forgetting to become a foundation for memory. It is in light of this that Ricoeur can make the claim that “every act of memory . . . is thus summed up in recognition” (*Memory* 495). As for forgiving, recognition plays a central role in its procedural unfolding. Forgiveness requires an act of recognition insofar as one must recognize the agent, the action, and the link between the

two in order to impute responsibility. This act of recognition is especially pertinent in the case of faulty actions. Without recognition, we are unable to impute responsibility to an agent and bind them to their action. Without this imputation of responsibility, we are unable to release the agent, through an act of forgiveness, from his or her action. Thus, a hermeneutics of recognition must hold a central place in any discussions on forgetting and forgiving.

In the final section of this paper, I will turn to a specific example of a crisis of sexual abuse in order to try and concretize the more conceptual analysis provided up to this point. As such, I will turn to the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church in order to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of the proposed Ricoeurian hermeneutics of testimony, responsibility, and recognition, within the matrices of memory, history, authority, justice, forgetting, and forgiveness.

PART IV: A RICOEURIAN RESPONSE TO CRISES OF SEXUAL ABUSE: THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The first set of questions we must ask about any crisis of sexual abuse, and specifically the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, deals with the category of memory: “What happened?” and “To whom?” In approaching the category of memory, the first step we must take is toward those persons whose experiences constitute the “what” of memory and who, as persons, constitute its “whom”: the victims. This move toward the victims themselves goes against the more “typical” move made in these cases toward the “record keepers” or the “institutional archives” that house the official accounts of “what happened” and “to whom.” In the case of the Catholic Church, the “record keepers” are the hierarchy of the Catholic Church themselves: priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes. I would argue, however, that such movement is misdirected. The first step in any process of attending to sexual abuse ought to be a step toward the victims of sexual abuse themselves. In speaking to the victims—in listening to their stories—we are given access to their memories of what happened through their testimony, characterized in the Ricoeurian phrase, “I was there! Believe me!” Their testimony provides access to the embodied and embattled memories that are not stored in the “documentary proof” of the official institutional archives. This attention to the testimony of the victims also aids in addressing the testimonial injustice many victims have experienced, and continue to experience.³

³ For an interesting reflection on, and analysis of, testimonial and epistemic injustice, see Fricker.

When we consider this category of testimony with regards to the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, we are tragically faced with a phenomenon that Ricoeur himself acknowledged as latent within the concept of testimony—namely, the “criteria of suspicion” that accompany all acts of testimony. The “criteria of suspicion” are that which responds to the claim “I was there! Believe me!” with the retort “Why should I?” This highlights the unavoidable ambiguity of testimony, and gestures toward one of the challenges facing the victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Victims must overcome this oft-heard retort to their claims for recognition and justice. The perpetrators of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, and their protectors, have frequently and systematically incubated these seeds of doubt, inherent in testimony, in order to foster scenarios whereby suspicion, rather than trust, becomes the *modus operandi* for understanding testimony. What Ricoeur offers, in these cases, is the important response to the response (of suspicion) that while we must acknowledge the ambiguities of history and memory that reveal themselves in testimony, if we are to say and/or do anything at all, we must have, on some level, trust in the validity of the testimony we receive. Ricoeur is not suggesting that we “turn off” the voice of suspicion—this would be impossible—but, rather, that we must keep an ear out for those moments of truth in testimony if we are to say anything about anything at all. Not to orient ourselves towards others in this way, suggests Ricoeur, will give rise not only to suffering, but to *the suffering other*. For Ricoeur, suffering is defined “by the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting, of being-able-to-act” (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 190), and this is precisely the suffering incurred by the victims of sexual abuse. When the seeds of doubt sown by suspicion are favored over the moments of truth in testimony, the testifying other is made to suffer: their self-integrity is violated and, as a result, their ability to act in a given situation is impaired, if not eliminated. As a remedy for this unequal form of relationality—as a response to the suffering other—Ricoeur offers friendship—that form of relationality constituted by equality:

While equality is presupposed in friendship . . . equality is reestablished only through the recognition by the self of the superiority of the other’s authority . . . equality is reestablished only through the shared admission of fragility and, finally, of mortality. (*Oneself as Another* 192)

This balancing act between attending to suspicion, while simultaneously recognizing the need for trust in, and friendship with, the suffering other, is one of the important contributions Ricoeur makes to the discourse on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

Another prominent Ricoeurian theme that arises from this discussion on testimony, suspicion, and trust is the concept of authority, and within this concept, the concept of justice. Authority, for Ricoeur, consists in “the right to command” and “the power to impose obedience.” The right to command, of course, rests on a claim to legitimacy—a claim that the commanding authority deserves to be obeyed and respected. If this is the case, then any claimant of such a right must recognize that, if it is not seen as a legitimate wielder of the right to command obedience, then it cannot be seen as authoritative because it has no legitimate claim to credibility. In the example of the Catholic Church, if its authority and credibility were not lost over the decades of sexual abuse, then they were certainly lost when civil court documents revealed that the Church had, in fact, been aware of the crisis and chosen to cover up and conceal it. Without the criterion of credibility to legitimate its right to command obedience, any such exercise of authority—or, one might say in these cases, of domination—demands that the question of justice be more openly and directly addressed.

Ricoeur offered a number of insights into the question of justice, but what remains most important for the discussion at hand is that justice, in the Ricoeurian paradigm, rests on a foundation of fairness and equality. It is, of course, only with a foundation in justice that love even becomes possible for Ricoeur. Love—*agape*—is at the heart of the Catholic Church’s mission in the world, and this is precisely what becomes impossible for the Catholic Church to embody and endorse without justice. Recall that, for Ricoeur, “it is first in contrast to justice that *agape* presents its credentials” (Ricoeur, *Course of Recognition* 220). *Agape* pertains to the realm of the hypermoral and the hyperethical, embodied in the Christian mandate to “love one’s enemies.” In order, however, for *agape* to avoid becoming the epitome of the non-moral, the epitome of the unjust, there must be an underlying conceptualization of justice through which, in addition to the Golden Rule, *agape* must pass. The apparent opposition between *agape* and justice is overcome through the recognition that the former, at least in practice, must be in some way dependent on the latter. While it is also true that *agape*, for Ricoeur, speaks a different language than justice, if we bring Ricoeur into conversation with the Catholic Church on *agape*, particularly in light of the Catholic Church’s crisis of sexual abuse, we see more clearly the need for articulating this relationship between *agape* and justice. While it is true that “*agape* declares itself, proclaims itself” while “justice makes arguments” (*Course of Recognition* 223), we cannot avoid the fact, in practice at least, that “the test of credibility for any talk about *agape* lies within the dialectic of love and justice” (222). Ricoeur’s discourse on *agape* provides the Catholic Church, particularly in light of its crisis of sexual abuse, with the transformative possibility of a renewed language of *agape*. The

justice and authority claimed by the Catholic Church today must account for the dialectic of love and justice, and this through an acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility for the injustice the Catholic Church has perpetrated against the victims of clerical sexual abuse. Avoidance of this responsibility fundamentally undermines the claim of the Catholic Church to being a credible, legitimate authority that embodies the hypermoral and hyperethical realm of *agape*. Only through the lens of responsibility can this rupture be addressed, and it is only through this same approach that we can begin down the pathway of forgetting, forgiving, and recognition.

Analyzing the concept of forgetting, and the possibility of forgiveness, is difficult in itself, but especially in light of crises of sexual abuse. Many of the memories of sexual abuse have been blocked by a victim's own psyche; other memories have been manipulated by institutional authorities that have, over the years, been determined to keep these crises within their control; still other memories have been lost through commanded amnesia. The loss of these memories undercuts their reliability, yet returning to Freud, as Ricoeur does, can prove to be invaluable in these cases. While memories may be blocked, manipulated or commanded, they still remain in the psyche. In the case of sexual abuse victims, the trauma of what they suffered is not likely to be forgotten completely. Thus, the type of forgetting pertinent to these situations will not be the "being-no-longer," but rather the "having-been" of memory—memory held in reserve. This is the form of forgetting that, as Pellauer notes, founds memory. It is precisely here that Ricoeur's analysis of forgetting impacts the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. Insofar as it pertains to the "having-been" of memory—a designation that requires a fundamental trust in testimony—forgetting becomes the discursive space for recalling memories held in reserve in the hopes of retrieving those memories that have been blocked, reclaiming those memories that have been manipulated, and naming those memories that have been commanded. Challenging though it may be, analyzing the forms of forgetting is integral for understanding what we mean when we speak of recognition.

The possibility of forgiveness is even more difficult to address, but in a substantially different way than the question of forgetting. For both Ricoeur and Derrida, "each time that forgiveness is in the service of some finality . . . each time that it tends to reestablish a normalcy . . . then 'forgiveness' is not pure—nor is its concept" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 469). Forgiveness, if it is to be understood as forgiveness, cannot be expected, it cannot be counted on, and it cannot be demanded. Forgiveness, like *agape*, is a gratuitous gift—one that goes beyond reason and calculation. Forgiveness could be understood as violent or unjust if it went down the road of pardon or amnesia, but in such cases it would, in fact, cease to be genuine

forgiveness. What forgiveness can, and often does, do is grant amnesty. It does not forget, or discard, the fault that led to the transgression of rights. What forgiveness does is acknowledge the wrong committed, then proceeds to release the agent from his or her guilty actions. As has been said, the act of forgiveness is beyond reason—it is supererogatory. This also goes to show that an act of forgiveness—a genuine act of forgiveness—is not something that we can “work towards” or “argue for.” It can only be something freely and gratuitously given by the victims themselves.

If this is the case, that forgetting—of all things—is that which grounds memory and, consequently, the possibility of forgiveness, which cannot be “worked towards” or “argued for,” then we appear to be left without a comprehensive, all-encompassing response to sexual abuse, particularly in the Catholic Church. Perhaps, however, this is Ricoeur’s point exactly. What Ricoeur offers us, against a one-size-fits-all response to crises of sexual abuse, are what he, and others, call “states of peace.” These are “peaceful experiences of mutual recognition,” the exceptional character of which “underscores their importance, and precisely in this way ensures their power to reach and affect the very heart of transactions stamped with the seal of struggle” (*Course of Recognition* 219). Mutual recognition within states of peace—this is what Ricoeur offers the Catholic Church as it faces its sexual abuse crisis. The Catholic Church must attend to what it means to be recognized as oneself by others—especially by suffering others. Even—perhaps especially—in the brokenness of abused bodies and identities, the Catholic Church must experience the “other” who demands recognition, not only as a victim of sexual abuse, but as a person whose very self-identity has been fractured by the (in) actions of the Catholic Church. It is only in this passive form of recognition—“where the subject places him—or herself under the tutelage of a relationship of reciprocity” (*Course of Recognition* 248)—that the necessary mutuality, constitutive of Ricoeur’s states of peace, comes to fruition. It is only in true sympathy that the self, or in this case the Catholic Church

. . . whose power of acting is at the start greater than that of its other, finds itself affected by all that the suffering other offers to it in return. For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself. This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude, when unequal power finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity of exchange, which, in the hour of agony, finds refuge in the shared whisper of voices or the feeble embrace of clasped hands. (*Oneself as Another* 191)

While these moments of mutual recognition—these states of peace—are exceptional, we are, perhaps, not without examples of such moments in the

wake of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. In February 2011, the Archdiocese of Dublin, led by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin and Cardinal Sean O'Malley, held a Liturgy of Lament and Repentance at St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland. This liturgy was offered as a space for the victims of sexual abuse to join with the Catholic Church in a ceremony that was, at the same time, an act of repentance and an attempt at an act of mutual recognition. The Archdiocese of Dublin exposed itself to its victims, seeking forgiveness, while the victims of sexual abuse exposed themselves to the community that failed them, yet which they sought to recognize as something—in hope at least—that could be better than its past actions constrained it to being. Though almost unheard of—and unrepeated—elsewhere, the Liturgy of Lament and Repentance embodies the possibility of a way forward for both the Catholic Church and the victims of its sexual abuse crisis—the possibility of mutual recognition. As Ricoeur notes,

[the] struggle for recognition perhaps remains endless. At the very least, the experiences of actual recognition . . . confer on this struggle for recognition the assurance that the motivation which distinguishes it from the lust for power and shelters it from the fascination of violence is neither illusory nor vain. (*Course of Recognition* 246)

CONCLUSION

Throughout this investigation, we have attempted to address two sets of questions. First, how can we more adequately respond to crises of sexual abuse? Second, what resources do the writings of Paul Ricoeur provide to help approach these crises of sexual abuse, understand—as much as possible—what happened therein, and evaluate potential avenues for moving forward in the shadow of these crises? In the end, I hope to have shown that Paul Ricoeur offers us not only tools, but avenues, for doing precisely this. Ricoeur's categories of testimony, responsibility, and recognition offer us three distinct, yet interrelated, ways of approaching and attending to the dynamics of these crises, as well as offering an avenue for the articulation of states in which forgiveness and reconciliation become possible. It is my hope that this article can serve to open such avenues for conversation and deliberation, as well as provide resources and frameworks for articulating and implementing responsible recognition and action amidst, and within, circumstances that are grievously irresponsible and which can only be described as moments of mis- or non-recognition.


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