



Who Should We Trust? Who Can We Forgive?

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OCTOBER 2022

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Prusak argues that giving children a “louder voice” is insufficient in addressing sexual crimes against children. Do you agree? What would it mean for the Church, rather than simply individual parents, to avoid hermeneutical injustice—to avoid dismissing children because they aren’t yet able to understand their experiences adequately? Is the Church, as currently constituted, capable of educating children in this way?

2. At the end of his essay, Prusak calls for an increased “epistemic democracy” in the Church, while acknowledging the truism that “the Catholic Church is not a democracy.” But is this a more fundamental tension than Prusak admits? Are there limits on the amount of epistemic democracy that can be permitted to suffuse non-democratic Church institutions? Could synodality offer a model for the kind of epistemic democracy Prusak describes?

3. DeVille describes a moment where he briefly feels a kind of sympathy for McCarrick, before his “superego swiftly moved in to forbid further feelings of sorrow” and to “insist that I think of him only as a moral monster.” Have you ever had a similar feeling of fleeting sympathy for an individual guilty of horrific crimes? Reflect upon that moment. How did you react after that initial moment of sympathy?

4. DeVille observes how quick he is to deny pity to McCarrick when, in his practice as a psychotherapist, he is open to seeing the full person in his patients who have committed sexual offenses. Consider DeVille’s patients alongside McCarrick. How do you feel toward each? What aspects of each context inform the way you feel and respond? And why, as DeVille prompts us to ask, should we want to do anything other than revile people like McCarrick?

5. “Forgiveness,” writes DeVille, “breaks deathly cycles of destruction”; when it occurs, it’s an event that “we should celebrate.” At the same time, he insists, forgiveness can never be demanded. Can the pressure to forgive—especially in Christian institutions—serve to further harm victims? How can Church institutions avoid putting undue pressure on victims to forgive swiftly and “move on”?

6. Do you genuinely hope, as DeVille proposes we do, that clergy sex abusers “might be reconciled to us, and we to them”? What would it mean for such a reconciliation—between abusive clergy and the People of God—to come to pass?

7. Peter Steinfels writes that “the dark ages of sexual abuse” in the Church ended around 1985. Prusak, however, wonders whether the Church’s epistemic practices around sexual abuse have really changed that much. The McCarrick revelations in 2018 roiled the American Church. Reflect on the past several years in your own parishes and church communities. Has much changed? Did the McCarrick scandal prompt an increased effort to repair epistemic and hermeneutical injustice?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Peter Steinfels, “What to Make of the McCarrick Report?,” November 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/what-make-mccarrick-report>

Ross McCullough, “Anger & Forgiveness,” June 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/anger-forgiveness>

The Editors, “Sex Abuse & Clericalism,” September 2018: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/sex-abuse-clericalism>

Cathleen Kaveny, “What Benedict’s Letter on Abuse Gets Wrong,” June 2019: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/putting-justice-first>

Massimo Faggioli, “The Problem Remains,” November 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/problem-remains>

Dennis O’Brien, “Forgiving & Listening,” May 2016: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/forgiving-listening>