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# Becoming whole again: The goal of women’s struggle against sex abuse in Catholic schools in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on sex abuse and abuse of power in Catholic schools in the Philippines. I argue that these schools should ground policy design and decision-making on the relational safety model developed by Maria Carmen B. La Viña and her colleagues at the Catholic Safeguarding Institute, and on a holistic pastoral approach developed by Nila Bermisa. The latter offers a life-giving vision on what to aim for in dealing with abuse as Christians, namely renewal and a movement toward fullness of life. I show that failure to reference the work of these two women is connected to the commission of egregious mistakes such as promoting silence and secrecy that further harm victims, partiality toward abusers, perpetuating organisational structures that correlate with abuse, and failing to listen to women who point to a connection between abuse and patriarchal Catholic culture.*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, young people in the Philippines have come forward with stories about sex abuse and how Catholic schools

1 CONTENT WARNING: This article contains details on sex abuse, including incidents where grooming was committed by teachers to target their students. It also refers to mishandling of sex abuse complaints by school authorities.

failed to respond adequately to what was happening under their watch. These stories became a rallying point for a burgeoning social movement, with young people at the forefront of the push for accountability. Women are involved in two ways. First, most of those victimised are women or girls. Secondly, several women are involved in advocating for, and accompanying victims of abuse.

Although protest and dissatisfaction with Catholic schools' response to abuse started prior to 2020,<sup>2</sup> a more serious reckoning came about during the pandemic. It is probably no accident that what started as a trickle of anonymous online postings became a deluge of published interlocking narratives about sex abuse and its mishandling, at a time when the online modality of communication and learning became more prominent. The first few stories that emerged in 2020 referred to incidents in Miriam College. The stories were amplified and shared widely until there were approximately 30,000 posts related to the hashtag #MCDoBetter on Twitter. More stories from other schools emerged and the young people came together in solidarity, their main interest being to hold abusers and school administration accountable. This came with a challenge against authority in a predominantly Catholic country, where administrators, even in non-denominational or public schools, wield moral authority related to the church or Christianity.<sup>3</sup> As the country and the world return to campus, the young people's push for schools to do better continues.

In this article, I answer the following questions: How do we understand and address problems associated with sex abuse and abuse of power in Catholic schools in the Philippines? More specifically, how do we work toward such understanding and amelioration from a feminist theological perspective that is rooted in the work done by women in local church communities? To answer these questions, I draw from the work of Maria Carmen B. La Viña and Nila Bermisa (1948-2013). La Viña is a psychotherapist who also trained at the Center for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Bermisa was a Maryknoll sister whose ministry and theological scholarship revolved around violence against women. I show that La Viña's relational safety model and Bermisa's holistic pastoral approach help us understand abuse in terms of fragmentation. I

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2 The most prominent protest against sex abuse, prior to 2020, took place at the Ateneo de Manila University on 15 October 2019 (Ramos 2019). The Time's Up Ateneo Collective emerged from this protest. They have continued to engage in their advocacy since 2020, mainly by amplifying victim-survivor narratives and connecting with more young people in other schools (Tan *et al.* 2021). More details in section 2.

3 Cornelio & Aldama (2020) point out that, even as 90 per cent of Filipinos identify as Christians, religious diversity is now a reality in the country.

also draw from philosophical research in moral psychology, and argue that we need to turn away from cheap grace and the “bad apples” explanation for abuse. Instead, we must allow survivors to tell their stories, so that fragmented communities can be transformed by the power of costly grace.<sup>4</sup> I begin by going through narratives about abuse and schools’ response. I then discuss problems related to fragmentation. In sections 4-5, I synthesise and expand on La Viña’s and Bermisa’s ideas, in order to identify a better path forward.

## 2. WOMEN COME FORWARD AND SCHOOLS RESPOND

The June 2020 social media storm associated with Miriam College was amplified by students and alumni from other Catholic schools, including St Theresa’s College Quezon City; Ateneo de Manila University; St. Paul College Pasig, and School of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, journalists covered the young people’s stories. In this section, I discuss victims’ narratives, as reported by mainstream and campus journalists. More specifically, I focus on the stories told by Isabel,\* Julia,\* and Patricia of Ateneo; Andrea\* of Miriam, as well as Crystal\*, Meulin\*, and Jastine of St Theresa’s College.<sup>6</sup> The public availability of narratives determined the decision to focus on these women and their schools.

First, a few words on terminology. I take the phrase “sex abuse” to cover all forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment. The latter is a specific form of abuse that consists in unwanted and inappropriate sexual advances made by a superordinate or peer within work or school contexts. I take “sex abuse” to cover a broader range of cases. For instance, it applies in cases where someone in a position of

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4 Following other writers on sex abuse, I draw on Bonhoeffer’s (1959:45-52) distinction between cheap and costly grace. According to him, cheap grace emerges when the church aligns itself with the world, whereas costly grace is associated with discipleship. Bonhoeffer (1959:48) points out that “costly grace confronts us with a gracious call to follow Jesus”, instead of abiding by the demands of the world. More on cheap and costly grace in sections 3 and 5, respectively.

5 These institutions are associated with the following religious congregations: Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (ICM) for St Theresa’s College; Sisters of St Paul of Chartres (SPC) for St Paul Pasig; Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) for School of the Holy Spirit, and the Society of Jesus for Ateneo. Miriam College is a Catholic institution currently managed by lay persons. The school is historically associated with the Maryknoll Sisters. Many other non-Catholic schools are associated with sexual harassment reports, which speaks to the prevalence of sex abuse in the Philippines.

6 Names marked with an asterisk (\*) are aliases. Only Patricia Escalante of Ateneo and Jastine Yap of St Theresa’s College have gone public with their identities.

authority such as a teacher makes an effort to find sexualised satisfaction by grooming or exploiting the trust of a vulnerable individual. Although there is no single definition of grooming, it is understood to refer to actions taken by an abuser to entice vulnerable individuals into complying with sexual acts.<sup>7</sup> Grooming can involve “verbal or physical coercion, emotional manipulation, seduction, games, enticements, and alcohol or drugs” (Terry 2008:33-34). In the case of teachers and other authority figures in Catholic schools, grooming can also include spiritual or intellectual influence that leads to participation in sexual acts. According to Terry (2008:41), “the more significant the grooming behavior, the less likely the victim is to report”. Sex abuse also includes what Rutter (1989:20-27) calls “sex in the forbidden zone”. This happens when people such as therapists, doctors, teachers, and clergy use their position of trust as a pretext for systematically taking advantage of vulnerable others. For some of these abusive individuals, sex in the forbidden zone acquires a different quality. It is something more appealing because it is illicit. Abuse of power relates to actions or omissions of persons in authority that result in one or several things. First, the discrediting or silencing of primary and secondary victims of sex abuse.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, allowing credibly accused abusers to have continued access to vulnerable persons or remain in a community where they threaten victims’ sense of safety. Finally, crafting or implementing policy in a way that focuses on the public image of the institution, but does not necessarily provide pastoral care to vulnerable persons or initiate an objective and transparent inquiry into cases.

## 2.1 Survivor narratives

The protest against the way in which schools handle abuse has a twofold purpose: to exert pressure on school authorities to do better, and to empower victim-survivors to come forward to tell their stories (if they so desire). Prior to 2020, anonymous reports about abuse already proliferated online. But there has long been a taboo against topics such as grooming. Investigative reports that emerged during the pandemic have allowed survivors to break this taboo. Andrea\* relates that, when she was

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7 In June 2021, Book VI of the Code of Canon Law was revised to include grooming as a punishable offence. Other changes consist of inclusion of non-ordained religious and laypeople in the list of punishable individuals. However, it is unclear whether these rules apply to educational institutions that are affiliated with the church but operate under a charter or articles of incorporation following regulations of civil authorities.

8 Primary victims are those who directly experienced sex abuse, while secondary victims are those who witnessed an incident, were confided to by a victim immediately after an incident or accompanied a victim in her effort to grapple with what happened. I thank La Viña, for introducing this distinction to me.

12 years old, her teacher established a close connection with her through SMS messages:

He kept texting me. At first, it wasn't anything discomforting, just him asking about my day, getting to know me more ... I wasn't used to stuff like that and I think he knew. It was easy for him to establish a connection ... because I didn't have many friends and I was really a low-key student. I knew he began being very sweet, making me feel special (Acosta 2020:n.p.).

As the exchange continued for months, her teacher also gave Andrea\* literature that portrayed illicit romance and even sexual violence between an older character and a young girl. Ultimately, her teacher's messages became explicitly sexual:

He would send me texts like I want to kiss you, I want to taste your lip balm ... because he knew I was into flavored lip balms. When he touched me physically and I felt I didn't like it, he tried to explain ... if it feels good for him ... it must be right. He would always try to explain and say, 'You don't know anything ... about relationships.' (Acosta 2020:n.p.).

Other survivors relate stories about grooming or befriending that pivot around a vulnerability. In Andrea's\* case she was very young. Meulin\* was grieving over the death of a sibling, while Isabel\* suffered from mental health issues. Isabel\* was being treated for major depressive and generalised anxiety disorders when she started college. One of her professors presented himself as a friend and source of emotional support. This started an ambiguous relationship. Like Andrea\*, Isabel\* was ultimately subjected to inappropriate and unwelcome sexual advances. Meulin\*, who was 16 years old at that time, thought she was in love with her teacher because he was there for her when she was grieving. She welcomed his advances and even thought that she was in a relationship with him.

For Patricia, Julia\*, Meulin\*, and Jastine, their abusers initially came across as upstanding men who were esteemed in the school community. Whereas Morales\* (formerly of St Theresa) came from a seminary background and was once a missionary in Jamaica, Torres\* (formerly of Ateneo) specialised in teaching philosophy of religion.<sup>9</sup> Patricia's and Julia's\* interest in philosophy and appreciation of the lessons in Torres's\* class became a basis for closeness with him. He made unwanted and

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9 Other teachers on humanist subject areas, which play a pivotal role in the kind of liberal arts education taught at Catholic schools, are also implicated in abuse. [Intervening clause refers to subject areas, not teachers]

unwelcome sexual advances in the context of their interest in philosophy (Cruz 2020). Julia\* was even touched inappropriately while inside the classroom with other students (Cruz 2020).

Nearly all victim-survivors encountered difficulties when they reported what happened to them. A guidance counsellor at Miriam College disbelieved Andrea\*, and even accused her of ruining his life and reputation (Acosta 2020). Isabel\* was alerted by her psychiatrist about the problem and she eventually filed a formal complaint. But she found the internal process of Ateneo an uphill battle, one where school officials showed almost hostile indifference toward her. Isabel\* describes her experience thus:

They wanted me to ‘elaborate’ on the experience ... I went into details because I understood that it was necessary ... but it was almost inhumane ... they wanted me to tell them what had happened after I had already written it in my testimony in great detail. ... I feel like they neglected the fact that this is a traumatic experience that took real emotional and psychological tolls (Luna 2020: n.p.).

Although her professor was ultimately dismissed from his teaching position, he was allowed to continue with his graduate studies in Ateneo. Isabel\* would still see him in or around campus. Combined with her bad experience on the processing of her complaint, her abuser’s presence negatively affected Isabel’s\* sense of safety (Luna 2020).

Patricia was also dissatisfied with Ateneo’s handling of her complaint. She was further aggravated by Ateneo’s public statement in 2019, which indicates that there are no sexual harassment complaints on record against Torres\*. In a social media post that went viral, Patricia called out Fr Jose Ramon T. Villarin SJ (former president of Ateneo), saying, “I filed a case against ... [Torres\*] in 2016. The complaint was sexual in nature and the institution gave an official decision.”<sup>10</sup> She filed an appeal after she

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10 Villarin’s (2019a) first public memorandum after the 2019 protest in Ateneo contained an apology for “gaps and inadequacies” in the university’s response. He also acknowledged the pain experienced by members of the community. Patricia’s call-out is directed at a subsequent public memorandum (Villarin 2019b), which contained the statement “No formal complaint for sexual harassment has been filed against ... [Torres\*].” Since this statement was never retracted, many young people have called for its rectification. In February 2021, the student council and the Times Up Ateneo Collective explicitly asked the university administration for “a genuine apology for and a clear rectification of the ... [Villarin 2019b] memo”. The young people pointed out that the later memo misled members of the community and “discredited the stories and voices of survivors and their advocates” (Time’s Up Ateneo 2021a). This development came at about the time when Torres\* departure from Ateneo was reported (Caiga & Mangaluz 2021). Patricia’s call-out of school administration exposed not only an incident of sexual harassment, but also evidence of mishandling of at least one such case.

discovered that her initial complaint was misclassified. Once again, she found the response of the university wanting. In a two-part video released by the Time's Up Ateneo Collective in 2020, Patricia says:

All I got was ... 'we made a mistake and we're reclassifying it. ... The question right now is why haven't they come out with a public posting taking back what they did and apologizing for that? I was made to feel like it didn't matter ... I remember thinking 'I wish I didn't do this.' It's really just re-victimization. It's like I'm going through something already, and then I feel like I'm made to go through something else, another injustice ... (Escalante 2020).

It appears that others also experienced re-victimisation. Julia\* accepted an apology from Torres\* because she was moved by what he said. At that point, Ateneo stopped further action on her complaint (Cruz 2020). Jastine made the mistake of telling Morales\* that she was going to report him if he did not stop talking to other girls. He responded by threatening to commit suicide. Ultimately, teachers and administrators of St Theresa's College discovered Morales'\* misdeeds because someone leaked screenshots of his messages to students. Abad (2021a; 2021b) reports that the school focused more on investigating who leaked information to the public. They even punished Jastine and asked her to apologise to Morales\*. He ultimately resigned from the school, but the damage to Jastine's social and curricular standing was already considerable by then. Her mother appealed to the school authorities on her behalf. But in the response letter to Jastine's mother, Sr Josefina Nebres, ICM (directress of St Theresa's College) declined to retract the punishment imposed on Jastine. Aspersions were even cast on her status as a victim. In a letter to Jastine's mother, Sr Nebres wrote:

You claim that she is the victim in these exchanges although the messages show that she voluntarily sent messages and responded to the inappropriate messages of the teacher.<sup>11</sup>

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11 When the case was brought to the attention of the Department of Education, an official resolution declared that St Theresa's College mishandled cases involving Morales\* (Abad 2021b). Part of the resolution indicates that Jastine "was influenced by [Morales] to lie [about] their relationship. And there was nothing on the records which would show that said allegation was denied by [him]. ... one cannot expect a minor to make the right decision especially when prodded by a teacher who has moral ascendancy over her person" (Abad 2021b:n.p.).

Despite the fallout from Morales\* wrongdoing and serious damage to the school's reputation, he does not seem to have been given any official punishment or public rebuke.<sup>12</sup> Sr Nebres' letter even shows that, as far as school authorities are concerned, Jastine shares significant blame for what happened.

Although investigative reports are now publicly available, many stories remain untold. Luna (2020) explains that some victim-survivors hesitate to come forward about the mishandling of their complaints because they signed strict and far-reaching non-disclosure agreements required by their schools. The large scope of such non-disclosure agreements is consistent with the schools' frequent appeal to technicalities on data privacy and confidentiality. One of Luna's interviewees mentions that,

since the main complaint of students is that the investigation process of Ateneo is broken, putting a gag order on students who went through the process stops students from exposing and criticizing the system.

Another source opined that non-disclosure agreements constitute a "catch-and-kill strategy", where the school offers victims a formal investigation in exchange for their silence. Despite this, survivors have continued to come forward with their stories. For instance, Ateneo's 2021 Orientation Seminar for new students was met with complaints about past abuse committed by one of its hosts (Doctor 2021). The organising committee of the Seminar responded by referring victim-survivors to the university's internal processes, the same ones that were described as opaque and broken (Time's Up Ateneo 2021b).

Ultimately, survivors and advocates want ownership of their stories so that they can obtain justice and accountability, as well as help establish mechanisms for ensuring student safety. Patricia expresses the view thus:

I don't think I can completely move past this until I'm sure that the institution is really a safe space ... justice for me would start with holding everyone accountable. You cannot be in a leadership position if you've caused these kinds of pains and trauma on your students (Escalante 2020).

Advocates add that schools must own up to their mistakes and not use an exclusively forward-looking approach. According to Danna Aduna, a member of the Time's Up Ateneo Collective, conducting a putative

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<sup>12</sup> Journalists were able to track Morales\* at another school outside Metro Manila, where he taught religion to college students from 2019 to 2020. It appears that he also sent sexualised messages to young women at this school (Abad 2021a).



independent review without being clear on how school administration would be held accountable would not

adequately address the unresolved issues in the past. It might focus ... exclusively in forward-looking changes, without asking the questions on how to make amends for the past, especially to survivors (Luna 2020:n.p.).

## 2.2 Response from schools

Ateneo, Miriam, and St Theresa's College all responded by creating revised policies, new offices, reconstituted committees, and/or mandatory training programmes on sexual harassment (not all forms of sex abuse).<sup>13</sup> These appear to be guided by an effort to avoid liability under Philippine law.<sup>14</sup> Forms of abuse such as grooming and sex in the forbidden zone, which are not clearly recognised by these laws, are ignored. Few or none of the school administrators have referred to ideas from La Viña, Bermisa, or other women who have done work on abuse.

In Ateneo, there seems to be a discrepancy between a purported commitment to an improved response and what community members know about mishandled cases (Luna 2021). An apparent refusal to account for this discrepancy creates a lack of transparency that breeds distrust.<sup>15</sup>

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13 This claim is based on information that the schools have made public. St Theresa's College (2020) created a training programme on sexual harassment in education crafted by lawyers who specialise in gender-related issues. Miriam College (2021) created a Truth and Justice Commission that was eventually reconstituted to become the committee on sexual harassment issues required by Philippine law. Interestingly, the College instituted a whistleblowing policy that protects against retaliation. Publicly available versions of Ateneo's (2018; 2020) sexual harassment policies heavily feature reference to relevant laws such as The Anti-Sexual Harassment Act of 1995 (R.A. 7877) and The Safe Spaces Act (R.A. 11313).

14 A comprehensive review of schools' policies and responses is not available at this time, because many important documents and records are inaccessible. In other places where sex abuse and abuse of authority at Catholic institutions were discovered, such review only became possible with the intervention of courts, grand juries, and similar bodies. Even as there is evidence that young people are included in the discussion of policy, their participation is not credited and they are unable to comment on what parts of their recommendations were rejected or adopted. For instance, the Time's Up Ateneo Collective reports that they participated in the discussion about revising Ateneo's 2018 policy and that they submitted 47 pages worth of comments to the institution before the 2020 policy was finalised (Tan *et al.* 2021). But no further details are publicly available on these comments or on how Ateneo responded to them.

15 The institution's initial response to the 2019 student protest is a statement from Ateneo's Marketing and Communications Office, indicating that the university is responding to issues related to sexual harassment, but that it is prevented from relevant laws from disclosing information on the cases about which students are protesting (Ateneo Statement 2019). This statement was met with a

Public statements of administrators appear to recognise the gravity of the problem and the immense pain felt by the members of the community (details provided in footnote 9). But there is also a tendency to downplay the institution’s moral culpability. A statement from Miriam refers to “the purported inappropriate behavior of a few male teachers in our High School through the years”, but does not mention how school authorities disbelieved students such as Andrea\*.<sup>16</sup> In Ateneo, a memorandum from the university president, containing apologetic statements about the school’s handling of sex abuse cases, was shortly followed by another memorandum that drew attention to the very small number of cases processed by the committee on sexual harassment (Luna 2021). This later memorandum (Villarin 2019b) is the one that Patricia publicly called out. It indicates that the university’s committee on sexual harassment has handled only seven formal complaints since it was established.<sup>17</sup> This statement does not acknowledge a student council report, stating that 39.5 per cent of the reports on sexual harassment in Ateneo (2017-2019) were only considered formal reports and not associated with any official disciplinary process (Luna 2020).

In some instances, the schools’ response is too late. In Miriam College, one very serious case, involving a teacher making statements with sexual innuendos and casually touching students, was not resolved adequately, because victims declined to file an official complaint and the teacher forestalled disciplinary proceedings by filing for resignation and fleeing. In some instances, lateness can partly be explained by the time needed by victim-survivors to fully grasp what happened to them and/or waiting for a time when they feel safer. For instance, Patricia only filed an official complaint against Torres\* after she graduated. Crystal was a 17-year-old student at St Theresa’s College when she was befriended by one of her teachers, Duico\*. He eventually had an affair with her and even manipulated her into competing with his fiancé. It took many years for Crystal\* to

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rebuke from Senator Risa Hontiveros, principal author of The Safe Spaces Act (Ormedo 2019). Hontiveros pointed out that the university seems to be misusing this law to “insulate offenders from accountability” (Ormedo 2019).

- 16 By contrast, the Women and Gender Institute of Miriam College published a statement expressing solidarity with young people. Part of the statement reads: “We continue to read these painful experiences of sexual harassment, homophobia, transphobia, pedophilia, abuse of power, neglect, and disregard for the safety and well-being of our students. We want our students to know – we hear you, we feel your pain and anger, and we stand by you” (WAGI 2020:n.p.).
- 17 The committee was most likely established after the 1995 anti-sexual harassment law took effect. This means seven formal complaints from 1996 to 2019, which is well under reported averages. According to a survey conducted by Plan International in 2020, 50 per cent of girls in the Philippines report that they frequently experience sexual harassment (Narvaez 2020).

realise that she was abused, and she only filed a complaint against Duico\* nine years after the affair. Although St Theresa's College processed the complaint in her favour and terminated Duico's\* employment in 2020, Crystal felt dissatisfied with the entire process (Abad 2021b:n.p.)

I kept following up through emails and they took so long to provide details about the investigation. I formally asked for an apology from the school and the teacher, but I did not receive any.

### 3. ABUSE AND FRAGMENTATION

Sex abuse and its aftermath create fragmentation at the level of individuals, relationships, and entire communities. In this section, I enumerate the problems schools are facing, and then introduce three interrelated ideas that will be used to analyse and find remedies for the problems. Here is the list:

- Issues connected to sex abuse and abuse of power are dealt with in a compartmentalised manner, focusing on individuals as scapegoats. Those who are accused of wrongdoing are either given significant amount of protection and sympathy, or later branded as one of the few “bad apples” in the institution. Those who suffered because of abuse are silenced or pressured into acquiescing that enough has been done to address their concerns.
- School administrators rely on reputation, status, and the goodwill of their publics as tools for damage control. They issue statements that deflect criticism of the institution or create the impression that adequate measures are being adopted. These tools and statements are used as a shield against genuine accountability. Insisting that persons in authority are well-intentioned or good people does not amount to much. In and of itself, such insistence does not change outcomes for those who suffered because of abuse, or cooperate with advocacies that pressure school administration into doing better.
- Even when they want to come forward, young women and their stories are hidden from public view. This cheapens confidentiality. Critical details, even in the form of anonymous or aggregated reports, are not completely divulged to stakeholders (e.g. alumni and parents), who can hold school administration accountable. Individual complaints are subjected to opaque and inadequate processes, which are later revised for the protection of institutions' reputation. But hardly anything or nothing is done to provide pastoral care or make amends to those who suffered under previous policy.

- The overall response to abuse in Catholic schools follows a worldly pattern, especially with respect to avoiding culpability and maintaining a problematic (patriarchal) status quo. Sex abuse in academia, sports, entertainment, and many other domains is marked by the same refusal to acknowledge corporate complicity. In the case of Catholic school communities, this refusal means a failure to own up to some form of social sin and an unwillingness to repent. Because transformation through costly grace necessarily involves communal repentance and reconciliation, the schools are left only with cheap grace.

The first important idea consists in recognising the misguided tendency to explain abuse in terms of the behaviour of a few “bad apples” in an otherwise blameless community. In a paper that revisits the “bad apples” explanation for abuse in the Catholic Church, White and Terry (2008) argue against the accuracy and usefulness of this explanation. Part of their argument shows that the analogous explanation for bad behaviour among police officers is flawed. Explaining police brutality by focusing only on a few officers, who directly participated in beating up a suspect, does not account for many other officers who saw or heard about the violence but did not interfere. Actions and omissions relating to such bad behaviour can only be addressed by recognising that it is enabled by opportunity and organisational structures that create isolation and lack of supervision over potential abusers, as well as institutional subcultures and policies directed at maintaining a problematic status quo (White & Terry 2008:662). Using parity of reasoning, sex abuse in Catholic communities cannot be solely attributed to a few bad individuals, especially if abuse happens over an extended period or is left unresolved because reports from victims are minimised and credibly accused individuals are protected from the legal and other consequences of their actions.

The second important idea involves cheap grace, which Bonhoeffer characterises as the tendency to produce simulacra of the benefits of discipleship, in order to remain worldly, thus avoiding having to actually follow Jesus. For instance, “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession” (Bonhoeffer 1959:47). In the case of sex abuse, the parts about forgiveness without repentance and absolution without confession especially apply. Even in instances where abuse is acknowledged, there is a tendency to obtain premature forgiveness from the victim so that some pretence to communal reconciliation can be made. This is a form of scapegoating on individuals, which, in turn, leads to a failure in addressing the evil of sex abuse in an integrated manner. Instead of adopting an integrative approach,

individuals are treated in isolation as a scapegoat. Whereas the offender is treated as an isolated “bad apple”, the victim is taken as the source of a quick fix. If she can just be brought to the point of saying that she forgives her abuser or agrees that authorities have done enough, then many will have been released from making difficult choices. They can put off or set aside structural reform and the need to deal with the fallout of abuse on the greater community, especially if everything can be managed in a secretive process.

The third important idea is clarity on what forgiveness does not mean. In the sense of forgetting, moving on, or erasing the memory of abuse, school administration seems to expect or desire forgiveness. There is hardly any recognition that merely smoothing over problems only protects the school’s public image. There is no acknowledgement of the necessary connection between forgiveness and justice. In her book on violence against women, Cooper-White argues that forgiveness requires justice.<sup>18</sup> She points out that one of two conditions is necessary, but not sufficient for such justice (Cooper-White 2012:255). The first condition is the abuser’s unqualified admission of guilt, repentance, and reform. The second condition is a clear decision from an authoritative process that delivers judgement on the guilt of the abuser and imposes appropriate punishment. When neither of these conditions is clearly met, many will continue to cry out for justice.

#### 4. BECOMING WHOLE AGAIN THROUGH RELATIONAL SAFETY

La Viña’s ideas about relational safety help us better understand and find remedies for the first two problems noted in the previous section. The model arises from the work that she and her colleagues have done on sex abuse in the local church. They operate from the perspective of (child) protection and safeguarding. The former refers to intervention after abuse has taken place, while the latter refers to measures designed to prevent abuse from happening at all. Domains such as social work, sociology,

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18 In this book, forgiveness is characterised as something that can only be done by God. It is a letting go that enables the survivor to move toward wholeness. Cooper-White (2012:257) describes forgiveness as a “releasing of all the heavy burden of rage and hatred and moving forward in life with new lightness of breath and step”. According to Karlijn Demasure, former Executive Director of the Center for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University, victims have a right not to forgive their abuser. She says, “We need to understand people who are not able to forgive. Forgiveness is always a grace; it can never be a moral obligation you can enforce on someone.” (Heikens 2020).

law, criminology, public health, and psychology inform the protection and safeguarding of the vulnerable. Those who work in this area recognise that the occurrence of sex abuse is correlated with unmanaged or mismanaged situational pressures on potential abusers, and insufficient structural measures for preventing and dealing with abuse (Terry 2008). According to La Viña (2021:3), safeguarding involves understanding sex abuse as “a problem of the heart that calls for conversion” of individual persons, their relationships, and their church. She adds that, when such a call to conversion is heeded, God may be found in any relationship or community, especially by the vulnerable. In her view, safeguarding is a necessary part of ministry not only for professionals such as psychotherapists, but also for all members of the community. In practical terms, we must take the following remark very seriously: “If it takes a village to raise the child, it takes the village to abuse one.”<sup>19</sup>

Thinking in terms of relational safety helps us recognise that abuse implicates entire communities, not only an individual abuser. The abuse of young people cannot be explained only by pointing to the bad behaviour of a few teachers. The “bad apples” explanation for abuse prevents us from recognising risk factors for victimisation. These factors include the existence of a vulnerable person; the presence of a possible abuser in the vicinity, and the absence of safeguarding norms and structures (Dy-Liacco 2020). Since the first and second factors are present in virtually all school and church communities, failure at the level of the third factor is almost always the main problem. The vulnerable person is not always a child. Adults can be rendered vulnerable by a power differential, which is structurally determined. Exclusively focusing on individuals ignores many important considerations. Wilfully creating such blind spots and scapegoating on individuals get in the way of safeguarding. According to Dy-Liacco, the worst criticism of the church is that it failed to build and maintain norms and structures on protection and safeguarding because of ignorance, fears about loss of reputation or resources, and problematic attitudes towards the vulnerable. Catholic schools in the Philippines seem to be similarly situated.

The relational safety model rests on a tripod that “provides an integrated and comprehensive safeguarding approach” (La Viña 2021:1), by highlighting the connection between safety across different relationships: to oneself, to specific others in one’s primary community, and within a greater institution. The latter especially refers to parishes, dioceses, congregations, and other organisational units of the church

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19 This line is from the movie *Spotlight* (2015).

(or affiliated institutions such as Catholic schools and universities). The following diagram (La Viña 2021) depicts the model.



Safe ministry refers to an institution's capacity to provide a space, in which compassionate and competent pastoral care is provided to vulnerable persons. La Viña encourages institutions to ask important questions such as: Are we promoting a culture of safety? Do we provide a safe environment in which people are able to find God? Do we have policies or codes that are effective and claimed by stakeholders as their own? Do our policies and measures promote transparency and accountability, so that people can be held accountable for their actions and prevent abuse of power? An adequate response requires attention to both prevention (safeguarding) and intervention (protection). Implementing the model importantly involves monitoring institutional practice from an outsider perspective, including audits. According to Dy-Liacco, intervention at the level of safe ministry must be timely, transparent, and subject to accountability checks. The idea is in keeping with the recent trend to allow civil authorities and other external bodies to scrutinise the church's response to abuse. Transparency and accountability cannot be properly instituted at the level of individuals, or even interpersonal relationships. When measures are faulty or missing, community leaders are not in a position to deny culpability for abuses that take place under their watch.

La Viña's ideas on relational safety are compatible with the claim that character or virtue is not a sufficient bulwark against misdeeds or catastrophic omissions. This claim especially applies to persons in authority. Merritt argues that, even among individuals with the right kind of moral commitments, sympathetic interpersonal dynamics can disrupt our ability to do the right thing. According to her, familiarity breeds a pattern

of overconfident decision-making that sometimes fails to track important moral considerations (Merritt 2009:46). For school administrators, answering only to a confidential audience with known and/or congenial views most likely leads to such error-prone decision-making. Relevant research shows that accountability is elicited when decision-makers know in advance that they have to respond to an audience whose views are unknown, are interested in accuracy, are focused mainly on processes instead of outcomes, are reasonably well-informed, and have legitimate reasons for inquiring into the matter (Lerner & Tetlock 1999:259). For Catholic schools, many groups such as advocacy collectives, student councils, alumni, and parent coalitions can play the role of such an audience. Administrators and policymakers would then do well to allow relative outsiders to regularly scrutinise their decisions. Such scrutiny makes safeguarding possible, not the reputation or actual virtuousness of individual administrators.

## 5. BECOMING WHOLE AGAIN THROUGH PASTORAL CARE

Bermisa's holistic pastoral approach complements relational safety. She points out that shelter, medical and psychological help, legal assistance, and other referrals are necessary for enabling abused women to heal (Bermisa 2011:10, 108-109). But Bermisa (2011:110) argues that these are not sufficient for attaining holistic healing that "allows those who were abused to reclaim their dignity, [and] personhood – that they may breathe and dance again". Her insight is that healing requires reform and renewal within the church and Filipino society. Something similar can be said about relational safety. Even if we have acceptable policies and safeguarding measures in place, there is work left for us to do. We must allow for reform and renewal through costly grace.

Before discussing costly grace, let us consider what is in need of reform. Bermisa argues that there is a connection between the failure to address sex abuse and abuse of power, on the one hand, and patriarchal Catholic culture, on the other. This culture involves rejection of the feminist claim that sex abuse is a concrete expression of men's control over women's and children's sexuality (Demasure 2019:23). When social norms and structures support the belief that women and children are responsible for the sexual acting out of men, the reality of abuse cannot be confronted. Following Bermisa, we can use a narrative approach in both pastoral work and theological reflection to resist the culture that puts



women down.<sup>20</sup> For instance, by making room for stories told by abused women and those who accompany them. Some of these stories provide a model for transformation where suffering and pain turn into ease and abundance – the life envisioned by Jesus for all (Bermisa 2011:34).<sup>21</sup> Stories of remembrance and recovery from past trauma must be modelled on Jesus himself. According to Demasure,

even after the Resurrection, his [Jesus'] scars were still there. He lived on with his past. ... You don't have to forget everything or pretend it never happened, Jesus didn't (Heinkens 2020).

For this reason, we must remember and honour the stories of young women such as Andrea\*, Jastine, Patricia, and many others.

What matters for the narrative turn in pastoral care is that silenced voices are allowed to speak in ways that challenge dominant narratives (Demasure & Müller 2006:416). Under this approach, those who occupy positions of authority – pastors, therapists, community leaders, or administrators – are enjoined not to dominate discourse. Instead, they are asked to take on a humble not-knowing stance, one that allows for the “*local wisdom* of the person seeking help” to emerge (Demasure & Müller 2006:418). Taking on this stance goes some way in preventing hierarchically focused stories from being used to hinder accountability and effective safeguarding. In the Philippine context, those seeking help are younger members of the community who are victim-survivors or survivor-advocates. In some instances, their stories might relate how those who experienced death-dealing sex abuse moved toward new life. The role of persons in authority and of the rest of the community is to empower women who want to engage in this counter storytelling.<sup>22</sup> Some of these women may even be willing and able to take critical roles in instituting reform. Part of the reform consists in allowing them to do so. However, creating space for counter-storytelling and challenging dominant narratives is what's

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20 This refers to the culture of misogyny, a term aptly analysed by Manne (2018:33) as the property of social systems or environments as a *whole* where women tend to face various kinds of hostility because they are women living in a man's world and/or failing to live up to patriarchal standards. On this view, misogyny is the law enforcement arm of the patriarchy.

21 To support this idea, Bermisa (2011:118-121) refers to the passage, “I came that all may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). In her pastoral work with women who have been abused by clergy and religious, Bermisa relates some stories of such transformation. See especially the stories of Ana\* and Mari\*.

22 Relevant information about specific cases can be shared without coercing specific individuals to divulge compromising information or violating anyone's rights. What matters is to disclose information and tell stories with the aim of creating “a safe place, where confidences are kept but destructive secrets are eradicated” (Cooper-White 2012:246).

important, not the mere involvement of some women in leadership roles in reform.

In other instances, the counter-narratives are not explicitly spiritual. Instead, a (secular) pursuit of justice and the need to hold power to account are emphasised. Such stories may humble, even humiliate, those in authority. But even this can be a locus of renewal and transformation. Much can be learned from choosing not to erase stories of protest, or silence voices that insist on retelling disquieting events from the past. It is not enough to refrain from making rules on confidentiality and laws on libel to hide certain stories from view. Neither is it enough to stop emphasising aspects of due process that require victim-survivors and survivor-advocates to speak only behind closed doors. Counter-narratives from hidden corners of the community must be welcomed and widely shared. These stories could allow the school communities to move away from the patriarchal and worldly tendency to discredit victim-survivors and refuse to acknowledge corporate complicity. This combination of discrediting and refusal is visible in every other worldly domain where systemic and prolonged sex abuse and abuse of power took place. This worldly pattern has also emerged in the church. For instance, inertia, institutional longevity, and limited attention span are sometimes used as tools to wait out the heat of protests. Then there is an attempt to “get ahead” of the way victim-survivors’ stories are re-told and remembered. In the meantime, the part of changing organisational culture and community practice that is up to us does not get done. The humble attitude that allows costly grace to effect a transformation is not taken on. The young people’s counter-narratives can allow their elders to learn and course correct. But only if the painful and humbling stories are told and allowed to transform everyone in the community.

Costly grace is about discipleship, which Bonhoeffer (1959:48) characterises as

costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says ‘My yoke is easy and my burden light’.

Bonhoeffer’s insight brings us to the paradox at the heart of our faith. The yoke Christians are asked to take on is at once a cross, and a source of rest and consolation. We should not focus on a simulacrum of consolation by avoiding the cross. God has already paid the exorbitant cost of transformation, as he sacrificed his own son. But, even if grace from this sacrifice is freely given to us, we cannot get transformation on the cheap. School communities, in particular, and Filipino society, in

general, must continuously confront the challenges presented by counter-narratives. These narratives are a critical vessel of costly grace. The uncovering of these stories may lead to pain, tumult in the community, and mortification. But even and especially in the face of these, we must retain hope that the community of faith can continue along the path of growth and transformation. Arguably, something similar already happened after investigative reports on sex abuse in the church forcefully emerged in public consciousness over 20 years ago, and again in 2018. The creation of a charter for the protection of young people, the revision of the Canon Law, the release of the infamous McCarrick report, and the practice of naming abusive individuals all emerged only after much tumult and mortification. That these necessary and important reforms can emerge amidst such tumult is a testament to the power of costly grace.

## 6. CONCLUSION

I now bring together the lessons from sections 3-5 to illustrate how school communities can move forward in a difficult but productive way. The following practical recommendations specifically address the problems enumerated in section 3.

- Recognise that the twin evils of sex abuse and abuse of power are associated with social structures and organisational culture. Schools need to implement policies that incorporate lessons on grooming, sex in the forbidden zone, and other hard-won lessons from the church's experience with abuse. Aside from ensuring that the focus is not merely on compliance with Philippine law, grievance mechanisms must be developed so that victim-survivors can speak out about problems on internal processing of complaints. It must be clear that the goal of such internal processes is to bring about justice. This depends on seeking the abuser's unqualified admission of guilt, repentance, and reform; or producing a clear official decision that delivers judgement on guilt and imposes appropriate punishment. Policy must be redesigned to produce either or both of these outcomes.
- Instead of using reputation or track record as a protection against further scrutiny, persons in authority must take on a humble stance. This means allowing their decisions to be regularly examined by a critical audience that enjoys a measure of independence. It would be helpful for these audits not to take on a hierarchical focus that privileges the perspective of clergy and religious. Humble listening to criticism and protest is needed.

- Community leaders must allow for, and engage with counter-narratives, especially from individuals or groups that advocate for victim-survivors and speak about problematic patriarchal tendencies in Catholic communities. Aggregated and anonymised information on cases, complaints, and so on, must also be regularly publicised. Investigative reports on mainstream media and initiatives from advocacy groups that create spaces for counter story-telling must also be welcomed, not undermined, or ignored.
- Everyone must accept that thorough reform of organisational culture and community practice is needed, and that such reform is costly. Only grace can truly carry through such reform. But we must not get in the way of transformation by avoiding humiliation and tumult. At the very least, decision-makers must consciously move away from the way in which the world deals with sex abuse and abuse of power. Recognising that such a strong worldly tendency exists is an important first step.

In the economy of costly grace, all of us are asked to participate in the process where God transforms fragmented communities and reconciles them unto himself. Everyone's participation importantly involves allowing survivors and protesters to tell their stories, and for the most part in their own terms.

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**DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

I am a staunch supporter of the Time's Up Ateneo Collective's push for justice and accountability. Although I am part of the community that comprises this collective, I call myself a supporter instead of a member of the collective out of a desire to recognise that it is a social movement of and by young people. Previously, I was a tenured faculty member at the Department of Philosophy of the Ateneo de Manila University. I resigned this tenured position because of principled disagreement over how cases of sex abuse were handled by school authorities.

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*Trefwoorde*

Waarde

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Beveilig

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