

IN ANIMO CONTRITO. The phenomenon of abuse in a wider context – Msgr. Tomáš Halík

In a spirit of humility and with a sorrowful heart – in spiritu humilitatis et in animo contrito – we want to touch on one of the most painful wounds of the Church. Even the mystical body of the risen Christ bears wounds, and if we ignored these wounds, if we did not want to touch them, we would not have the right to say with the Apostle Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” A Christ without wounds, a Church without wounds, a faith without wounds, is just a diabolical illusion.

With confidence in the healing and liberating power of the truth, we want to touch the wounds that the official representatives of the Church have inflicted on the defenseless, especially on children and adolescents; in doing so, they have also inflicted slow and hard-to-heal wounds on the credibility of the Church in today’s world.

The gradually revealed, long covered up and trivialized pandemic of sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse, abuse of power and authority by members of the clergy is one aspect of the deep crisis of the Church in today’s world. It is not a disease of individuals; it is a disease of the system. It needs to be seen in a broader context and can only be overcome by courage to reform the many related problems concerning the level of the theological, pastoral and spiritual understanding of the Church and the priesthood. Disciplinary measures alone will not solve the problem.

It is not a marginal aspect. The phenomenon of abuse plays a similar role today as it did in the high Middle Ages with the scandals of the sale of indulgences that precipitated the Reformation. What at first seemed to be a marginal phenomenon clearly reveals today, as it did then, even deeper problems, the maladies of the system: the relations between Church and power, clergy and laity, and many others. The situation of the Catholic Church in our civilization today strongly resembles the situation just before the Reformation.

The Church needs a profound reform. If we limit reform to questions of institutional change, it could remain on the surface or lead to schism. The “Catholic Reform” of the 16th century should be taken as inspiration – its essential component was a deepening of spirituality (recall the role of mystics such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Ignatius of Loyola), but also a deepening of pastoral style and episcopal and priestly ministry (recall Charles of Borromeo and others).

The Church attempted at the Second Vatican Council to reform its pastoral style and its relationship to the modern secular world. It understood that waging a culture war against modernity was leading the Church into the dead end of history. She attempted a “transition from Catholicism to Catholicity.” This reform remained largely misunderstood and unfulfilled, especially in countries under communist rule. In these countries in particular, the system of clericalism has not been overcome.

The Council’s efforts to come to terms with the modern world came too late. While modernity peaked in the 1960s (with the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s), modernity ended soon after. The Council did not prepare the churches for the new postmodern age. Today the

whole socio-cultural context has changed. The churches have lost their monopoly on religion. Secularization has not destroyed religion, but transformed it. The main competitor of the Church today is not secular humanism, but new forms of religion and spirituality that have emancipated themselves from the Church. The Church is finding it difficult to find its place in a radically pluralistic world. In particular, churches marked by the communist past find it very difficult to understand this world. (The current dramatic secularization of Polish society is a case in point.)

There are great differences among the churches of the post-communist world; hard secularization during communism and “soft secularization” in the post-communist era have taken place and are taking place with varying intensity. There is a great temptation of nostalgia for pre-modern society and a dangerous alliance of the Church with populist and nationalist currents in politics.

Sexual abuse is only one aspect. The Church’s response to the sexual revolution of the 1960s was fear and panic. The emphasis on sexual morality became the dominant theme of preaching, and there was a gap between the Church’s teaching and the practice of many Catholics, including priests. Pope Francis called it a “neurotic obsession”. The reaction of the secular public was: Look within your own ranks. The Church began to address the hypocrisy and scandals late, only in response to the exposure of these phenomena in the secular media.

The tendency to cover up and downplay these phenomena in the churches of the post-communist world has a number of specific causes.

It was not only sexual abuse, but also psychological and spiritual abuse. The main cause was “clericalism” and “triumphalism”, the abuse of power and authority. In post-communist countries, it had a number of specific reasons.

Cases of abuse points to the crisis of the clergy as a whole. This crisis can only be overcome by a new understanding of the role of the Church in contemporary society – the Church as the “pilgrim people of God” (*communio viatorum*), the Church as a “school of Christian wisdom”, the Church as a “field hospital” and the Church as a place of encounter, sharing and reconciliation.