

CHURCH AND TRAUMA

Klaus Mertes SJ

An Article for “Stimmen der Zeit”,
A German Jesuit monthly magazine

1. Explanation of Terms

The notions of “church” and “trauma” can be related actively and passively: “the traumatizing church” and “the traumatized church”. Each has its proper place. While the church, as an institution, is not an offender-subject in the same sense as a lone offender, the church is still involved in the abusive deeds insofar as the offenders represented the church officially, because the responsible office holders in the ecclesiastical institutions affected did not listen as the victims tried to speak, or because they did hear the victims but then hushed it up and relocated the offenders. This aspect of abuse is generally just as painful for the victims as is sexualized violence by an individual offender.

1.1. Traumatized Church

Conversely, it has become quite common to speak of the traumatized institution. As is well known, trauma reactions to abuse are displayed not only by the individuals affected but also in the systems involved such as schools, communities, associations, clubs and other institutions. However, this formulation can be misunderstood to mean that the institutions affected are likewise to be defined as victims! For the process between institution and victim it is decisive, first of all, that the representatives of the institution assume responsibility for their own failure – so that they certainly do not define themselves as victims, but admit their systemic membership of the offenders’ side. But, on the other hand, clearing up a case of abuse is always connected with experience that is also extremely painful for the institution. For example, Canisius-Kolleg: the rector assumes responsibility. But, in fact, the others who belong to the same institution, namely its employees, children, youths, parents, and former members, are treated as liable as well. When, on January 28, 2010, the *Berliner Morgenpost* published my letter to those born in the 1970s and 1980s, the children and youths at Canisius-Kolleg ran through the city’s streets and saw the picture of their school under headlines such as “School of Horror”, “School of Abuse” emblazoned across the newspaper kiosks. That hurts, and is experienced in the “System” as unjust, yet it must be accepted if one is to face the truth.

1.2. The Especially Great Fall

Church is more than mere institution, but it is also an institution, both in its composed structure and its component institutions such as congregations, schools, and hospitals. Church is also more than Roman Catholic Church, although it is primarily the Roman Catholic Church which the reader should have in mind. Church is also not an institution like every other institution. It has an especially strong understanding of itself as an institution. Indeed, there has been talk of the especially great fall that is given in the case of sexualized violence by catholic priests and in catholic institutions. This is related to the special claims of a theological and

moral nature which the church makes for itself and which return to it like a boomerang in cases of abuse – which is different and more than, for example, in the case of sport clubs, **at the BBC or in the children’s playground in the Wuhlheide.**

1.3. Theological Challenge

Finally, a preliminary theological comment about the relationship of trauma and church. According to a classical topos of modern religious criticism, Christianity (and thus also the church) is based on an inadequately processed trauma, namely the traumatic experience of the failure and crucifixion of Jesus. This trauma is contained by flight into an illusionary world, the basic characteristics of which include the idea of the resurrection as well as the redemptive function of the death on the cross and other theological theories. Even if one does not share this critical view, it still indicates that the topic of “Trauma and Church” has a theological aspect about which one must think if one is to face it from an ecclesiastical perspective. The decisive keyword here is “trust”. The basis of the Christian faith is a twofold act of trust: God’s trust in the world – keyword “Christmas” – and the trust of Jesus in the hands of God – keyword Golgotha: “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Force, particularly the special crime of sexualized violence in the church and by representatives of the church, touches on the core of trust and ability to trust on the part of the persons affected and in the “system”. This is why the church is also challenged theologically. There has not yet been any theological penetration of this aspect worth mentioning in connection with the abuse scandal.

2. The False Sense of Victimization

2.1. Victim vis-à-vis Church

On the day the *Berliner Morgenpost* published my letter of 20.01.2010, the outcry from the institution reached my ear: “What is P. Mertes doing to us!” I am not quoting this exclamation of a colleague in order to show her up. The pain which expressed itself in the outcry is comprehensible. Our young people also felt greatly hurt as their school was suddenly stigmatized as the “School of Horror”, as a Berlin tabloid put a few days later. It was similar for the teachers at the school. And that certainly also applies to the pupils and employees at schools such as Ettal, Odenwaldschule, Birklehof, Aloisiuskolleg and Kolleg St. Blasien, which have stood at the centre of public attention during the past three years. To hear that a beloved, esteemed, and since deceased school director who served as a role model for careers and also for identification with a school knew about the incidents of abuse but did not react appropriately hurts one at any institution of learning very much. Icons of identification with the institution develop a fissure and one’s own professional biography appears in a different light.

Clearing up abuse – both the deed itself and the silence in the institution – hurts. It makes one’s own self-image falter, along with one’s pride in one’s reputation which was previously given through membership of the institution, the self-image of the church and identification with role models. And then there are the would be participants who use this chance to vent their old anger with the institution and settle other accounts. Know-it-alls who explain the world to one and issue unsolicited advice. One soon reaches one’s threshold of pain.

But then there is the second step, the step back into distance from spontaneous emotion: Shall I let the varnish have a scratch, or shall I continue in the attitude of warding it off. The question sounds easier than it is to answer it concretely. The pain confuses one and leads to the question of who the victims actually are in this entire matter of clarification. Young people at the institution who have nothing to do with the abuse there that lies many years in the past fear that their school will be stigmatized even though they experience their school differently from the victims of abuse of decades past. Then they too are actually victims in some sense or other, for this stigmatization affects them too. Teachers, educators and priests are hurt by the general suspicion that they too are potential offenders, a suspicion which falls on them as darkening shadows. They too are somehow victims.

But the institution's self-assessment as a victim and the feeling in the institution of being a victim makes one blind to the victims of abuse and deaf to their stories. This is why it is "wrong", theologically, and a "temptation" biblically speaking. There is a chronological order which must be observed if the process of clarification is to succeed. First the victims of abuse must be heard. To let the words of the victims get to one, one must sort out one's own feelings of being a victim: yes, the awful truth will hurt, but at first it is not about the institution, and not about the church. The church does not act as a victim when it encounters victims of abuse. Even in the case of the one or other individual who belongs to the institution and has a rationally comprehensible feeling of being a victim, it does not help further to present oneself as likewise being a victim to the public and to the victims of abuse. For if everyone felt like a victim, there would only be victims and consequently nobody who could accept responsibility on behalf of the institution.

Of course, the distinction between victim of abuse and institution has its limitations. There is not only the "church of the abuse offenders", but also the "church of the victims of abuse". Victim and institution do not just stand opposite each other; in many cases, they are also linked by joint membership that continues into the present. But for those victims who regard themselves as belonging to the church at some other level, there still has to be a counterpart for clarification of abuse and the subsequent process. If the victim and the institution do not face each other, nobody will hear, and nobody will speak, and ultimately there will never be a process of clarification and possibly of reconciliation.

2.2. Feeling of Victimization, Hate

The "false sense of victimization" has yet another aspect. Victims have to struggle with feelings of hatred. This also applies to those who wrestle with the "false sense of victimization". Anyone in the church who does not come out of the false sense of victimization will easily slip from complaining about their own pain into feelings of hatred and hate speech. A particular type of hate speech which has been coming up in the church since January 2010 and which can be expressed anonymously with no inhibitions or concealed by clever formulations, shouts down all who draw attention to the ugly side of the institution. At the end of the day, such hate speech also does not spare the victims of abuse.

Hate feelings are an expression of helplessness. But there is a difference there. The hate feelings of the defamatory forums and critics are those that arise from the pain of clarification –

that is, hate feelings in the institution which form an alliance with the institution. It is bad for the church when such voices meet with assent in broader circles. Hate has brought many victims to be silent, time and again. Pure hatred within the institution. Naked rage against speaking the truth – in families, congregations, schools and homes, and also in the church. Helpless rage connected with the institution applies force. This is one of the symptoms of trauma, that the institution has been traumatized.

2.3. Church as Victim of the Offenders

Regarding itself as victim of the offenders is another trap into which the false sense of victimization entices the institution. According to this fallacy, the abuse offenders have damaged the institution, so the institution is a victim too. This suggestion sounds convincing enough and invites one to side with the victims and proceed with them against the offenders. This leads to hate speech against the offenders: “stamp out, eradicate, pull up”, or, in somewhat less drastic form, the metaphor of “cleansing”. But splitting off the dark side in one’s own system does not solve the problem of violence and even less the problem of blindness to violence.

Here, however, one has to distinguish from case to case. Abuse in institutions, including ecclesiastical institutions, has a variety of forms. There is abuse which be recognized as criminal at first sight. This is the abuse which is carefully concealed by the offender precisely because it would immediately be recognized as abuse if it were ever to be seen at all. In this case, the scandal of covering it up in the institution becomes even more scandalous as the indications of criminal activity become more and more obvious and as it becomes more and more obvious that these are actually indications of crimes.

But then there is also the other case of abuse with which the offender succeeds not only in abusing individual victims, but also in creating a system in which the indications of abuse are more or less public for everyone to behold, but without being recognized by the participants as such. This is the institution with a spell cast on it by the offender, so to speak. In this case, one can certainly say that the institution itself has been led by the offender into blindness. Here, the distinction between offender and victim becomes blurred because in such systems (almost) everyone has been turned into an accomplice, into an accomplice who is a victim. The examples of sects which rally around a charismatic, narcissistic personality show how this type of abuse works. The narcissistic interplay of abuse offender and church (group, congregation, spiritual community) turns more or less everybody into an accomplice – except the victims who are the object of the naked force applied by all the others. It may be that such systems develop inner circles in which the naked felony comes to light, whereas only symptoms are visible in an outer circle, symptoms which it is hard to recognize as such within the entire system, inasmuch as they have been placed on exhibit by the offender. Here is an example. One of the chief offenders at Canisius-Kolleg liked to speak publicly on masturbation in detail and on all occasions, naturally “only” with the intent of sexual education. Then, the abuse centred on masturbation in the inner circle – but no longer just verbally. Thus the symptom was actively made visible by the offender to the outside so as to disguise its symptomatic character. The entire institution was dragged into the abuse in this way.

3. Split in the Institution

Clarification of misuse of power in institutions splits. That also applies to the church. This split is related to the truth. Emotionally speaking, there are good reasons not to admit the truth, or not to admit it in its entirety. When I hear what one of my own has done to a third party, a child, perhaps even my child, then that changes my relationship to him or her. In the moment in which sexual abuse is uncovered in the church, all the members of the church are affected in their relationships with one another: those who have a relationship to the offender as well as to those who knew or should have known. The question, “What did you know?” makes its way into the congregations, the families, the religious orders, the colleges for teachers and educators, and the alumni groups. Loyalties change, break up, and reassemble.

3.1. The Testimony of the Victims

The church has been undergoing a similar experience with its clarification of abuse. The testimony of the victims splits, due to its effect, but not due to its intent. However, the split cannot serve as a reason for turning a deaf ear again or for somehow leaving out clarification. One can – to put it metaphorically – go only one way forward. Standing still would be at the expense of the victims and turn the institution into an entity clothed in armour, one that loses contact to reality and thus brings forth further victims.

Thus there is a split which stands against the unity of an institution or even the church, and there is a split which is necessary in order to find one’s way back to unity. Here is where the concept of “reconciliation” plays a role. The actual split comes from force, from the abusive deed itself. Making clarification responsible for the split is deliberate confusion; indeed, that is the irrational core of the accusation that clarification fouls one’s own nest. But when the force is uncovered, there is also another type of split, a split in the service of unity in order to make new trust possible at all, with inclusion of the victims. This split is necessary in order to overcome the split that proceeds from the act of violence. Ultimately, superficial unity, be it ever so clever, cannot be the reason for omitting the split which is always connected as a risk when the truth is discovered. Unity, and mutual trust, cannot be warranted by standing still, but only by entering into the entire truth.

3.2. Fear For Existence

Here is another comment on this point. The split of the institution results in the institution in fears for one’s own existence, especially in the ranks of those responsible. Having responsibility for an institution also means having responsibility for jobs, and for performance, on which others are dependent. This fear for the existence of an institution has an entirely rational basis. On the one hand, this fear for existence results from the occasional demand that abuse in an institution must have as a consequence that the institution close down. It may be that in the one or other case a specific ecclesiastical institution can deal with its past in a truthful manner only by closing its doors. But there are two reasons why such a procedure seems to be problematic. On the one hand, self-dissolution of the institution – such as a home or a boarding school – can also mean that it is evading its responsibility, similarly to how perpetrators of other crimes commit suicide to evade their responsibility to their victims, thus pass-

ing their guilt back to the victims. On the other hand, the following applies: “Organizations are changed and can in principle dissolve themselves, whereas institutions mutate and always come back again.”¹ I regard boarding schools, homes, and also the church as institutions, and not as organizations. Institutions which think they can really dissolve themselves overestimate their options. An institution that does not renew itself, but dissolves itself instead, is an institution that will reappear someplace else basically unchanged. The net result would be zero.

4. Loss of the Helper Position

The church is accustomed to and likes to be in the position of helper. But abuse in its own ranks tarnishes its self-image. As long as the poor whom I encounter are victims of third parties, I can turn to them to offer help. The Good Samaritan, who turned to the man who had fallen into the hands of robbers, had not beaten him up and robbed him. The congregations and aid organizations are glad to play the part of the Good Samaritan. But in a case of abuse, the church’s situation is more complex. Here, the institution does not just encounter victims of deeds and circumstances for which it is not at all responsible. Rather, the church encounters victims of its own “spiritual care”.

4.1. Self-Awareness in the Mirror of Victims’ Stories

That has several consequences. For one thing, the institution in this constellation cannot simply join the victims’ side to strike against the offenders. The institution is also not primarily entitled to the therapeutic, helping gesture vis-à-vis the victims with which it customarily and traditionally turns to those in need. On the contrary, many victims turn to the church in the context of a therapeutic review of their story, which they have seen to themselves. When the topic of “help” is articulated by them, then this is probably connected with demands, including financial demands.

The encounter with the victims of one’s own spiritual care requires – one could also say makes it possible for the institution to achieve – a change of perspective. What does a church school recognize, and what does the church recognize concerning itself when it regards itself from the perspective of those who have suffered and still suffer under its actions, and its myths and structures, when it lets a mirror be held up to its face in the narratives of its victims? This in no way means that the victims are instrumentalized again for self-recognition processes in the church – if that were the case, then the victims would once again no longer be in sight. On the other hand, in an encounter between church and victims it is unavoidable that processes of self-recognition will be initiated, processes *hinter die ich nicht zurück kann*.

4.2. Signs of Penance (Digression)

a) Penance and Effort

The process of the past few years has also made the following clear: the victims’ side expect an effort from the offenders, they expect of the church that the church will take initiatives, and

¹ Heinz Bude, *Bildungs-panik*, p. 114

not the other way around. After 2010, sentences such as “I am not interested in revenge, but they ought to bleed” could be heard from the victims’ side in public. As understood by the ear of the institution that had been addressed, this sentence could be translated into the principle “Penance has to hurt”. That has nothing to do with masochism. It is not a question of inflicting pain upon oneself, but of allowing oneself to experience pain. This applies not only to the offenders as individuals, but also to the institution. It is a matter of repentance.

The first dose of pain that has to be allowed is the pain of the truth. But repentance must also take action. Suffering must be acknowledged not only through words but also in that it costs the acknowledger something. When the damage cannot be quantified, acknowledgment payments are admittedly only a gesture, but at least they are a gesture. Indeed, it is more than a matter of money. If it is really a process of reconciliation, then it is a question of much more. The institution cannot want to come out of the reconciliation process the same as it was before if it is really interested in reconciliation. It must leave behind itself the defensive perspective that is worried about identity. Repentance includes the willingness to change. Changes can hurt. It is more comfortable to stay the way one is and just to “atone” outwardly.

b) Penance and Reconciliation

In addition: reconciliation is not something that may be imposed on the victims. There is no eleventh commandment that is addressed specifically to victims and charges them with “Thou shalt forgive.” The demands of the victims for redress entail a call for performance on the part of the accused. This call from the victims need not have the perspective of reconciliation in mind – nor does it in many cases. But, for the sake of its own self-esteem, the institution, the church, can respond to this call only if it connects this call for itself with the perspective of reconciliation. Whether the victims adopt this perspective is quite another question. The church has nothing normative to say in this matter. In view of the magnitude of the damage in a case of abuse, redress can in any case only be a gesture that is not able to “compensate” for the damage in the narrow sense of this term. But the concrete gesture, the effort, the critical view of oneself, the willingness to turn back, that is all indispensable. Not until then can one add that the pain of clarification, the corrections of one’s own structures and the work on prevention belong to penance. But then they are also fundamental. Penance continues to be superficial as long as there is no real change in oneself.

There is a misunderstanding that says a victim is morally obliged to forgive if the offender shows remorse in word and deed. However, by listening to the stories of victims, one can find out that it is the other way around: Forgiving, when it succeeds, is good for the victim. Forgiving means letting loose; this letting loose frees the victim, but not the offender or the offender’s side – or, to put it better: it frees the offender’s side because it frees the victim from fixation on the old wound, the rage which has become old, the bitterness. However, this does entitle the offender’s side to jump into the role of an adviser and signal to the victim that the victim would be doing him or herself a favour if he or she were to forgive. The offender’s side must be patient and confine itself to what it itself can contribute to reconciliation. In terms of forgiveness by God, this means that God does not close ranks with the repentant sinner against the (yet) unforgiving victim by forgiving the repentant sinner his or her sins; rather, God is merciful with the sinner because this is in accord with God’s own nature. It is in

this way that God has the greatest joy, one could say, as related in the parable of the merciful father the Gospel according to St. Luke (Luke 15.11-32). Of course, this also makes God's love for the sinner visible, which is not in contradiction to God's love for the victims.

Reconciliation with God does not ignore the victims. This, too, is a message from the perspective of the victims. It refers above all to the fact that some offenders turned to the victims later with the statement that they had confessed and made amends and Christ had forgiven them. This too is a vast area for theological reflection. On the one hand, the conciliatoriness of Christ cannot be made dependent on the conciliatoriness of the victims, for that would impose on the victims the responsibility for ensuring that the reconciliation process is a success. On the other hand, reconciliation with God cannot be uncoupled from the reconciliation process with the victims. It is precisely for this reason that the church approaches the topic of reconciliation with the conviction that the church itself must contribute something. The church cannot and must not escape the reconciliation process with the victims.

4.3. Victimism and the Language of Pity

Victims attach great importance to not just being regarded as victims. Of course, the term "victim" is indispensable wherever there is a clear distinction between offenders and victims. And especially with child abuse, the asymmetry of power between offender and victim is obvious. The responsibility for the act of violence lies solely with the offender, and the responsibility for omitting to protect the victim lies solely with the institution. Resort to survival strategies by victims in constellations of abuse – this is also emphasized by the feministic perspective of abuse – cannot be adduced to place any blame on any of these victims. But this does not allow the inference that victims are just victims. Otherwise they would be deprived of their identities as subjects simply because they had been abused. In this respect, the debate about abuse can get sucked into the whirlpool of "victimism" (Kathleen Barry):

"A woman who has been mugged may well experience that she can reckon with sympathy only if she assumes the role of victim. She is assigned the status of a victim and is judged solely on the basis of what happened to her. This classification as a victim generates a frame of mind that sets off reactions of sympathy and pity. Victimism denies that this woman is a whole human being, quite apart from her unfortunate experience, and creates for others a frame in which they do not see her as a person but just as a victim. The designation 'victim' becomes a label that determines the identity of the person in question."²

This applies to all victims of all types of abuse. Society, the media, the church and all others who engage in the discussion about abuse must therefore be sure they do not use the language of pity and thus participate in prolonging any victim's status as victim or in his or her internalizing this status. Sympathy, Yes. Pity from above, No. This is a very important task for working on one's language, especially for the church, inasmuch as the term "pity" is indispensable for preaching the gospel and conveying an understanding of Christian spirituality.

² Maria Katharina Moser, "Auf das Opfer kann sich keiner berufen" in: Goertz/Ulonka (publisher), Sexuelle Gewalt, Münster 2010, p.102

5. Church and Trust

Abuse of persons entrusted to one's care is breach of trust. Omitting to protect such persons damages their ability to trust. The difference between trust and mistrust – in biblical terms, between faith and fear – is not a neutral difference. Trust is the basis for all relationships between people, and also for their relationship to God.

5.1. Trust and Control

In the first days and weeks of the abuse scandal, a wave of mistrust swept through the land. In addition to its clarifying tendency, it had and still has a destructive character. The panic of mistrust crashed against the still functioning spaces of trust to cast a general suspicion on all institutions that have anything to do with persons entrusted to the care of others. When one thinks this through to the end, a totalitarian model of society that operates on the principle “We replace trust with control.” becomes visible, resulting in frightening visions.

Trust is rebuilt through trust, not through control. Control is good, but trust is better. This begins in communication with the victims themselves in which they are *not* served with words like “Now you must trust us again”. Renewal of trust must be made possible. The first step must come from the other side. The church must listen to the victims with trust. The victims are not obliged to approach the institution with trust; rather it is the other way around. Theologically speaking, the priority of trust on the part of the institution is reflected in the priority of the acts of God over those of mankind: God, through his incarnation, approaches his people with trust. That is the “*pístis theou*”, the “trust of God” of the Epistle to the Romans (Rom. 3.2). This is what makes it possible for the people who have been pushed into mistrust to regain their faith. It is incarnation which makes faith possible, not the other way around. Thus the church's first message to each victim is not “Trust me!” but “I trust you.”

Mistrust is the consequence of violated trust. But when victims takes a step toward the church, this is an expression of trust that has remained. The reaction to this step taken by the victims will decide whether the violated trust is pressed into the habitus of mistrust or whether trust that has remained is fortified. Fearful reactions to victims on the part of the institution are disastrous – when the side that is addressed reacts to the victim's report with fear because it calls into question one's view of oneself and one's relationships with others. Then the institution, in its fear, approaches the victim with mistrust, and this generates further mistrust.

That may at first seem to be naive, as if here the principle of the presumption of innocence is suspended when victims begin to speak. That, however, is a misunderstanding. There is justified trust and there is unjustified trust. There is methodologically justified scepticism. But this does not imply that trust is an irrational act. Even if a victim's statement proves not to be right, this does not yet imply that the victim is speaking falsehoods on purpose. Nevertheless: if I always begin communication with victims with an attitude of mistrust, I will never be able to get at the truth. There is an indissoluble connection between trust and truth.

5.2. Ways out of Mistrust

Victims of abuse can likewise be caught in the perspective of suspicion and mistrust. That is a part of their suffering. It puts a strain on their relationships. Mistrust is an affliction and adds to their inflictions. The other person is always more a threat than an enrichment. Individual pieces of information are quickly arranged to form convincing conspiracy theories. This mistrust gives rise to defensive power fantasies that can suddenly change to violence.

A victim's experience also includes feelings of hate. The encounter with hate involves the temptation to be infected with hate and resist violence with violence. The gospel knows another way to deal with hate: Mt 5,39. Hate provides an opportunity to live the principle of facing one's opponent in a non-violent way, as Christ preached and lived. However, love for one's enemies also includes the attitude of trust, trust that God is also powerful through the power of nonviolence, or, to put it in secular terms, that violence can be stripped of its power through nonviolence because nonviolence is stronger than violence. Thus the communication of the church with the mistrust of the victims is also a test of faith for the church.

What can "turn the other cheek" mean? It does not mean "withdraw and submit", even though one might well insert a phase of distance for reasons of self-protection. Turning the other cheek means not to turn away but to keep facing one's opponent inwardly, even when hatred against one is returned. Hate is nothing other than anger grown old. Hate is not only destructive, but also self-destructive. If I face the opposition, I can also disassociate myself from it in this way. A methodically reasonable dose of mistrust is advisable thereby, provided it does not develop into a basic attitude toward the victim. This presents the church with a broad field of practise in the midst of the crisis, a field with which the church can contribute something to interrupting cycles of violence, including cycles of violence within its own ranks.