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“Commission Reconnaissance et Réparation”
For victims of members of religious orders and other communities
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As I have written in various articles and I teach to the students in my course on the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, the CIASE report of 2021 is one of the milestones in this history thanks to its scope, method, and analysis of the phenomenon. The CIASE report makes clear that there is still an urgent problem of prevention and repression of abuse in the Church, and advances significantly our understanding of the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon.

One of the unique features of the CIASE report is the ethical and methodological reference point, centered on the listening to the victims and survivors as a starting point. It is a reminder of the transformative nature, at the level of empathy but also cognitive, of any sincere effort to study and understand the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. I can attest this not only as a scholar, but also as a teacher of college students, and as a parent of young children that go to Catholic school and parish here in the USA. Clearly, the past is still not in the past when it comes to sex abuse, as the CIASE report proves.

The institutional Church is taking stock of the current situation, but it is by no means clear that it can propose rapid solutions for the future. The CIASE report indeed did not talk only to the hierarchical church, but raised theological and religious questions that have to be addressed by the institutional church, but also by legislators, academics, and the public sphere.

Still, the issue of what to do for the victims/survivors and how to do it as a Christian and ecclesial community, once that the scientific reports and the justice have done their course, continues to remain in the background for many reasons. This is why the innovative work of the CRR – “Commission Reconnaissance et Réparation” - is important because it proposes something that is still largely absent from the attention of key actors: the institutional church, the scholarly/academic community, secular justice, and the media.

As the mission statement says, the CRR draws inspiration from restorative or reparative justice in order to offer a novel approach. The CRR proposes a process of justice and reparation for the violence suffered, when criminal justice can no longer intervene, due to the death of the perpetrator, the prescription or the rigidity of its procedures and qualifications. This is an attempt to bridge the gap between what we know in terms of facts (and we now know much more than we did in previous phases in the history of the abuse crisis) and what we feel we should do. Recognition means more than “knowing”, and reparation means more than “payment” in terms of settlement of the cases. As important and necessary as knowing and settlements are, from a Christian and human point of view they cannot substitute a more profound effort to heal the wounds as much as possible.

This effort is important as a signal that purely intellectual and legal approaches to the abuse crisis would be just one more injury, after abuse itself and after the neglect by the Church. This

process has very few parallels, also because other legal secular/civil systems have preferred the route of the extension of the statute of limitations in ways that make more difficult to imagine a process of recognition and reparation as the one chosen by the CRR. The question of reparations indeed takes on very different aspects according to different ecclesiastical and constitutional systems, ecclesial sensibilities, and moral philosophies. This is one of the reasons why this approach is not possible, at the moment, in other Catholic Churches, like for example in the USA. Already in 1985, in one of the earliest reports (this one confidential at the time) analyzing the situation created by the first cases in Louisiana reported by the press, Tom Doyle and Ray Mouton spoke about “the age of litigation” of which the Church is part. Besides the legal and financial consideration, the culture of litigation has impacted the way in which the Church acts - not just in its relationship with the world, but also with its own members.

Looking at the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is, in its own tragic way, is like viewing through a kaleidoscope that shows so many different aspects in the global Christian community. Beyond the legal issue, there is also a question of ecclesiology, of what idea of the church we have, that needs to be reflected upon. The effort of building a culture and a system of recognition et reparation has profound theological and ecclesiological consequences. This effort can serve as an example also in order to help the church understand something special about the religious orders and communities: their role is, often in the lives of many Catholics, to be in the revolving door of the Church, figuratively speaking, meeting people on their path into and on their way from the Church. This “revolving door” aspect is even more crucial in the context of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.

Much keeps changing in what we know and understand of the abuse crisis - year after year, news cycle after news cycle. Most important is the message of the CRR that the church must not just remember the victims of abuse in an empty memorialization of this tragedy, but must actively move towards a different and proactive kind of engagement that cannot substitute, but cannot rely either on purely legal means.