

Sin, Sex and Democracy: Politics and the Catholic Church

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At first glance, the five terms chosen for the title of this Special Issue do not seem to fit together. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has distanced itself from involvement in the political field. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* states (76), “The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. [...] The Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other”.

Nonetheless, the Catholic Church, like all other strong civil society organizations, is a pivotal actor in the political arena, wielding varying degrees of influence and impact contingent upon the socio-religious traditions prevalent in each country (Dillon 2018). In anticipation of significant elections, national Bishops’ Conferences typically proffer a set of principles intended to serve as guiding tenets for voters in their decision-making processes. Eminent religious figures, including the Pope, hold a conspicuous position in shaping public opinion. Notably, John Paul II is recognized for his substantial role in the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Conversely, Pope Francis has been characterized by some as a “communist”, a perspective espoused, for instance, by certain factions aligned with the Republican Party in the United States, while, in Argentina, various local interpretations of his actions align him with the Peronist Party.

The Catholic hierarchy has been involved in peace dialogues, at local and international levels. Additionally, depending on current challenges, it has also approached other topics, especially in its now wide-ranging corpus of social doctrine that crystallizes an effort to match social concerns. On the contrary, regarding sexual norms and practices, the Church does not take into consideration social transformations, or it does so in a few instances and in a superficial way. In the early Christian period, a confluence of trends, ranging from Semitic traditions and stoic philosophy to Manichaeism theories, created the grounds for the prevalence of ascetic ideals in the Church. As of today, bodily needs and pleasures—and, even more so, sexual pleasures—are despised and considered powerful temptations preventing spiritual flourishing. Succumbing to temptation, according to moral theology, leads to sin and thus to eternal damnation. Consequently, debates or democratic conversations on the topic become irrelevant. From the Catholic Church’s viewpoint, the understanding of sin and its associated norms is considered part of the realm of natural law and revealed truth, extending thus far beyond the scope of social human argument. The Church conceives of itself as the guardian of this eternal truth.

This brief examination of seemingly unrelated concepts—sin, sex and democracy; politics and the Catholic Church—illuminates areas of tension and debate that scholars have explored, yet demand further nuanced and thorough exploration. In this introductory discussion, we outline two main lines of inquiry. The first involves a more conventional exploration of the interplay between democracy and the concepts of truth and sin. The second delves into a contemporary examination of the challenges confronting the Catholic Church in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis and of the Church’s efforts to establish practices of democratic accountability within a framework not ruled by democratic principles.



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1. Catholic Church: Democracy and Truth/Sin

The Church had its origins and development within the framework of the Roman Empire. Its structure and organization adhered to the administrative divisions of the Roman territories, adopting hierarchical norms of power. Imperial titles, such as *Romanus Pontifex*, *Summus Pontifex* and *Pontifex Maximus*, were transferred to the Pope, establishing him as the *de facto* successor and heir of the emperor. Over centuries, the Church regarded the monarchical political system as an ideal for human society, mirroring its own structure. This preference for a monarchical system persisted until the traumatic juncture of the French Revolution. Up until the Second Vatican Council, the Church maintained officially its position against republican regimes. However, the Council marked a pivotal moment leading to the transition to a neutral stance regarding political regimes.

It took a few more decades for the Church to adopt unequivocally a favorable attitude towards democracy (Lecaros and Suarez 2023). During the reign of John Paul II, the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the political transition of Central Europe played, undoubtedly, an important role in this change of attitude. In his encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), Pope Francis, reflecting on politics and the common good, mentions the word “democracy” four times, associating it with social ideals of liberty and justice.

Nowadays, the Catholic Church favors democracy as a political social system but still does not recognize it as applicable and valuable for itself. The hierarchy has systematically stated that the Holy See is not a democracy and that consulting bodies should not be assimilated to a parliament. The Pope, as chosen by the Holy Spirit, is sovereign. The constitution *Lumen Gentium* states (chap. 22), “For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ and as pastor of the entire church, has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power he can always exercise freely”. In terms of consulting bodies, the synthesis report of the first session of the Synod (first chapter, section g, October 2023) addresses the “concern” and the “fear” that “the Synod may become a body of majority deliberation denuded of its ecclesial and spiritual character, so jeopardizing the hierarchical nature of the Church”. Hence, the Church is and will remain a “monarchy”, as several theologians have stated, among them Yves Congar (1960) and Carlos Schickendantz (2019).

From this standpoint, the antithetical pairs of sin/perdition, hell/heaven and sainthood/salvation are construed as inherently part of the domain of spiritual revelation and, as such, lie beyond the purview of majority deliberations. From the advent of Christendom, amid a cultural backdrop that exalted asceticism, the concept of sin has been intimately entwined with sexual practices, particularly those characteristics of traditional Roman and Greek societies. This inclination, which peaked with Augustinian theology’s formulation of the doctrine of original sin, deems sexual acts as sinful unless conducted within the context of marriage and open to procreation. Augustine elaborated the concept of original sin, associating it with the inaugural sexual encounter of our prospective forebears, Adam and Eve. This doctrinal stance forms the justification for the subordination of women, as it attributes the initiation of sin to Eve, who tempted Adam according to the Genesis narrative.

By convoking the second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII’s purpose was, as he expressed it, to propitiate an *aggiornamento*, an “actualization”, of the relation between the ecclesial institution and the world. The council liberated the Church from its traditional theocratic exercise of power and established its independence and autonomy. The Church thus became a protagonist among others in most of the fields open to public democratic debate. However, in relation to sex, the Church has sought to retain its theocratic authority by associating it exclusively with procreation, human life and, eventually, sin. In his encyclical letter (1968), *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI ratifies the inherent connection between sex and procreation. This encyclical letter was released in the aftermath of the implementation of the council, in a context in which Paul VI claimed the inalterable Church’s authority on moral and ethics. His striking formula, the Church as “expert in humanity”, from his encyclical letter, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), buttressed his position.

With the invention and improvement of contraceptive methods, the massive access of women to the workforce and the feminine liberation process at large, societal evolutions

have collided with the Church's norms. What was a discrepancy in 1968 has become an insurmountable abyss for most Christians. The controversy may be expressed in terms of the debate between [Habermas and Ratzinger \(2007\)](#). Whereas, for Habermas, open public debates and the following consensus should constitute the founding principles of democracy and encompass all realms of social life, Ratzinger considers that the scope of democracy is limited by revealed truth. In this conception, human life and thus sex belong to the realm of truth.

As of today, most Catholic couples (in some countries, 90%) ignore the Church's teachings on contraception and most clergy members tend to avoid the issue publicly. Abortion is, at present, the most controversial topic. From the perspective of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI and the hierarchy, in general, abortion is murder and, as such, should be forbidden by all means.

The commencement of human life cannot be determined in a scientific way. It depends on the definition of humanity that we embrace and on conceptions of the relation between body and soul. Within the Muslim tradition, ensoulment is posited to occur during the second or third month of pregnancy, contingent on the sex of the fetus. Thomas Aquinas similarly advocated for this position, perhaps influenced by Muslim perspectives.

In democratic contexts, legislation on contentious issues such as abortion is grounded in public reasoning. Through this debate, universal arguments—aiming at the wellbeing of all citizens within a territory—are sifted, irrespective of their religious underpinnings. This process leads to a consensus that reflects the best possible solution to the specific issues that the legislation aims to address. It constitutes legislation open to modification as it becomes evident within the framework of public discourse that changes are warranted.

The abortion controversy, grounded on religious arguments, has recently reached such a climax that abortion has become the dividing line between political parties and social trends in several democratic countries, particularly the USA and several Latin American countries. The vocabulary used by both parties is especially noteworthy. The anti-abortion groups—pro-life, as they identify themselves—take the side of the fetus, speaking of the defense of life, innocent victims, murder, massacre and even genocide, whereas the pro-abortion groups are pro-choice on the side of the woman, referring to female rights and speaking of the process as an interruption of pregnancy. It is needless to say, that, more often than once, this focus on the topic and the exacerbation of the debate may function as a tactical political maneuver.¹

2. Catholic Church: Sexual Abuse and Accountability/Democracy

In 2002, the publication of the Boston Globe, based on a thorough investigation, launched the abuse crisis that has been expanding internationally. The revelation of gruesome criminal cases has been unravelling, questioning some of the bases on which the Catholic Church rests. The names of religious people (male and female), priests, bishops and even a few cardinals have been appearing in the public reports on abuse. The empirical evidence shows very diverse profiles. The incriminated individuals come from both conservative and progressive ecclesial trends; some of them were barely known outside of their circles, while others, on the contrary, were highly respected, charismatic figures. Beyond the crimes of sexual abuse and coverup, the crisis has revealed the incoherence within the Church's institution. Some empirical evidence collected by journalists and scholars shows that several members of the clergy do not follow the strict rules of sexual continence that they pretend to impose on the laity ([Marzano 2021](#)). Historians have also revealed that abuse is not a modern phenomenon and existed in the past, although, due to a lack of archives and testimonies, its prevalence cannot be objectively evaluated ([Faggioli 2019](#)). Truly enough, some of the quantitative results have been criticized by specialists. However, most scholars agree that the breaching of the rules is fairly ubiquitous.

From a Christian perspective, the lack of coherence is even more scandalous. It represents the focal point of Jesus' criticism against the pharisees, his enemies who precipitated his death condemnation, as it is narrated in the Gospels. The following famous passage from the Gospel of Matthew seems to illustrate the crisis: "You must therefore do and

observe what they tell you; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they!" (Mat, 23, 3–4).

At first, scrutiny was primarily focused on the sexual abuse committed by clergy members against minors and the web of institutional coverups that allowed the perpetrators to escape justice and remain in positions of authority. Initial literature reviews on child sexual abuse within ecclesiastical institutions revealed the dynamics of the crime, illustrating the social processes and institutional failures that fostered such abuse. They underscored the significance of power relationships, intimidation and the silencing of victims. With these contributions and others, the perspective broadened, revealing that behind sexual abuse is the abuse of power and spiritual abuse, both inflicting profound harm on victims. Simultaneously, the expanded focus encompassed various forms of abuse suffered by adults within different Church organizations. The abuse is now considered as the symptom of a cultural, psychological, structural, symbolic and theological system that is dualistic and divided.

The crisis revealed internal problems within the Church. Unlike other crises throughout its history, the phenomenon cannot be resolved by placing blame externally. It is not possible to identify an external factor responsible for the dimension of the conflict (heresies, atheist communism, liberalism, modernist theses, the sexual revolution, etc.).

The abuse crisis sparked a profound theological crisis, initiating serious academic reflection both in the civil and ecclesiastical spheres. The theological issues intertwined with the abuse crisis encompass concerns regarding the theology of priestly ordination, clerical leadership styles, the relationship between the clergy and laity, the institutional representation of laypersons, gender-based differential roles placing women in an inferior position to men, teachings on sexuality and the role of charismatic or spiritual authority in the formation of new religious groups. Of all these issues, the literature on the topic focuses on clericalism, making it responsible for most of the crisis.

Pope Francis, in most of his speeches on the Church's ailments, mentions clericalism. It has become a compulsory reference (among others, a French report, CIASE 2021; [Royal Australian Commission 2017](#), p. 612). With these widespread references in so many different contexts, clericalism tends to become a catch-all notion.

Clericalism is, above all, about power and the legitimacy of authority. For the Royal Australian Commission, referring to the reflections of the Dominican theologian Thomas Doyle, "Among its chief manifestations are an authoritarian style of ministerial leadership, a rigidly hierarchical worldview, and a virtual identification of the holiness and grace of the church with the clerical state and, thereby, with the cleric himself" (2017, p. 614). Clericalism entails the development of strategies "to protect the privileges and power that have traditionally been conceded to those in the clerical state" (2017, p. 613). Certain components of clericalism are universal but other characteristics correspond to the local social and cultural organization.

Authoritarian power is precisely the opposite of democratic governance, which implies a careful process of checks and balances for the decisions and usage of human and financial resources. Some theologians—among them, Carlos Schickendantz—have advocated for the incorporation of scientific methods of proven efficiency to guarantee the accountability of Church management ([Schickendantz 2021](#)). But is this feasible? Can the Church incorporate democratic measures in an institution ruled in an "undemocratic" manner? Is accountability compatible with the "hierarchical nature of the Church"?

Among certain circles close to Pope Francis, synodality has raised a lot of hope as a way to overcome clericalism. Undoubtedly, the organization of synodal participants around circular tables sent a powerful message of change. In previous synods, participants were organized in a hierarchical way: first, the Pope; then, cardinals, bishops, priests and, far away, male and female laypeople. Although the equalitarian position and the listening process demonstrate greater closeness to the Vatican II's concept of "people of God", nonetheless, the final decision still remains in the hands of the hierarchy. At the

parish level, according to Canon Law, the priest may or may not take into consideration the observations of the consulting bodies that, moreover, he may or may not decide to organize. As a matter of fact, in countries where democratic behaviors have become a cultural “habit”, in Bourdieu’s sense, consulting bodies are more common and resources tend to be managed in a more transparent way (Lecaros and Suarez 2023).

The abuse crisis highlighted the loopholes and the incoherence in the Church’s conception of sin. This perspective collided with the legal system of modern states that establishes clear procedures to investigate and prosecute criminal acts. The articles referring to sexual and power abuse in Canon Law have been changed to address them as criminal offences. However, the concentration of power in bishops’ hands limits the scope of the legal reformation (Lecaros and Suarez 2023).

This introductory text has raised many issues that need to be debated, considering the societal changes. The medieval theocratic grasp of the Church is over, at least for most Christians. The ecclesial institution is now at a crossroads. The hierarchy may adopt a sectarian stance, deploying its pastoral care for a select group of privileged, obedient individuals. Otherwise, if it pretends to maintain its relevance and be considered as an “expert in humanity”, it has to take into consideration that plurality has become the norm and that the worldview and aspirations of most of our contemporaries cannot be satisfied with arguments of authority.

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Notes

- ¹ In Argentina, for example, the abortion law was approved in 2020 as a result of extensive public debate. The debate favored also political alignments. Groups opposed to the law aligned themselves, exerting political pressure and fostering a conservative alliance and agenda that brought together evangelical and Catholic sectors. At present, they oppose issues of sexual and reproductive health, homosexual marriage and sexual education in schools. They tend to produce narrative conflicts that favor the emergence of moral panic. As in many other countries—notably the case of Brazil—some of these conservative groups tend to work in coordination with large, international, conservative pro-life organizations, building mechanisms to influence public policies and lobbying for the removal or passing of laws.

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