



TOWARD A SERVANT-LED RESPONSE ROOTED IN FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN THE CATHOLIC CLERGY SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDAL

—DUNG Q. TRAN

A STORY OF CLERGY ABUSE AND FORGIVENESS ASKING

A chill in the air, fog smearing his windows, Tom Blanchette drove west of Boston to Lexington. He had an appointment with Father Joseph Birmingham. It had been twenty-five years since Birmingham's going-away party in Sudbury, where they last spoke. "How could I ever explain to anybody that I had laid naked in Father B.'s bed over a hundred times? I didn't know how to explain these experiences. All I knew was I didn't like it. But I saw him every Saturday and Sunday, because I worked in the church rectory; I saw him at least one night a week for catechism classes, and at least one night a week he was at our house for dinner. Every time we were alone he pursued sexual activity. For two years I would say we had sex two or three times a week, sometimes two or three times a day."

Until he was in his twenties, Tom had never mentioned a word of this history. One morning as Tom and an old friend were reminiscing about their teenage years, Father Birmingham's name came up. The friend grew angry and said, "that bastard...he queered me." Tom then polled his brothers and learned that Father B. had solicited sex from them too. In a span of a week, Tom and his mother compiled a list of twenty-five victims.

As Tom entered his thirties, he decided that something was seriously wrong. All these years he had not been able to develop a lasting relationship with a woman—at age forty he remained doggedly single. Even a stable place to live was too much of a commitment for him. He moved at least once a year. The bite of alcohol snuck up on him. He joined Alcoholics Anonymous and began his twelve steps. The fifth required him to sit down with people in his life and forthrightly detail where he had done them wrong.



He knew he had to find Birmingham. Reached on the phone, Birmingham agreed to a visit and on this frigid early-winter day Tom headed to see him with some trepidation. When Tom arrived, Father Birmingham was open and encouraging, which impressed Tom. "I've had some experiences in my life and I've realized that some of the difficulties were a result of the relationship that I had with you," Tom began. "I played sports in high school, got good grades and went to college for a year, but then decided to enlist in the army. I went to the military academy for a year, but decided against a military career. I then landed at Boston College and graduated there. I then went to work for a friend from high school and ended up selling tires for a few years. All those years, I never attended Mass. After my father died in 1981, I started being a little introspective and had a spiritual awakening. I started to attend a little Episcopal church in Akron, Ohio, which was beneficial for me. I felt a disregard for the Catholic Church." He paused and continued. "You know," Tom said dexterously, "what you did to me and my brothers and all those other boys in Sudbury was wrong. You had no right to do it. And I don't think anybody has ever told you that before."

"Now let me tell you *my* story," the priest said. "I've endured a difficult life myself. I was an only child and both of my parents have died. I've had a lot of personal difficulties and recently some medical ones. I seem to be troubled with a lung disorder that defies diagnosis. I've been removed from ministry for sexually abusing boys. I'm not allowed to say Mass. I'm sort of under house arrest here. I can't leave the grounds unless accompanied by two adults. I can't have any contact with kids. I'm seeing a psychiatrist in Boston."

Tom then interjected, "The real reason I've come is to make amends to those I have harmed. Now, I know I didn't do outright harm to you. But I've come to ask you to forgive me for the hatred and resentment I've felt toward you for the past twenty-five years." Infuriated, Birmingham rose from his seat and bellowed, "Why are you asking me for forgiveness?" Overcome with tears, Tom said, "Because the Bible tells me to love my enemies and to pray for those that persecute me." Slowly Birmingham slid back into his chair and began to weep as well.

Months later, Tom heard that Father Birmingham was dying and was overwhelmed by a desire to see him again. Tom arrived at the hospital and found a man propped up in a chair, breathing ponderously through a mask. His hair was gone; his sight half lost to whatever consumed him. Entering the silent room, Tom knelt next to Birmingham's chair and took his hand. He then prayed silently for a few minutes. Tom then said, "Father, it is Tommy



Blanchette from Sudbury. I've come to visit you Father. Is it okay if I pray for you?" Birmingham nodded. Tom closed his eyes. "Father, in the name of Jesus Christ I ask you to heal Father Birmingham in the body, mind, and the spirit. Father, forgive him his sins through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, that he too might have eternal life." Birmingham closed his eyes and seemed to be asleep. Tom then gathered his hollow frame up in his arms and carried him to his bed. He smoothed a blanket over Birmingham and through the stream of his own tears he wished Father Birmingham a good night. That would be the final encounter between Tom and Father B., as Birmingham passed away just a few hours later.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous commentators have chronicled the recent clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church (Berry, 1994/2000; Bruni & Burkett, 1993/2002; Cafardi, 2008; Frawley-O'Dea, 2007; Goode, McGee, & O'Boyle, 2003; Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002; Jenkins, 1996; Sipe, 1995, 2003; Wills, 2000). The sexual abuse scandal has been called "the greatest and gravest crisis in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States" (Martin, 2007, p. 139). The scandal is a complex situation involving personal, relational, and social systems (Dokecki, 2004). The cover-up and vehement denials by ecclesiastical church leaders (Flynn, 2003) led devout yet disgruntled Catholics to "pursue a more coordinated strategy of activism" (Shirky, 2008, p. 144) by forming various groups that actively advocated for and against the leaders of the Catholic Church. Activist groups such as *Voice of the Faithful* (Muller & Kenney, 2004), and various pundits, have urged Catholic Church officials to consider operating and functioning in a more transparent manner (Buckley, 2005; Cafardi, 2008; Reese, 1996; Swidler, 1996, 2007; Sipe, 1995).

In response to the pain, anger, and confusion, concrete measures were enacted to prevent clergy abuse in the future (Cafardi, 2008; United States Catholic Conference, 2005). Many victims have been able to receive monetary compensation from the Church for their suffering. Countless bishops, including Pope Benedict XVI, have met with victims and listened to their stories of sexual abuse. These acts of empathy, listening, and healing led bishops to seek forgiveness from victims. Forgiveness asking is an important first step toward healing for the priest abuser, abuse victim, and the Catholic Church at large. The opening vignette testifies to the horizon of the



possible (Ferch, 2008) that can emerge when efforts are made to reflectively discern our interior movements. This deepening and broadening of a person's character can result in the deepening and broadening of the character of others; a hallmark of servant-leadership (Ferch, 2008).

With all of this in mind, the purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to examine the sexual abuse crisis and the ways in which Catholic Church leaders and victims have responded to this scandal; (2) to analyze the Church hierarchy's response in light of the servant-leadership characteristics of listening, empathy, and healing; and (3) to explore how the role of forgiveness asking between victim and perpetrator can lead toward restorative justice and wholeness.

A HISTORY OF THE REPORTED SCANDAL (1983–PRESENT)

The Catholic Church's contemporary abuse scandal originated in Henry, Louisiana, when molestation allegations were brought against Father Gilbert Gauthe in 1983 (Berry, 1994/2000; Bruni & Burkett, 1993/2002; Cafardi, 2008; Frawley-O'Dea, 2007; Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002; Jenkins, 1996; Plante, 1999; Wills, 2000). The Gauthe case contained all of the factors that became routinely associated with the clergy abuse crisis. In her review of more than one hundred newspaper articles related to the scandal, clinical psychologist Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea (2007) concluded that the clergy abuse scandal was characterized by a "deadeningly repetitive paradigm of perpetration and cover-up" (p. 1).

Generally, a priest was assigned to a parish or other pastoral setting between 1950 and the early 1990s. Usually charismatic and full of enthusiasm, he focused his energies on activities with adolescent youth (Frawley-O'Dea & Goldner, 2007). Over time, he cultivated friendships with young people, primarily boys between eleven and fifteen years of age. Some of the boys came from broken homes and lacked the guidance of a father figure, while others came from established and loving families (Frawley-O'Dea, 2007). All of the adolescents were raised to respect and trust priests, as they were spiritual and holy men. Eventually, the priest would introduce sex into his relationship with a young person.

At some point, a victim's parent, parishioner, fellow priest, or the victim would complain to the pastor, diocesan representative, or local bishop about the inappropriate sexual behavior. When an allegation was made, there were several probable outcomes. Years ago, the complainant would be rebuked



for trying to “bring scandal to the Church,” a Catholic cliché implying an offense considered to be far graver than anything the priest might have done (Cozzens, 2002; Cafardi, 2008; Kennedy, 2002; Sipe, 1995; Wills, 2000). In this situation, the scolded complainant was sent home and, as whispers of the accusations circulated throughout the rumor mill of the parish or organization, the accuser was likely eschewed by both clergy and fellow parishioners (Bruni & Burkett, 1993/2002; Frawley-O’Dea, 2007).

Back at the rectory, chancery, or provincial house, the pastor, bishop, or religious superior would confront the priest and in a number of cases, the accused priest acknowledged the veracity of the abuse claims (Frawley-O’Dea & Goldner, 2007). After confessing his wrongdoing, the priest would vow never to sin again. As decades went by, it became routine for priests to be sent for psychological evaluation and/or treatment. After being treated, the reformed priest turned up in another setting where no one was informed about the priest’s prior alleged or acknowledged problems. Oftentimes, the priest abused again and the cycle was repeated (Cafardi, 2008).

As the years went on and bishops came under increasing public pressure to do more about sexual abuse, another scenario would emerge when a priest was accused of past or present abuse. By the mid-1980s and into the early 1990s, once a complaint was deemed serious, the victim was assured that the priest would be removed from any ministry involving children (Berry, 1994/2000; Cozzens, 2002). The Church would offer to pay for the victim’s counseling expenditures. As accusers became more aggressive in their demands for restitution, sometimes drawing on legal counsel to help them, classified monetary settlements were reached. Although the Catholic Church has been excoriated for negotiating confidential legal settlements, it was often victims who desired that their abuse and monetary payouts remain arcane (Frawley-O’Dea, 2007).

Once again, it was standard procedure for the sexually abusive priest to be sent away for further psychological evaluation and treatment. The effectiveness and credibility of the treatment programs and discharge plans varied widely (Bruni & Burkett, 1993/2002). According to psychologists Mary Gail Frawley-O’Dea and Virginia Goldner (2007), “Recommendations about fitness for ministry did not always represent the priest’s psychosexual organization well or his propensity to reoffend” (p. xiii). When priests were reassigned, “the receiving clergy and community typically were not informed about the priest’s background and therefore there was no particular supervision of his activities” (Frawley-O’Dea, 2007, p. 4).



Although the model presented varied widely, this was “more or less the characteristic pattern of sexual abuse and the response to it enacted by Catholic Church leaders for decades” (Frawley-O’Dea, 2007, p. 5). From the Father Gauthé case in 1983 onward, the Church’s handling of the sexual abuse of children by priests became more publicized. It escalated into an American crisis in 2002 when news of the Boston Archdiocese’s intentional concealment efforts made national headlines (Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002; Muller & Kenney, 2004; Shirky, 2008).

Sipe (1990) contended that “between 1983 and 1987, an average of one case per week of past or present sexual abuse by a priest was reported nationwide” (p. 12). Beginning in 1987, the Catholic hierarchy began formally addressing the burgeoning abuse crisis. Many members of the clergy blamed victims and the media (Frawley-O’Dea, 2007). Archbishop emeritus of Boston Cardinal Bernard Law publicly criticized the media coverage as unfair and from the pulpit noted, “By all means we call down God’s power on the media, especially the Boston Globe” (Shirky, 2008, p. 147; Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002, p. 7).

In 1992, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops established what came to be known as the “Five Principles” (Cafardi, 2008; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996). These principles urged “greater openness about abuse allegations, prompt response to allegations, removal of accused offenders from ministry for referral for evaluation and treatment, compliance with civil law, and reaching out to victims and their families” (Frawley-O’Dea and Goldner, 2007, p. xiv). After 1992, many bishops took steps to strengthen their response toward new sexual abuse allegations, by establishing advisory boards that included lay people to help bishops evaluate abuse reports (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 1996). In 1993, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops formed an Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse. The committee was charged with developing “diocesan guidelines for responding to accused and/or guilty clergy—as well as to victims and their families—and to help bishops better screen candidates for priesthood” (Frawley-O’Dea and Goldner, 2007, p. xv). For the rest of the 1990s, bishops continued to formally respond to the complaints about priests.

In 2002, the sexual abuse crisis reached a new critical stage Boston where “by the end of 2002, at least 500 people had come forward with claims [that] they were abused by Boston-area clergy” (Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002, p. 100). The exposure of serial sexual abuse and the subsequent cover-ups shattered the sacred respect traditionally lavished



on priests and bishops by the laity (Fleming, Fleming, & Matousek, 2007; Muller & Kenney, 2004). The spiritual leaders of a Church “dedicated to promoting Christian values had desecrated those values. It was as if fire-fighters had become arsonists, or doctors had intentionally spread disease” (Muller & Kenney, 2004, p. 1).

These actions were a betrayal of an implicit trust that the laity and institutional Church had bestowed on priests and bishops. Muller and Kenney (2004) noted “that many had lost the sense of security the Church had provided. People were questioning whether they had been too trusting” (p. 21). Frawley-O’Dea and Goldner (2007) observed that “lay people who at one time would have done what they were told by priests and bishops stood up to the clergy and demanded accountability for the crimes of a priest and the complicity of his ecclesiastical superiors” (p. xiii). Media publishers and editors, once deferential to the Church, stayed on the story and made it national news (Muller and Kenney, 2004; Shirky, 2008). The relationship between the laity and the Church would be forever changed.

The story of Father John Geoghan’s serial abuse of children over three decades and the Boston Archdiocese’s intentional concealment efforts swept the national news headlines. The Boston situation was a watershed event as innumerable revelations of priestly sexual abuse of minors and administrative cover-up through out the American Catholic Church saturated national media outlets. By late April 2002, “176 priests from twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia had resigned or been removed in cases of sexual abuse” (Frawley-O’Dea, 2007, p. xv). 2002 also saw the resignation of several bishops because of the scandal (Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002; Shirky, 2008). The crisis had reached such a disastrous zenith that Pope John Paul II took the extraordinary step of summoning the American cardinals to the Vatican to discuss the sexual abuse crisis (Frawley-O’Dea, 2007). As a result of the media firestorm around the abuse crisis, both the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) used their summer meetings to apologize to victims and to pass the strongest measures yet to keep sexually abusive priests away from children (USCCB, 2003; CMSM, 2002).

As Catholic leaders were attempting to reform and regroup, lay people began to organize themselves in an attempt to defend and reform a church they loved so dearly (Muller and Kenney, 2004). Diocesan finances began to shrink as lay groups such as Voice of the Faithful organized to exert financial and pastoral reform power in the Archdiocese of Boston (Muller and



Kenney, 2004; Shirky, 2008). More traditional Catholics also organized in an effort to defend the Church; forming groups with names such as Faithful Voice. Dissatisfied clergy also banded together to support each other through the formation of a unified voice in the controversy (Frawley-O'Dea, 2007).

By the end of 2002, the landscape of the American Catholic Church was drastically altered. Boston's Archbishop, Cardinal Bernard Law, ultimately acquiesced to public opinion and submitted his resignation to Pope John Paul II. The Boston archdiocese and countless other local Catholic Churches across America were now embroiled in protracted legal negotiations over financial settlements for victims. As of July 2007, the Catholic Church in the United States has "paid more than \$2 billion in settlements and legal judgments to victims of sexual abuse and their families" (Goodstein, 2007, p. 1). The financial settlements have been an important step toward healing for victims, their families, priest perpetrators, and the Catholic Church at large.

However, these payouts will significantly impact how the Church can fiscally sustain its services. In the Los Angeles archdiocese, Cardinal Roger Mahony has already closed one high school and has leveraged six other high schools as collateral in order to borrow \$50 million to aid in the \$774 million settlement with more than five hundred plaintiffs (Mozingo & Spano, 2007).

The Catholic Church is certainly at a crossroads (Flynn, 2003). Coupled with the current economic recession, the sexual abuse settlements have the potential to bankrupt a diocese. As of February 2007, the following dioceses have filed for bankruptcy protection: Portland, Oregon; San Diego, California; Spokane, Washington; Tucson, Arizona; and Davenport, Iowa (Sauer, 2007). Time will tell as to the lessons the institutional Catholic Church will learn from this horrible episode of spiritual betrayal. Hopefully, with most of the financial settlements in the past, further steps toward wholeness and restoration can be taken by victims, Catholic clergy, and the Church at large.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: A LIFE-AFFIRMING VISION

The mission and vision of the Catholic Christian Church and Robert Greenleaf's model of servant-leadership have a tremendous amount in common. Greenleaf (1996) noted the Christian underpinnings of servant-leadership and the importance of ongoing reflection:

The idea of servant is deep in our Judeo-Christian heritage. Servant (along with the serve and service) appears in the Bible more than thirteen hundred



times. Part of the human dilemma is that the meaning of serve, in practical behavioral terms for both persons and institutions is never completely clear. Thus one who would be servant is a life-long seeker, groping for light but never finding ultimate clarity. One constantly probes and listens, both to the promptings from one's own inner resources and to the communications of those who are also seeking. Then one cautiously experiments, questions, and listens again. Thus the servant-seeker is constantly growing in self-assurance through experience, but never having the solace of certainty. (p. 15)

At its best, the life-affirming enterprise that is the Catholic Church is a vocation of loving evangelization that welcomes all people and instills in them habits of reflection in order to be a beacon of grace to fashion a more humane and just world (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 1975, no. 14). The evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church resonates with Greenleaf's contention that servant-leaders endeavor to build a more caring society (Greenleaf, 1977). He also encouraged those in leadership positions to assume more personal responsibility and accountability with the goal of building a more life-giving society. He offered a new mode of leadership that featured more caring on the part of the leader:

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and proportion to, the clearly evident servant structure of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond to only individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant-led. (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 10)

Greenleaf contended that a desire to lead had to be preceded by a fundamental desire to serve. He noted, "The servant-leader is a servant first...it begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then the conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13). In choosing to lead, Greenleaf believed, servant-leaders needed proper motivation to lead. He appealed for leaders to "make sure that the other people's highest priority needs are being served" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13). Leadership fixated on acquiring wealth, satiating ego, and wielding abusive power would only objectify and marginalize followers, leaving them feeling unappreciated. Spears (1998) observed, "At its core, servant leadership is a long term, transformational approach to life and work—in essence, a way of being—that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society" (p. 3).



Similarly, the Catholic Church exists to inculcate an enthusiasm for the Catholic faith that inspires people to share that life-affirming truth with others so as to renew the world. For the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (1990),

The mission of evangelization is entrusted by Christ to his Church to be carried out in all her forms of ministry, witness, and service. By evangelizing, the Church seeks to bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus and strengthened by the sacraments, most especially the celebration of the Eucharist, they freely share that faith with others to transform the world. (p. 1)

The Catholic Church's emphasis on freedom, enthusiasm, and transformation resonates deeply with Greenleaf's reimagining of leadership power. He held that power should only be exercised by the leader to provide opportunities, individual autonomy and alternatives for followers (Van Kuik, 1998). Power is shared, not abused for personal gain (Westre, 2003). Power from service-oriented leaders result in followers committed to organizational goals (Westre, 2003). Leadership committed to service "implies that power is shared with followers and used to cultivate their autonomy rather than coerce or manipulate them" (Van Kuik, 1998, p. 34).

After many years of thoughtful analysis of Greenleaf's original writings, Spears (2004) "extracted a set of ten characteristics of the servant-leader that I viewed as being of critical importance" (p. 13). These characteristics are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2004). For the sake of brevity, this paper will only focus on three characteristics. The following section will explore the characteristics of listening, healing, and empathy as identified by Spears (2004) in light of the forgiveness-asking vignette between abuse victim Tom Blanchette and his abuser Father Joseph Birmingham.

TOWARD FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE THROUGH LISTENING, EMPATHY, AND HEALING

As previously noted, the mission of the Catholic Church includes the spiritual formation and cultivation of people who are willing to place their gifts and abilities at the service of the common good. By virtue of its biblical and spiritual tradition, the Catholic Church is a servant-led organization charged with forming the next generation of servant-leaders. Yet what if some of the formal



spiritual leaders of the servant-led organization are not living up to Greenleaf's "best test"? What if despite genuine and altruistic intentions, a formal leader does not live up to Greenleaf's ideals of servant-leadership? What if priests, who by virtue of their ordained ministry are servant-leaders, are wielding their power in a way that is mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and sexually abusive? What if their superiors ignore the cries for life-affirming leadership leaving the traditionally docile laity exhausted, angry, frustrated, and hopeless? What do we do? How is this overcome?

In order to answer some of these questions, it is imperative to examine the sexual abuse and forgiveness-asking vignette involving Tom Blanchette and Father Birmingham as well as the abuse crisis as a whole through the servant-leadership characteristics of listening, empathy, and healing espoused by Greenleaf (1977) and codified by Spears (2004). Exploring these characteristics will pave the way for a holistic understanding of forgiveness and restorative justice.

Listening

Leaders must maintain a deep commitment to listening intently to others. Servant-leaders identify the will of a group and aid in the clarification of that will. Listening also requires attentiveness to the interior movements within. The practices of listening and regular reflection are essential to the growth of the servant-leader (Spears, 2004, p. 13). Greenleaf (1977) stated, "I have a bias, about this which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first" (p. 17). He added that "true listening builds strength in other people" (p. 17).

Strength building was absolutely critical for abuse victims, their families, and the entire Catholic community. Instead of pastorally listening, as their formation and tradition demanded, Catholic leaders were preoccupied with preventing "scandal" (Cafardi, 2008; Frawley-O'Dea, 2007). The prevalence of priestly pedophilia and ebophilia along with the subsequent cover-up by priest superiors was devastating for the entire Catholic Church. The abuse of minors could have been avoided. Exacerbating the lay frustration was the benign response of Catholic bishops who ignored the relentless cries for leadership and a listening ear.

I was deeply moved by the meeting between Tom Blanchette and Father Birmingham. Particularly striking was how both victim and abuser shared their twenty-five years worth of difficulties. Both Tom and Father Birmingham



were connected by their former sexual relationship and the subsequent consequences and relational difficulties that ensued. This common ground built on intensely personal sharing kindled in Tom, the victim, a desire to seek the forgiveness of his abuser. I found this to be immensely poetic and profound. Philosopher Joanna North (1998) noted that “from the injured party’s point of view, forgiveness will have the effect of preventing the wrong from continuing to damage one’s self-esteem and one’s psyche, so bringing to an end the distortion and corruption of one’s relations with others” (p. 18).

In an effort to minimize the damage experienced by victims, the U.S. bishops devoted a significant portion of their 2002 summer meeting agenda to the listening of abuse testimony from victims (United States Catholic Conference, 2003). This crucial moment in American Catholicism initiated a wave of meetings between bishops and abuse victims (Cafardi, 2008). Often-times, these meetings were a requirement of the legal settlements between victims and the Church (Frawley-O’Dea, 2007). In Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahony has met with more than seventy victims. Some of the meetings have lasted almost three hours (Catholic News Service, 2007).

Earlier this year, Pope Benedict XVI personally met with five victims of priestly sexual abuse from Boston during his papal visit to the United States (Allen, 2008). He met with all of them privately, listened to their stories, and prayed with them. This action, coupled with the pope’s strong rhetoric denouncing priestly sexual abuse as evil and sinful, was an important example of servant-leadership. The pope’s act of listening to the stories of abuse epitomizes the idea that servant-leadership “is rooted in the far-reaching ideal that people have inherent worth, a dignity not only to be strived for, but beneath this striving a dignity irrevocably connected to the reality of being human” (Ferch, 2004, p. 2).

Empathy

Greenleaf (1977) advocated for leaders to both hear the message conveyed and attempt to understand the message from another’s perspective. Spears (2004) wrote:

People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. One assumes the good intentions of co-workers and does not reject them as people, even while refusing to accept their performance. The most successful servant-leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic leaders. (p. 13)



Greenleaf (1977) maintained that leaders who demonstrated empathy would kindle more trust among followers. He opined:

People grow taller when those who lead empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted. (p. 21)

The constant cries for assistance and help by victims, their parents, and other priests fell on deaf ears (Frawley-O'Dea, 2007; Sipe, 1995; Shirky, 2008). Bishops in a sense rejected the good intentions of their subordinates; the laity. They were more concerned with preventing Church scandal by giving credence to the accusations of priestly sexual abuse of minors (Cafardi, 2008; Frawley-O'Dea, 2007). Therefore, when the salacious details of abuse and cover-up dominated the national news in 2002, the general public felt betrayed and became less trusting of Catholic clergy and the hierarchy at large (Fleming, Fleming, & Matousek, 2007; The Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe*, 2002).

With the bulk of the abuse cases legally settled and the abundance of concrete measures aimed at safeguarding children and preventing further abuse that have been taken, the lay faithful are slowly beginning to trust the Catholic Church again (Flynn, 2003). As more and more efforts are made to support victims and reform the institutional Church, perhaps future generations will be able to implicitly trust the Catholic Church as a whole again.

As previously mentioned, cultivating trust demands that the leader empathize and accept others for who they are (Spears, 2004). Not only does empathy cultivate trust, it is "a consistent predictor of forgiveness" (Belicki, Rourke, & McCarthy, 2008, p. 166). In a study where participants were asked to imagine scenarios of being infected with HIV or losing a loved one to a car accident caused by a drunk driver, it was observed "that empathic concern was positively related to reaching out to the offender in compassionate ways" (Williams et al., 2005). This sense of empathic concern was certainly felt by Tom Blanchette when he received the news that Father Birmingham was dying of cancer. Even though Tom sought Birmingham for his own personal healing in their first meeting, confronting his abuser allowed Tom to share his difficulties and listen to the struggles of his abuser. This dialogue connected their humanity; a humanity that allowed Tom (the victim) to seek forgiveness of Father Birmingham (his abuser); a humanity that elicited a strong



feeling of compassion toward the dying child abuser which compelled Tom to visit and pray for him. In those acts, Tom Blanchette realized “the essence of being a person” (Tutu, 1999, p. 26). In that moment Blanchette embodied Tutu’s (1999) invitation to a forgiveness response: “[I]n our experience, in our understanding, a person is a person through other persons. You can’t be a solitary human being. We’re all linked” (p. 26).

Healing

Like Tutu (1999) and King (1993), Blanchette was “obeying the imperative of his faith” (p. 93) by loving his oppressor. The forgiveness response of Tom Blanchette was a profound moment of transformation and healing. With regard to healing, Larry Spears (2004) wrote:

Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing oneself and others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to make whole those with whom they come in contact. (p. 13)

Related to healing, Greenleaf (1977) pondered, “Do those being served grow as person; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?” (pp. 13–14). For Greenleaf, the resulting behaviors and actions of followers is the ultimate judge of whether a leader embodies the essence of servant-leadership.

Covey (1998) proclaimed, “I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in this country, with the right kind of servant-leadership at all levels, most importantly at the family level, could heal our country” (p. xviii).

Lurking amidst this great tragedy and atrocity is an opportunity for institutional and personal healing in the Catholic Church. The story of forgiveness asking by Tom Blanchette of Father Joseph Birmingham poignantly illustrates that institutional healing begins with personal actions undergirded by the servant-led desire to seek forgiveness. In Father Birmingham’s last hours of life, Tom’s desire to be physically and prayerfully present was the servant-leader’s recognition to make both himself and Father Birmingham whole.



TOWARD RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN THE SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDALS

Restorative justice is a process and relational model of justice that “involve[s], to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible” (Zehr, 2002, p. 37). Restorative justice focuses on restoring the victim. Typically, restorative justice

occurs after a person has admitted to or has been convicted of a crime. Instead of sentencing, the convicted person is directed to meet with the victim and the victim’s supporters and work out mutually agreed-upon outcomes. (Worthington, Jr., 2006, p. 248)

These outcomes can involve some form of restitution to the victim, “apologies might be given, and impact statements are listened to and often responded to by the offender so the offender learns of the personal effects his or her crime has had on victims” (Worthington Jr., 2006, p. 248).

The poetic narrative featuring Tom Blanchette and Father Joseph Birmingham, as well as the stories of Pope Benedict XVI and bishops meeting with abuse victims, exemplifies the inherent holistic and relational value of the restorative justice model. It is my fervent prayer that victims, priestly perpetrators, Catholic leaders, and their supporters continue along this path of healing. May this journey be marked with emphatic listening and an authentic recognition that “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours and that we belong in a bundle of life” (Tutu, 1999, p. 31).

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

My motto as a bishop is “love one another.” The first act in love is reconciliation and forgiveness. The other part of that is respect, respect for other people and respect for ourselves.

—Bishop Dennis O’Neil (1940–2003),
Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus, Diocese of San Bernardino, California

As we have heard, organizational and personal reflection and forgiveness asking is crucial to realizing our potential and becoming more fully alive. Reflective forgiveness asking is an opportunity to become healthier,



wiser, freer, and more autonomous as a servant-leader (Greenleaf, 1977). Discernment of both gift and fault is pivotal for personal growth and development. The recognition of gifts allows us to recognize the beauty in ourselves and the world. Conversely, accepting our faults is an opportunity to seek meaningful change (Ferch, 2004). Forgiveness and reconciliation with the “other” offers the potential to “emerge more refined, more willing to see the heart of another, and more able to create just and lasting relationships” (Ferch, 2004, p. 225). Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) noted:

Thus, to forgive is indeed the best form of self interest since anger, resentment, and revenge are corrosive of the *summum bonum*, the greatest good, communal harmony that enhances the humanity and personhood in the community. (1999, p. 35)

Ferch (2004) contended that “[t]he will to seek forgiveness, the will to forgive, and the will to pursue reconciliation may be a significant part of developing the kind of wisdom, health, autonomy, and freedom espoused in Robert Greenleaf in his idea of the servant-leader” (p. 225). For Harold Kushner (1997),

To be forgiven is to feel the weight of the past lifted from our shoulders, so feel the stain of past wrongdoing washed away. To be forgiven is to feel free to step into the future unburdened by the precedent of who we have been and what we have done in previous times. (pp. 184–185)

The project of discerning one’s faults and seeking forgiveness for those faults is a monumental task. Yet, as the vignette of Tom Blanchette and Father Joseph Birmingham indicates, the simple, yet challenging act of forgiveness asking and seeking can enlarge the heart of both victim and perpetrator. The image of Tom Blanchette gathering the fragile frame of his dying priestly abuser to his hospital bed is a powerful one. In that moment, Blanchette appropriated and realized servant-leadership in a very profound way. I remain hopeful that similar beautiful encounters toward reconciliation, healing, and peace between victims and perpetrators will continue to occur. I pray that the seed of forgiveness asking and seeking will continue to take root in their lives and bear much fruit; life-giving fruit that heals the “self” and others, making them whole.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dung Q. Tran is a lecturer in the Communication Studies Department at Loyola Marymount University. Previously he served on the campus ministry team at the University of San Francisco and taught at Catholic secondary and elementary schools in Los Angeles. He is currently a PhD candidate in leadership studies at Gonzaga University. He holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, a Master of Arts degree in Secondary Education from Loyola Marymount University, a California State Clear Secondary Teaching Credential in History, and two Bachelor of Arts degrees in Theological Studies and Communication Studies also from Loyola Marymount University.

NOTE

The story of Tom Blanchette and Father Joseph Birmingham is excerpted from the following books: France, D. (2004). *Our fathers: The secret life of the Catholic Church in an age of scandal* (New York: Broadway Books), and the Investigative Staff of *The Boston Globe* (2002). *Betrayal: The crisis in the Catholic Church* (Boston: Little, Brown).

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