

Transcript from Fr Hans Zollner

Hello from the Centre for Child Protection at the Gregorian University in Rome.

I'm grateful for the invitation to talk to you and to talk about something that you have dared to take on, that is, theology in the face of the sexual abuse crisis, or the double crisis as it is called, the crisis of the abuse itself and the crisis of leadership in regard to these issues.

From my point of view, I have seen over the years that in theology, especially in systematic theology, in dogmatic and in fundamental theology over the last 35 years, there has been little reflection and little output in terms of the publication of articles and books on the impact of the abuse crisis on theological reflection and teaching, and this is very unfortunate. I believe that theology plays a vital part in dealing with sexual abuse as such, as well as with its prevention.

So, what I would suggest is that we consider sexual abuse — and other forms of abuse of minors, abuse of adult people, abuse of vulnerable people — as one part of theological reflection; as a starting point for thinking about our faith. This is called, in the tradition of the Church, considering a certain topic, a certain area, a *locus theologicus*, something from which our reflection in theology starts and emerges, and then comes also to conclusions. Considering the abuse crisis as a *locus theologicus* means first and foremost thinking about the voice of victims, the presence of victims, the reality of people who have been harmed so grievously by the hands of clergy and other church personnel over the last decades — maybe we should more appropriately say centuries. What does these facts mean to us? What do we need to do to understand how this could have happened; how these horrendous crimes could have taken place; how they were covered up? What are theological underpinnings of not dealing with abuse, denying it, being neglectful about the presence of survivors among us? And of not being able to really take on the challenge of changing our understanding of the Church, changing our understanding of priesthood, of clergy, of episcopacy, of church structure as such, of the sacramental institution that we call the Church? How could we be neglectful about all this in the face of all the suffering that was created over the last years?

Some of the topics I would say should be a priority in our reflection are:

- how do we think about redemption?
- what does it mean to people who have been wounded that we talk about Jesus Christ as their saviour?

Now these questions are not new. What is new, and should be new from my perspective, is that we listen to survivors, and we listen to secondary survivors — their families, their friends, their partners, the families in which they grew up, and the families in which they live; the schools where abuse has taken place, the boarding schools, the social activities, the pastoral ministry, youth ministry and so forth — wherever abuse took place. And what does it mean to us that we say Jesus Christ has saved us from sin, from suffering, and ultimately from death? This certainly also includes the death of the soul that many survivors of abuse refer to when they realize that the part of themselves that was relating to God, that was believing in Jesus Christ, that was trusting the Church, has been destroyed.

Another big area of reflection certainly should be ecclesiology. What does it mean that we call the Church one and holy and apostolic? Holy in what sense, if we consider the sins and crimes committed by church representatives and within the realm and reality of the Church?

What does it mean that we administer the sacrament of reconciliation to individuals? But also, what does it mean and say about our reflection? What can and should the Church do in terms of repentance, in terms of public confession, in terms of not only amendment but also reparation for victims and secondary victims and for the whole community of the Church, whether it be a local diocese, a religious congregation, or a religious institution?

As such moral questions come into play so does the whole discussion about what mercy means to perpetrators in the face of their crimes. To what extent can we be merciful, keeping in mind Jesus who, yes, on the one hand wants to forgive, to bring the message of forgiveness to the whole world, but who also uses very strong words — maybe the strongest words we have from him — when he tells us that we should throw those who have harmed the little ones into the sea with a millstone around their neck? How can we balance justice and mercy? How can we avoid talking about mercy in a cheap way, refrain from forgetting that the mercy we have received as sinners is the mercy that was very costly to the Lord? It cost him his life, and he suffered all the torture and the entire Passion, up to being nailed to the cross for our sake. This is not something we should take lightly.

Another area of concern in theology is the understanding of priesthood. We all know that this crisis has changed our understanding of the sacrament of order and of the relationship between the laity and the clergy. Lay people are outraged — and I would say justly so — that our ordained leaders were so neglectful and pushed aside not only victims but the whole discussion about this. Not only was justice not done, victims were not even heard. In light of this, what is priesthood, what is episcopacy all about? What would a new understanding of the sacrament of order and a new understanding of ecclesiology be? How are the different roles and sacramental order related to the whole People of God?

I would also say that this includes the whole question of how we theologically talk about accountability and responsibility. The word *accountability* doesn't exist in the languages derived from Latin; it is in German and it is in English, but you don't have the equivalent of that in any of the Romance languages. If we lack a word in those languages to express what is meant by accountability, not only on a juridical or canonical level but also on a moral and theological level, what does this mean?

This also includes the question about how we can celebrate liturgy, in terms of bringing the words of survivors into our official prayer. And by 'our' I mean both communal prayer and individual prayer. Why are there so few liturgies of penance? Why are there not more liturgies of reconciliation? And why are there very few instances in which we put into words prayers for those who have been harmed — in the prayer of the faithful in normal liturgies?

Finally, I would say that the theological questions need to go deeper, to the roots of our understanding of who we are as human beings and who we should be as Christians baptized

in the name of the Triune God who calls us to follow his path — the path that Jesus walked. Jesus has shown us that the Father wants to be a father for all and that he wants to protect all human persons, not only Christians. How do we reach out to others? How do we work with others? How do we understand our collaboration in the area of safeguarding, not only in practical terms, but also reflecting on the good that is done outside the Church? And how can we learn from others? So, it is a call to more humility, to greater realism, and to more thoroughness, also in the area of theological reflection.

I'm really happy that you are endeavouring to embark on work in this new field. Unfortunately, we have to call it a new field, though it has gained some traction in recent years; but there's so much more to reflect on and to discuss, and also to express in a way that the Church — which means not only clergy but the whole People of God — really learns how to deal with this issue with courage, within the Church and outside the Church, in a better way, in a more consistent way, so that we can become a safer Church and a safer world.

Thank you.