When the church faces death, it encounters a critical moment when it may know the power of resurrection. But the church can only know this power in actually facing its death. Resurrection is not an abstraction or a mere possibility; resurrection is impossibility, that is, it cannot be counted on in the normal course of events. It is not a guarantee. It lies on the other side of that which cannot be known. Nothing can remove the risk implicit in death. Full stop.1

The sins of the Catholic Church have been writ large over the last few months. Even those who might want to discount the recent feeding frenzy as typical media hyperbole or ‘anti-Catholic bias’, cannot render insignificant the dimensions of the crisis that has resulted from both sexual abuse by clerics and the Church’s unsatisfactory response to that abuse. In the face of this crisis, we cannot resort to the politicians’ fatuous distinction between what is ‘core’ and ‘non-core’: every aspect of clerical sexual abuse involves a catastrophic failure in justice and love, a catastrophic failure in elements central to Christian life.

This failure casts a pall over the future of the Church: can a Church whose ‘inner circle’ is capable of such horrendous damage have anything to offer a world that already knows too much pain? If not, can the continuation of that Church be justified? Were such questions to be as sudden and incongruous as an alp on a plain, there might be grounds for claiming that they are an over-reaction, that they ignore the everyday reality of the Church’s life. Such, however, is not the case. Indeed, questions about the long-term survival of the Church have become more frequent as surveys of religious practice and the results of the national census have continued to show a seemingly inexorable decline in connection to the Church, especially its worshipping life. What the present crisis has added is a sharp new aspect: doubts about the Church’s future are linked to the perception that criminal corruption and denial are endemic in the Church.

In such an environment, what is the appropriate response for the person of faith? Is it to rally to the wounded Church and its wounded leaders, to pledge renewed trust and commitment? Is it to walk away angrily, overwhelmed by a sense of betrayal and disillusionment? This article proposes a response different and, perhaps, more demanding than either of those two options, a response that pivots around the possibility of hope. The article will look firstly at the possible shape of hope in the context of the sexual abuse crisis; secondly, it will explore the broader issue of hope for the future of the Church.

**Truth, Death, and the Possibility of Hope**

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus countered the teaching of Apollinarius, who denied the full humanity of Jesus, by arguing that ‘What is not assumed is not healed; what is united with God is also saved’.2 Gregory’s concern was to establish that the life-giving love of God revealed in Jesus could benefit humanity only if Jesus was truly human, truly one like us, but his principle also supports the conclusion that whatever we keep away from God remains deprived of God’s healing love. In other words, intrinsic to our relationship with God is the need to face the truth of our own existence, including our sinfulness. Such a confrontation with our sinfulness is no mere statutory obligation. Indeed, as a response to the urgings of the Spirit, it can be the prelude to liberation and healing. It is not, however, ‘cheap grace’.
If sin is the choice for what is illusion, for the false self, then the failure to acknowledge sin imprisons us in illusion; as a result, it deprives us of a future. Even the certainty of such a grotesque fate, however, does not make more palatable the confrontation with our sinfulness. We shrink from such a confrontation because it is a form of death: the acknowledgement of sin shatters the illusion of perfection, the illusion that we are God. Ironically, the refusal to acknowledge our sinfulness because of the fear of death, keeps us trapped in a situation where there can be no life. On the other hand, Christian hope says that the death of the illusory self can be a means of life. Authentic Christian hope, therefore, does not quarantine us from death.

The sexual abuse crisis manifests human sinfulness. In a most chilling manner, it manifests what characterises each of us in our sinfulness: the radical split between profession and action, the fact that our behaviour contradicts who we claim to be. Less centrally, but in no insignificant way, it manifests too the potential for harm in certain forms of clerical culture, as well as the damage that is done when, because of the fear of scandal, the Church appears to privilege ‘the system’ above the people who are victims, above the truth, and above accountability. In the face of such a profound experience of death, can there be hope for the Church?

If there is to be hope, it cannot be born from denial, cannot be the product of trying to ignore ‘the elephant in the living room’, pretending that it is still possible to conduct ‘business as usual’. Nor will the treasure that is hope reveal itself to the purveyors of specious ‘explanations’ for clerical sexual abuse. Thus, efforts to ascribe responsibility for clerical sexual abuse to the alleged flawed teaching of moral theology or the alleged post-Vatican II ‘culture of dissent’ are more likely to express a desire for a scapegoat than for the truth. Concern for the truth means that we must also reject any tendency to bumper-sticker smugness—‘Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven’. In more strictly theological terms, we must resist the urge to bridge too quickly the gap between Good Friday and Easter.

If there is to be hope, it will not be found outside of an acknowledgement of our need for repentance, of our need for God. The most ancient forms of the Church’s sacramental celebration of God’s forgiveness gave flesh to the realisation that authentic appropriation of God’s mercy, a mercy that is itself abundant and gratuitous, requires both time and a commitment to a new way of living. In other words, the penance undertaken by the penitent was not simply punitive or backward looking, it aimed to promote both a right relationship with God and a changed way of acting in the world. Similarly, any remembering of the catastrophes of the past, argues Johann Baptist Metz, must be done with ‘a practical intent’, a commitment to ensuring that the future is different from the past.

**Truth, Death, and the Possibility of Hope**

In the light of the present crisis, can the Church present itself to the world in ways that embody both its repentance and a commitment to a different future? Here we confront a major difficulty: since it is those who represent the Church officially, its ordained ministers, who are central to the present crisis, many people will doubt the authenticity of either the repentance or ‘the firm purpose of amendment’ expressed by the Church’s leaders. The compromised position of the Church’s ordained ministry, then, is another fact, another death, that cannot be denied.

For some people, the loss of faith in the Church and its ministers as a result of this crisis might be final. Hence, the demand for punitive structures: ‘zero tolerance’; walls between priests and children, between priests and everyone else; greater vigilance/discipline/control in seminaries. While such responses are understandable, are expressive of the anger that sexual abuse arouses, they also run the risk of compounding injustice by assuming that all priests are automatically guilty, or at least suspect. They assume, too, that control will ensure prevention, that it will eliminate all tendencies to exploitation and duplicity; the evidence of history, however, would, overwhelmingly, say otherwise.

Is there anything that might offer some encouragement to a renewed act of faith and trust in the Church and its ordained ministry? One possibility is that renewed trust might follow from the
willingness of all the members of the Church to face the questions that clerical sexual abuse evokes. In addition to protocols of behaviour, we need, therefore, to ask what has failed in the Church and why it has failed. We need to ask what such a failure says about the life of the Church: about priests/about bishops/about celibacy/about systems of formation/about structures of authority in the Church. We need to ask how, in the light of such catastrophic failures, we might speak in the future of the sacramentality of the Church and of its ordained ministry.

Such questions do not have to be asked in a merely self-lacerating way, in a way that deepens depression, or increases the fear of the future. On the other hand, unless such questions are asked openly, there can be little hope for the Church, little possibility that the Church will appear as responsible and accountable, little possibility that ordained ministry will be seen as other than the refuge for the warped and the inadequate, or that the bishops will be seen as other than authoritarian and insensitive.

Acceptance of the sacramentality of the Church’s ordained ministry and, indeed, of the Church itself, always involves an act of faith. Like any act of faith, the one that we make in regard to the Church is an act of self-surrender. While the surrender of faith is never easy, the present situation of the Church and of its ordained ministry highlights its essentially radical nature. It highlights, too, that Christian hope always involves hoping against hope.

As a Church, we have a long history of providing authoritative answers to a plethora of issues. On the other hand, what we lack is the experience of such answers following an open discussion of the relevant questions. Unless such openness is manifested in the present situation the future is irredeemably bleak. While such a conclusion might appear to be denying the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, it is actually a refusal to separate that Spirit from the need to face the truth of our situation, from the fact that the sexual abuse crisis is a form of death for the Church.

Will such openness ‘work’? Will it ensure that people do not reject and pillory us? Will it guarantee that everyone in our society will affirm the light of Christ shining though the Church? To these questions, the answer can be unequivocal: no. What the openness will do, however, is allow us to know that we have sought to act with integrity, that we have sought the future through the cross of truth. This alone offers the possibility of hope, and the comfort that derives from knowing that we have responded from resources that we acknowledge as our own.

A Future for the Church?

One of the claims made at the beginning of this article was that questions about the future of the Church have not emerged only in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis, but have surrounded the Church for decades. Clearly, part of what is at issue here is the constellation of factors that affect the possibility of faith in the postmodern world. That fact notwithstanding, there are also matters that are specific to the Catholic Church; it is the latter that will be the focus for the remainder of this article.

At the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Karl Rahner summarised in this way the challenge central to that moment of history: “God addresses to the Church the question whether it has the courage to undertake an apostolic offensive into the future and consequently the necessary courage to show itself to the world sincerely, in such a form that no one can have the impression that the Church exists as a mere survival from earlier times because it has not yet had time to die.”

The mere fact that this article is discussing whether there can be a future for the Church would suggest that we have not negotiated well the challenge that Rahner identified. We have not succeeded in finding a way to open our settled ecclesial culture to the dynamism inherent in the pilgrimage of faith. We have spent too much energy either in looking back, in remembering what was, or in lamenting the present, and too little energy in asking how we might be creative in that present, how we might open paths to the future.
In addressing how the Church might relate to its world in a way that is faithful to the Gospel, Metz distinguishes between ‘creative noncontemporaneity’ and ‘aggressive backwardness’. A strong case could be made to support the contention that, in the last generation, we have lurched towards the latter in the mistaken belief that we were actually practising the former. As a result, the Catholic Church in our time, just as it was after the Reformation, in the post-Enlightenment period, and in the era of industrialisation, is mired in anxiety about its own survival; consequently, it is unable to operate as a sign of hope for the world. Were this condition to become chronic or, even worse, terminal, then Vatican II would have to be counted as a failure, as a valid Council that was not fruitful, that was ultimately not received by the Church, just as the reforms proposed by Lateran V (1512-17) were still-born.

What might help to bring about a different outcome? While there are no magic answers to such a question, one thing that is essential is the readiness to acknowledge that ‘business as usual’ is no longer possible, to acknowledge that ‘the usual’ has actually ceased to exist. In concrete terms, the death of ‘the usual’ refers to a raft of issues, of which two of the most significant, and interconnected, are: authority in the Church, particularly the manner in which this authority is exercised; and the relationship of the ordained members of the Church to the rest of the baptised, particularly as this affects the everyday functioning of the Church. Each of these will be discussed in the remainder of this article.

Authority in the Church

While it is true that concern about the exercise of authority is not something unique to the Church, what is specific to the Church is the challenge to accept that authority can manifest the Spirit of Christ. The possibility that authority might be seen in this way depends radically on whether the exercise of authority communicates something of Christ, especially his compassion: Authority without mercy fails the test of Christ-centredness. The absence of mercy is a fair indicator that authority has become over-concerned with power. Its veins have become clogged up with bureaucratic endeavour, with head-counting rather than heart-counting. The debate about authority in the Church is a cry for mercy, the authentic mercy of God himself, the self-same mercy offered to Peter…

Accordingly, those who exercise authority in the Church today must be about mercy as well as truth, must realise that truth without love can be intolerant and authoritarian. Only the compassionate exercise of authority will make it possible that authority might be perceived as a gift to the Church, as an act of service, rather than of control or self-aggrandisement. Vatican II’s emphasis on the collegial nature of authority in the Church does provide a basis for an altered practice of authority, but, like other aspects of Vatican II, this too has been only partially received into the life of the Church.

In addition, endorsement of authority as an irreducible element of the Church’s life will be easier to attain the more that the communal identity of the Church is understood and promoted. Within such a communion there is need for both the contribution of every member - a consequence of the sensus fidei that derives from our baptism - and for authority that can simultaneously respect the gifts of the Spirit in all of the baptised and guide, articulate, and symbolise the unity in faith of the communion. If authority in the Church is not to be regarded merely as an imposition, if the call for greater involvement of all the baptised is not to be dismissed as heretical democratisation, then we need to direct more energy towards understanding and appropriating a communal ecclesiology. Failure to do so can only deepen and prolong a climate of distrust within the Church; this, in turn, can only add to the ambiguity of the Church’s witness to the world.

Ordained Ministry

In regard to the ordained priesthood, the death of ‘the usual’ is, perhaps, more strikingly obvious than in any other aspect of the Church’s life. It is most evident in the ‘greying’ of the clergy, in the small number of candidates for ordination, and in the amalgamation of parishes that leaves the priest exercising a quasi-episcopal role. Such developments all raise the spectre of a future without priests.
For some members of the Church, the prospect of such a future is a positive good: it not only signals the end of a narrow clericalism, it also opens possibilities of lay leadership, the utilisation of the gifts of all the baptised, rather than merely those of the ordained. If it is true, however, that an aspect of the catholic genius is the passion to embrace the ‘both…and’, rather than simply the ‘either…and’, then we need to think about the Church in ways that endorse the particular contribution of all of its members, not just of any one group. While it is also true that we have not been good at this in the past-and struggle to do it even now-it alone offers possibilities for the future.

The meaning of ordained ministry and the relationship between the ordained minister and all other members of the Church are fundamental aspects of the life of the Church; indeed so fundamental are they that we tend to assume that discussion of them is unnecessary. Unless such an exploration takes place, however, we will continue to limp along with priests feeling burdened and inadequate, with other members of the Church feeling excluded and frustrated, and with a general pall of decline covering the Church. We can either face the death of ‘the usual’ or we can die trying to maintain it. The latter offers no future; the former includes the hope of resurrection.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed the possibility of hope for the Church via consideration of the various forms of ‘death’ that the Church faces. It has done this in the belief that, for the person of faith, death is never mere emptiness, that death must be understood in the context of an invitation to a deeper trust in God, who alone can give life. Such a conviction is, of course, grounded in the cross of Jesus. That cross, however, if it is to retain its ‘edge’, must not be domesticated. The cross, therefore, can never be disassociated from a sense of being abandoned, a sense that God seems distant, even uninterested. In other words, we ought not to speak too glibly of resurrection, ought not to assume that the prospect of the cross is free of terror, or that its outcome can be taken for granted.

Clearly, none of us would choose to be where we are at the moment. The issue, however, is whether we believe that here is where God meets us. If we do believe that, then we must face what needs to be faced. In doing so, we are making that act of self-surrender that is faith. To deny our situation or to assume that God will save us from the death involved in facing it, is to mistake faith for magic.

Can there, then, be hope? Can we live as people who believe that death is not the last word? Can we still trust that the God who raised Jesus from death will do the same for us? Part of the self-surrender of faith involves an emphatic ‘Yes’ in answer to such questions; it also involves, however, the recognition that death changes everything, that what follows it is not ‘the usual’. The issue for us as a Church is whether we will allow this death to transform us, to make less ambiguous our discipleship. As we face this death, what is appropriate for us is what Karl Rahner calls ‘a gentler and more modest Easter joy’. This is the patrimony of those who are aware of the wounded state of humanity, their Church, and themselves, but who believe still that the Lord is risen.9

**NOTES**

2 For an overview of the Apollinarian controversy see Brian McDermott, Word Become Flesh: Dimensions of Christology (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1993), 199-201
5 Johann Baptist Metz, A Passion for God, 53.
6 For this point see Walter Kasper, Theology and Church (London: SCM, 1989), 168.
8 Walter Kasper, Theology and Church, 146.

Richard Lennan is a priest of the Maitland-Newcastle diocese lecturing in theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney. The real and irremovable scandal of faith, the cross of Jesus Christ, has been obscured by superficial and unnecessary scandals. Here we shouldn’t think in the first place of moral scandals, but of the scandal of many of the Church’s structures, which seem to many people obstacles both to human emancipation and happiness and to Christian freedom, and an encouragement to immaturity and authoritarian attitudes.
