

## Scriptural Sources for Renewal

By Very Rev. Robert Barron

2015 Anglophone Conference, Pontifical Gregorian University

The Catholic Church, especially in the West, has been passing through one of the very worst crises in its history. The clergy sex abuse scandal has compromised the work of the Church in almost every way. It has adversely affected teaching, preaching, evangelization, the recruitment of priests and religious; it has cost many billions of dollars which could otherwise have supported the Church's mission; it has almost thoroughly undermined the credibility of the Church's ministers, and of course most terribly, it has deeply wounded many thousands of the most innocent, those the Church is specially charged to protect. Given the gravity of this crime, it is just that the Church should suffer.

Those who reverence the Bible as the Word of God will not be surprised to discover that the Scriptures have a good deal to say about this crisis. I believe that any approach to solving it—psychological, legal, institutional, etc.—must be grounded, finally, in the wisdom of God's revealed Word; otherwise, it will be a chase after wind.

I would suggest that we begin at the beginning, with the account of creation in the book of Genesis. In almost all of the other accounts of creation from the ancient world, order comes to the universe through some primordial act of violence, typically the victorious struggle of one god against another. Very often the elements of the world are made up of the severed body parts of the conquered deity. But there is none of this in the Biblical story, according to which God brings the universe into being through a non-violent act of speech: "Let there be light...let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures," etc. God faces down no rival as he makes the world, but rather shares the bounty of his being through love.

The Church fathers exulted in seeing the orderly coming forth of all things from the Creator as a kind of cosmic liturgical procession, each thing finding its place in the chorus of nature. On this reading, the human being, precisely as the last of creatures, took up the privileged place at the end of the procession, much as the priest or bishop would. This is because the role of the human being is to praise the Creator on behalf of all creation, giving prayerful voice to the sun, moon, earth, animals, and insects. The Fathers, accordingly, consistently read Adam as the high priest of creation, walking in easy fellowship with the Lord, communing with him "mouth to mouth," which is the root meaning of *adoratio*, and they interpreted the Garden of Eden as a

kind of primordial temple. Adam was priest, and he was also prophet, philosopher, and scientist, since he named the animals in the presence of the Lord, literally cataloguing them, describing them *kata logon*, according to the intelligibility placed in them by their creator. Finally, Adam is construed as king, which is to say the one whose task is to protect and to foster the life in the garden and eventually to go on the march, turning the whole world into a place where God is praised and God's order is concretely realized. In exercising these offices, the human being is meant to show forth his identity as one made distinctively in the image and likeness of God, as one functioning as a sort of viceroy on behalf of the Creator.

The first command which God gives to his human creatures, "be fruitful and multiply" is a summons to fulfill their priestly, prophetic and kingly missions precisely through sexual love and reproduction. It is of supreme significance that this primal command is repeated at key moments in salvation history. As he brings the remnant of God's good order forth from the Ark after the flood waters had receded, Noah is told "be fruitful and multiply;" when he enters into covenant with Yahweh, Abraham is informed that he will be the father of many nations; when the Israelites flood into the Promised Land, they are summoned to produce life abundantly. It is absolutely no accident that the privileged sign of covenantal belonging for ancient Israel is a mark on the male reproductive organ. God's designs for the human race—and through the human race for the whole of the cosmos—are deeply tied to sexuality, and this means that sexual love, children, and family are paramount vehicles by which a compassionate, non-violent stewardship of creation finds expression. In light of these clarifications, it should not be the least surprising that, on the Biblical reading, one of the principal marks of human dysfunction is sexual misconduct. The Scriptural authors know all about pride, ambition, envy, violence, and avarice, but they recognize something of a *corruptio optimi pessima* quality in regard to sexual corruption. And they analyze it frequently and with a remarkable psychological and spiritual perceptiveness. In the course of this brief presentation, I can hardly do justice to the full richness of the Scriptural treatment; therefore, I will focus on only a handful of particularly illuminating narratives.

### **Abraham, Lot, and the Angelic Visitors**

I should first like to consider the strange but richly illuminating story from the 18th and 19th chapters of the book of Genesis, which treats of an angelic visit to the patriarch Abraham

and its troubling aftermath. We are told that the Lord deigned to appear to Abraham through the mediation of three men/angels. After the patriarch received and served them, the visitors predicted that, despite their advanced years, Abraham and Sarah would, a year hence, have a son. Overhearing the conversation, Sarah laughs at the absurdity of the suggestion that she and her husband could still experience “sexual pleasure,” but the Lord remonstrated with Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I really bear a child, old as I am? Is anything too marvelous for the Lord to do’” (Gen. 18:13-14)? What is marvelous, of course, is not simply that an elderly woman would bear a son but that the promise made to Abraham, that he would become the father of a great nation, was, against all odds, about to come true. God’s lordship, faithful human cooperation, the fulfillment of the covenant, reproduction, laughter, and even sexual pleasure are all, in the typically Israelite manner, folded in together.

And this is why it is extremely instructive to examine the stories of sexual perversion and misconduct that immediately follow this one, for they demonstrate the negation of God’s plan for human sexuality. At the beginning of the nineteenth chapter of Genesis, we hear that the angels who had visited Abraham have made their way to the city of Sodom, the home of Abraham’s nephew Lot. After enjoying a meal in Lot’s home, the angels find themselves hemmed in by a startlingly aggressive and lustful band of men, indeed, we are told, *all* of the men, both young and old, of the town. Without the slightest hesitation or shame, they announce their intentions: “Where are the men who came to your house tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have intimacies with them” (Gen. 19:5). The gang-rape being proposed—violent, impersonal, self-interested, and infertile—is the precise opposite of what God intends for human sexuality. In the feral men of Sodom, the *imago Dei* has been almost completely occluded.

The narrative becomes, if anything, more disturbing as we consider the reaction of Lot. The nephew of Abraham begins promisingly enough: “I beg you, my brothers, not to do this wicked thing,” but then he proposes an appalling solution: “I have two daughters who have never had intercourse with men. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please” (Gen. 19:7-8). In order to stave off a brutal sexual assault, he presents his own virgin daughters for a violent gang-rape. Could we imagine a more thorough-going undermining of the Creator’s intention regarding sex? The men of Sodom, simmering with rage, are having none of it, and they press Lot against the door of his home. At this point, the angels intervened, pulling Lot inside and striking the men of the mob blind. The dramatic punishment should not be read

simply as an intriguing twist in the narrative, but rather as the symbolic communication of a spiritual dynamic. Having devolved morally to the level of pack animals, the men of Sodom have become blind to any of the deeper dimensions of sexuality and human community. In response to the polymorphous dysfunction of the city, God, we are told, rained fire and brimstone upon Sodom. We must never interpret divine punishment in the Bible as capricious or arbitrary, the result of an emotional affront; rather, we should read it as a sort of spiritual physics, God allowing the natural consequences of sin to obtain.

Following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his daughters, we are told, flee to the surrounding hill country, where they take up residence in a cave. Commenting on the annihilation of their city, Lot's older daughter suggests to the younger that since all the men have been wiped out, they should couple with their father and so bring forth children. Accordingly, on successive nights, they get their father drunk and sleep with him and both girls become, through these incestuous relations, pregnant. They give rise, thereby, to the Moabites and the Ammonites, two tribes that would come, in time, to be at odds with Israel. Can anyone miss the connection between the shocking psychological and sexual abuse to which these girls were subjected—their own father offering them to a violent mob—and their subsequent abuse of Lot? Haven't we seen over and over again in our time the sadly familiar dynamic of sexual abuse begetting sexual abuse, the sin passed on like a contagion from generation to generation? That this perversion of sexuality took place in a cave, the dwelling place of animals and primitives, is still another indication that the *imago Dei* has been rather thoroughly effaced. And that the weird unions are the *fons et origo* of two peoples antagonistic to Israel is a further sign that what transpired between Lot and his daughters stands completely athwart God's salvific purpose.

### **Eli and His Sons**

The narrative of Eli and his sons is an eerily accurate anticipation of many of the features of the clergy sex abuse scandal, and thus it behooves us to attend to it with some care. The first glimpse we get of Eli, high priest of Shiloh, is not edifying. Demonstrating not an ounce of pastoral sensitivity, Eli upbraids the distraught Hannah, who had been praying aloud in the sacred place, begging God for a child: "How long will you make a drunken show of yourself? Sober up from your wine" (1 Sam. 1:14)!

Then we hear of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, who are priests like their father, but wicked, having regard neither for God nor for the people. We are told that they took the best meat from the sacrifices piously offered by the supplicants at Shiloh and that they were sexually abusing the women who worked at the entry of the meeting tent. The victims of their abuse brought complaints to Eli, and the high priest responded with strong enough words, remonstrating with his sons: "Why are you doing such things? It is not a good report that I hear the people of the Lord spreading about you. If a man sins against another man, one can intercede for him with the Lord, but if a man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him" (1 Sam. 2:24-25)? But Hophni and Phineas disregarded their father's warning and continued on their path of corruption, and Eli apparently took no further action against his sons.

It is against this background that we must read the famous and poignant story of the Lord's call to Samuel, the son whom Hannah had sought from the Lord and whom she had given to the Lord for service in the Temple. We are told that, at this time, "a revelation of the Lord was uncommon and vision infrequent" (1 Sam. 3:1). One might be permitted to wonder whether this was a function of the Lord's refusal to speak or rather of the blindness and corruption of the spiritual leadership of the nation. During the night, God calls to Samuel, but neither the boy nor his spiritual father understand the nature of the summons. Only after several false starts does Eli give the proper instruction: "If you are called again, reply, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening'" (1 Sam. 3:9). Since the version of this narrative that is found in the lectionary ends at this point, most Catholics don't know the devastating words that the Lord finally speaks to young Samuel: "I am about to do something in Israel that will cause the ears of everyone who hears it to ring. On that day, I will carry out in full against Eli everything I threatened against his family" (1 Sam. 3:11-12). And God specifies precisely why he will exact such a severe punishment: "I announce to him that I am condemning his family once and for all, because of this crime: though he knew his sons were blaspheming God, he did not reprove them" (1 Sam. 3:13). In short, it was not the crimes of Hophni and Phineas that particularly aroused the divine ire, but rather Eli's refusal to act when he was made aware of them.

Just after this unnerving revelation, the Philistines engaged Israel in battle, and the result was an unmitigated disaster. After four thousand Israelites were slain in a preliminary skirmish, the army regrouped and resolved to bring the Ark of the Covenant itself into battle. Despite the presence of this talisman of the God who had brought Israel out of Egypt, the Philistines won a

decisive victory, killing 30,000 Israelites, including Hophni and Phineas, and carrying away the Ark as booty. When news of the catastrophe reached Eli, the old priest was sitting by the gate of Shiloh. So overwhelmed was he that he fell over backward and broke his neck, thus bringing, as the Lord had predicted, his entire family to an end.

Now does any of this story strike you as familiar? We hear of priests abusing their people both financially and sexually; complaints are brought to their superior, who uses strong words and promises decisive action but does nothing to stop the abuse. And the result of this double failure is a disaster and deep shame for the entire people, as they are delivered into the hands of their enemies. I would suggest that the story of Eli and his sons is an almost perfect Biblical icon of the clerical sex abuse scandal that has unfolded over the past fifty years. At the height of the troubles, in the early 2000's, many Catholics in America were dismayed at the frank anti-Catholicism on display in many of the newspapers, journals, and television stations that covered the scandal. Those with a Biblical frame of reference shouldn't have been surprised: the new Israel of the Church had been handed over to its enemies, precisely for the sake of purification.

### **David and Bathsheba**

The endlessly fascinating and psychologically complex tale of David and Bathsheba, recounted in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of 2 Samuel, has beguiled artists, poets, and spiritual writers across the centuries. It is one of the most sensitive and subtle narratives that has come down to us from the ancient world, and it sheds a good deal of light on the subject under consideration at this conference.

The commencement of the story is worth close attention: "At the turn of the year, when kings go out on campaign...David remained in Jerusalem" (2 Sam. 11:1). David was the greatest of Israel's campaigners, never shrinking from a fight, always at the head of the army, willing to undertake even the most dangerous missions. So why is he lingering at home, precisely at the time of year when kings typically sally forth? As we saw, the kingly task, rooted in Adam's mission, is to protect the Garden, to govern it well, and to extend its boundaries outwards. When kings refuse to undertake these tasks—whether out of cowardice, weakness, boredom, or distraction—trouble comes to Israel. Vacillating or indifferent kingship permits the serpent and his allies to hold sway. A clue to David's reticence is provided in the next verse: "One evening David rose from his siesta and strolled about on the roof of the palace" (2 Sam. 11:2). To be sure,

people in Mediterranean cultures typically take a siesta after the mid-day meal, but it is significant that the King rose *in the evening*, implying that he had been in bed quite some time. What the Biblical author sketches here, in characteristically laconic manner, is a portrait of a king gone to seed, a military leader grown a bit indulgent and indifferent. When he was in his spiritual prime, David invariably inquired of God what he should do, even in regard to minor matters; but throughout the Bathsheba narrative, he never asks God for direction. Rather, he does the directing. From his God-like point of vantage on the rooftop of his palace, David can see in every direction, and he can order things according to his whim. It is precisely from this perspective that he spies the beautiful Bathsheba, and through a series of quick and staccato commands, takes her to himself. It is doubtful that the Biblical author is unaware of Bathsheba's own cooperation with the affair—does she just happen to be bathing within easy eye-shot of the king?—but he is especially interested in the king's deft but wicked use of his power to manipulate another.

In the wake of Bathsheba's pregnancy, David attempts, using every means at his disposal, to cover up his sin, cruelly playing with the upright Uriah who though an outsider, nevertheless proves more faithful to Israel's laws than does Israel's king. Finally, of course, David arranges things so as to bring about Uriah's death, stooping so low as to compel the man himself to carry his own order of execution to Joab, the commander in the field. The murder of Uriah allowed David to take Bathsheba as his wife and definitively to cover up his sin, but we are told that "the Lord was displeased with what David had done" (2 Sam. 11:27). Again and again, the Scriptures insist that any human power is grounded in and derived from a more fundamental divine sovereignty. Aquinas's insistence that the positive law nests in the natural law which in turn nests in the eternal law is but a specification of the Biblical rule. No matter how much rangy authority a human being has, he does not escape the moral oversight and sanction of God. This is the sense of Jesus' reminder to Pilate, the representative of the most powerful political institution of his time: "You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above" (Jn. 19:11). In his laziness, self-indulgence, manipulation, and cruelty, David stands in the tradition of the sinful Adam whose bad kingship led to a compromising of the integrity of the garden.

Something like the law of karma typically obtains in the narratives of the Deuteronomistic history, and we see it in Nathan's famous confrontation with the king—"You are the man!"—and in the prophet's assurance that the sword shall never leave David's house. From

the death of the child conceived with Bathsheba, through the rape of Tamar, the murder of Amnon, the rebellion of Absalom and his subsequent death in battle, to the disastrous census-taking that resulted in the deaths of seventy-thousands Israelites, the prophecy of Nathan is relentlessly fulfilled. Though the Lord pardoned David for his sin against Uriah, there isn't an ounce of "cheap grace" in this narrative. Rather, David's sexual sin, and the violence and manipulation that attend it, result in horrific suffering for his family across several generations. In the wake of the scandals of our time, can anyone think that sexual abuse is relatively harmless, that its victims will "get over it" promptly enough? Isn't it in fact the case that the sword continues to swing and to cut, producing ever more victims?

### **Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom**

In the chapter that immediately follows the account of David and Bathsheba, we find the tragic story of Tamar, her brother Absalom, and her half-brother Amnon. These three children of David find themselves implicated in a nasty net of intrigue, violence, retribution, and above all, uncontrolled and self-serving sexual desire. We are told that Amnon "loved" his beautiful half-sister, but the Bible's description of his inner state reveals that he was, in fact, sexually obsessed with her: "He was in such straits over his sister Tamar that he became sick; since she was a virgin, Amnon thought it impossible to carry out his designs toward her" (2 Sam. 13:2). What becomes eminently clear is that his approach to her was predatory and aggressive, not unlike that of his father in regard to Bathsheba. One of St. Augustine's pithiest definitions of sin is the *libido dominandi* (the lust to dominate), and this is precisely what has seized the heart of Amnon.

How often it is the case that the sinner will find someone to aid and abet his sin: "And Amnon had a companion named Jonadab...and Jonadab was very clever" (2 Sam. 13:3). The use of "clever" in the New American Bible translation is apt, since it calls to mind the cunning of the snake in the Garden of Eden. Jonadab lays out the plan that Amnon should play at being sick and then protest to his father that he will accept nourishment only from the hand of his half-sister. One is struck by the unlikeliness, even childishness, of this stratagem, but David falls for it, proving once again that his failure to act in a disciplinary way is one of his chief faults. In point of fact, he gives the order to Tamar to go and feed her brother, thereby unwittingly facilitating the rape of his own daughter. The narrator allows us to look in on the very vivid scene of Amnon's seduction/manipulation. As her brother lies on his bed—how like his father who was

presented as lying in bed at the beginning of the Bathsheba story—Tamar prepares “heart-shaped dumplings” for him. One would have to be naïve in the extreme not to notice the voyeuristic and sexually charged nature of this scene. When she brings the food to her brother, Amnon seizes her and says, “Come! Lie with me, my sister” (2 Sam. 13:11), words which closely echo those of the wife of Potiphar to Joseph in the book of Genesis. Then, in four different ways, Tamar signals her lack of acquiescence to this demand, culminating in the observation, “Where would I take my shame” (2 Sam. 13:13)? Tamar knows that, according to Israelite law and custom, this rape would result in an immediate and permanent reduction in her status. Here the comparison with Bathsheba fails to obtain, for even after being violated by David, Bathsheba became a queen, whereas Tamar knew that in the wake of Amnon’s attack, she would be a pariah.

Utterly indifferent to her plea and her plight, Amnon, in the blunt words of the Scriptures, “overpowered her, shamed her, and had relations with her” (2 Sam. 13:14), the three transitive verbs in rapid succession imitating the thrusting force of Amnon’s crime. I can’t help but *feel* a connection here to the numerous stories we have heard in the last twenty years of powerless children and young people who were aggressed and shamed by sexually abusive priests. And then we hear of a weird reversal: “Amnon conceived an intense hatred of her, which far surpassed the love he had had for her” (2 Sam. 13:15). The psychological perceptiveness of the author is on evidence throughout the Samuel cycle, but perhaps no more conspicuously than here. How often it is the case that those who aggressively pursue someone out of lustful intention lose all interest in the person once the conquest has been made. Completely reversing the words he had used earlier, “Come lie,” Amnon shouts, “Get up, go!” The curtness and directness of the command conveys the brutality of an unbalanced man. Tamar immediately senses the precariousness of the situation. A lively option would have been that, having had relations with her, Amnon would petition David for her hand. Though this scenario might have been repugnant to her, it at least would have covered her shame and restored her social status. In sending her away so peremptorily, Amnon was closing out this option and thereby exposing her to ridicule and condemning her to social exile and a permanently unmarried state. The author provides the poignant detail of the “ornamental tunic” that Tamar wore, as did all the virgins of David’s household. Putting ashes on her head, the young woman tore the tunic and walked away, screaming as she went. Every bit of that description hammers home her humiliation and

hopelessness. How disturbingly familiar all of this sounds to us, who have heard hundreds of accounts of those who had been sexually abused by priests.

At this point in the narrative, Absalom, Tamar's brother, comes on the scene. Outraged at the violation of his sister, he plots his revenge on Amnon. Meanwhile, David the King has heard about the affair and signals his extreme displeasure; nevertheless, he fails to act. Once more the sin of Eli—inaction regarding gross injustice—comes to the surface, and it is precisely this inaction on the part of the king that gives Absalom room to maneuver. Two years after the rape of Tamar, Absalom sprang his trap at a shearing festival. While Amnon was “merry with wine,” Absalom ordered his murder, thereby both avenging his sister's violation and positioning himself to be the next king. Though he was deeply chagrined by what had happened, David, once again, did nothing, allowing Absalom to escape and, in time, to foment a rebellion against his father, which resulted in his own death and a disaster for the nation. We have certainly seen how often it is the case that sexual sin, unaddressed, gives rise to extraordinary violence and division in its wake.

### **Jesus the Son of God**

Having surveyed a handful of Old Testament narratives treating of various forms of sexual misconduct, I should like to turn to the New Testament and a consideration of Jesus himself. How wonderful that the Gospel of Luke includes a genealogy of Jesus that traces his origins through the roiled and complex history of Israel, all the way back to Noah, Methuselah, Enoch, and Adam. Luke's point is that the story of salvation, which culminates in Jesus, has been carried on precisely through the family and sexuality. As we saw, there is nothing puritanical or Gnostic in the Biblical imagination.

Moreover, a baby, a child, is at the center of attention as the Gospel story commences. Cherished by his mother, protected by his foster-father, visited by the shepherds, bestowed with gifts by the Magi, the baby Jesus is, at the same time, threatened by Herod and indeed by all of Jerusalem, which we are told, trembled at his coming. Herod's massacre of the innocents mimics, of course, Pharaoh's murder of the male children of the Hebrews at the time of Moses' birth. Once more we are made to see that, in the fallen world, the least powerful can be ruthlessly eliminated in order to satisfy the needs and assuage the fears of the most powerful. Of course, the same Herod who casually ordered the murder of the children of Bethlehem had previously

commanded the execution of two of his own sons. As in the Old Testament tales that we considered above, this awful story functions as a vivid picture of what compromised family life looks like. The abuse of young people can and should be analyzed psychologically and sociologically, but Biblical people know that, in the final analysis, it is a manifestation of the dysfunction born of sin, Augustine's *libido dominandi*.

We know next to nothing about Jesus' youth and coming of age, but the Gospel of Luke provides one intriguing glimpse, namely the account of the finding of Jesus in the temple. This well-loved story teaches a fundamental Biblical truth about family life and the proper relation between parents and children. We hear that the boy Jesus had wandered away from his parents while they were journeying, with their wider circle of relatives, from Jerusalem to Nazareth. After they discovered that he was missing, they returned to the capital and searched for him frantically across three days. Finally, they found him in the temple precincts, listening to the elders and asking them questions. Understandably exasperated, Mary asked, "Son, why have you done this to us?" And Jesus replied with devastating laconicism: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" The narrative in many ways echoes the account of Hannah and her son in the first book of Samuel. Though she had, in the course of many years, begged God for a child, Hannah, upon receiving the gift she had so ardently desired, returned him to the temple for service to the Lord. On the Scriptural reading, the family is meant to be a place where parents shape their children in the direction of mission. Children are not the means by which parents satisfy their own needs and ambitions; rather, they end in themselves, to use the Kantian language, and parents and other elders are meant to suit them for a life of service to God. Can we see the sexual abuse of children by their own relatives and by those who play a fatherly role in their lives as the supreme instance of the reversal of these values? We are told that the child Jesus, upon returning with his parents to Nazareth, was "obedient to them." What should be clear in light of the narrative is that this obedience on his part had not the slightest hint of obsequiousness or slavish acquiescence to arbitrary authority—an important reminder, given the number of children who were coerced into submission by predatory adults, often members of their own families.

## Jesus and Children

The eighteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel commences with a lovely and incisive meditation on the spiritual significance of children and of Jesus' attitude toward them. Exhibiting their customary tendency to miss the point, Jesus' entire company of disciples approached him with the question, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 18:1)? Their inquiry, of course, is born of a false or fallen consciousness, a preoccupation with honor and worldly power. In answer, Jesus called a little child over and placed him in their midst, which is to say in the focal point, the center. By so situating the child, he physically interrupted their jockeying for position and notice. In his innocence and humility, the child exemplifies what the spiritual masters call the true self, which is able to relate simply and directly to reality. This is in opposition to the false self, which is so layered over with preoccupations with honor that it gets at reality only haltingly and through a kind of buffer. This is why it is altogether appropriate to associate the true self with humility, drawn from the Latin *humus* (the earth or the rough ground). Though they take on the qualities of the false self soon enough, little children typically exemplify this spiritual alertness precisely in their ability to lose themselves in a game or a conversation or the beautiful facticity of the simplest things.

It was a commonplace in the ancient world to hold up distinguished figures as models: military commanders, religious leaders, political potentates, etc. What Jesus is doing is turning this tradition on its head, placing in the position of honor a figure of no social prominence, no influence, no connections. Within the standard societal framework of the time, children were expected to remain silent, and it was assumed that the powerful could manipulate them at will. Jesus reverses this, identifying the socially negligible as the greatest. Indeed, for those who have moved from the false self to the true self, the very meaning of greatness has been adjusted: "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:4). What follows is a remark of rich theological significance: "And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me" (Mt. 18:5). In the second chapter of Philippians, we find the remarkable hymn that Paul has adapted to his epistolary purposes. It commences with an evocation of the self-emptying quality of the Son of God: "Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God a thing to be grasped, but rather emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross" (Phil.

2:6-8). In short, the child—humble, simple, self-effacing—functions as a sort of iconic representation of the divine Child of the divine Father. The route of access to Jesus is therefore to move into the spiritual space of a child, to “accept” him in the fullest sense. This truth becomes especially clear in Mark’s version of this story.

When the disciples disputed about which of them is greatest, Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” Then he took a child and in a gesture of irresistible poignancy, he placed his arms around him, simultaneously embracing, protecting, and offering him as an example. The clear implication is that the failure to accept, protect, and love a child, or what is worse, the active harming of a child, would preclude real contact with Jesus.

And this helps to explain the vehemence of the statement that immediately follows: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Mt. 18:6). Mind you, this from the mouth of the same Jesus who, just a few chapters before, had urged the love of enemies! I don’t think for a moment that the earlier teaching is being repudiated, but I do indeed think that the extraordinary gravity of the offense is being emphasized. There is no other sin—not hypocrisy, not adultery, not indifference to the poor—that Jesus condemns with greater passion than this: “Woe to the world because of things that cause sin! Such things must come, but woe to the one through whom they come. If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into fiery Gehenna” (Matt. 18:7-9). It cannot possibly be accidental that

Jesus mentions Gehenna in the context of condemning those who attack children, for Gehenna was the place where children, throughout much of the Old Testament period, were sacrificed to Moloch. This extraordinary peroration concludes with an evocation of the angels: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father” (Matt. 18:19). This is far more than pious decoration. The abuse of children is a function of the objectification of children, turning them, as we saw, into mere means. In reminding his listeners that every child is assigned a supernatural

guide who is, in turn, intimately linked to God, Jesus is insisting upon the incomparable dignity of those whom society—then and now—is likely to disregard or undervalue. The central tragedy of the clergy sex abuse scandal is that those who were ordained to act *in persona Christi* became, in the most dramatic way, obstacles to Christ.

In the following chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we find another beautiful icon of Jesus in relation to children. The chapter commences with a pointed discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning marriage and divorce. Harkening back to the book of Genesis, Christ reminds his interlocutors that "the Creator made them male and female and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh... Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate'" (Matt. 19: 4-6). Lest anyone miss the implication of the two becoming one flesh, this discourse segues neatly into the account of Jesus blessing little children. One of the marks of our time, of course, is precisely the tendency to separate copulation from procreation, to drive a wedge between the pleasure of sexual congress and the moral demand of raising children. As one American wag put it, we no longer want to see the link between sex and diapers. At any rate, people bring youngsters to Jesus for a blessing, and the Lord's disciples rebuke them. As we saw, this was in line with the social conventions of the time, according to which children should never be permitted to bother a prominent adult. But Jesus is having none of it: "Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19: 14). The reign that Jesus speaks of, the new order of things brought about by his appearance in space and time, involves a turning upside down of the false order of the fallen world. Now humility, non-violence, guilelessness, and service are the marks of prominence, and hence children are the living icons of the new world.

## **Conclusion**

It is perhaps best to conclude with the image of Jesus laying his hands upon the children in blessing, for it sums up so much of what I have wanted to communicate in this reflection. The God of the Bible is the God of creation, which is to say, the God who cherishes matter and fosters the teeming of life. Family, sexuality, sensual pleasure, the joy and responsibility of raising children—all of it is, from the beginning, blessed by God. The corruption of these, therefore, is one of the surest indicators of the reign of sin. The rapists of Sodom and Gomorrah,

Eli and his wicked sons, David in his abuse of Bathsheba, and Amnon in his cruel manipulation and rape of his sister are all standing athwart the purposes of the creator God. Jesus, the divine child, who welcomes the young with joy and places his hands on them in blessing, is the beginning of the great restoration of a devastated creation.

According to Catholic ecclesiology, the Church is not simply a collectivity of like-minded people, not just the Jesus of Nazareth society. Rather, it is a mystical body, made up of inter-connected cells, molecules and organs. It is, in the language of the Church fathers, the prolongation of the Incarnation across space and time. Therefore, its task, up and down the ages, is to be Christ to the world and to do what Christ did. It is meant to foster what God wants to foster and to bless what God wants to bless. This is precisely why the abuse of children at the hands of priests is such an outrage, such a violation and contradiction, and why it stirs in the hearts of all decent believers a sense of disgust and an ardent desire to set things right. We have, justly enough, suffered, but how wonderful that we can find, in the Scriptures themselves, such a rich source of information, inspiration and renewal.