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The Abuse Crisis and the Church's Response: A Journey Through Justice, Faith, and Law

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Abstract

The issue of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church represents one of the most complex and painful challenges of our time. As Professor Ventura highlights, the issue is played out on two fronts: on the one hand, the prerogatives of the State and civil law; on the other, the internal structure of the Church, governed by canon law. Understanding this scenario requires an analysis that begins with the origins of the crisis, continues through current reforms, and addresses the remaining unresolved issues.

From Emergency to Change: The Boston Case

The phenomenon emerged with explosive force following the events in **Boston**, which tore away the veil of silence surrounding a dramatic reality. Initially, the response from the hierarchy and part of the faithful was marked by profound denialism, driven by the inability to accept that priests could be guilty of such atrocities. This reaction fueled a "culture of cover-up," where priority was given to safeguarding institutional prestige and appearances, concealing crimes rather than protecting victims.

Under pressure from the press, legal processes, and growing social awareness, the Church embarked on a path of radical reform. This created the need for specific training, such as that promoted by the safeguarding program of the Pontifical Gregorian University, and new operational protocols were established based on four fundamental pillars.

The Pillars of Reform and the New Protocols

The first pillar is **listening and support**, which aims to put the victim back at the center, offering authentic spaces of welcome led by specially trained staff. At the same time, rigorous management of the **perpetrator** was implemented: it is not just a matter of identifying signs of manipulation used to conceal the crime, but of taking firm action. The perpetrator must be immediately removed from ministry and subjected to transparent canonical and civil processes, ensuring monitoring that prevents the repetition of the crime and access to minors.

The other two pillars concern **hierarchy accountability**, i.e., the creation of mechanisms that prevent superiors from covering up crimes, and **systemic awareness** of the phenomenon. The latter recognizes that abuse is not an isolated case, but a scourge that requires global commitment and a thorough understanding of the different types of violence.

Open Questions and the Protection of the Vulnerable

Despite this progress, critical issues remain that require intellectual honesty. A central issue is support for the most vulnerable victims: often, those who lack the financial means to afford lawyers or psychological support risk remaining in the shadows. The system cannot simply give a voice to those who are already able to make themselves heard, but must also take responsibility for those without resources.

On the other hand, there emerges the risk of **manipulation of accusations**. There have been cases in which the gravity of the matter has been exploited to eliminate internal adversaries or destroy careers, leaving people psychologically devastated even in the face of proven innocence. A balance between justice for victims and the search for truth is therefore essential to prevent protocols from becoming instruments of political or ideological vengeance.

The Conflict between State and Church: The Secret of Confession

A point of strong friction between civil and religious authorities concerns the obligation to report, especially in relation to the **sacrament of confession**. While the State requires the reporting of all child abuse, the Church defends the inviolability of the sacramental seal.

The Church's arguments lie in the very nature of confession, which is anonymous and often represents the last resort for those who suffer. A child victim of abuse who cannot find the courage to speak up at home or at school might confide in a confessor precisely because she knows she is protected by secrecy. In those few minutes, the priest must establish a relationship of trust; the obligation to immediately report the crime could frighten the victim, causing them to flee and depriving them of their only option for help. The confessor's goal is therefore to welcome the victim and, over time, guide and encourage them towards a process of reporting and healing in a civil court.

Conclusion: Toward a Culture of Care

The path to a definitive resolution is still long and cannot be limited to protocols written on paper. A true "conversion of structures" is needed, one that places human dignity and truth above any logic of power. The current challenge, supported by research centers such as the Anthropology Center at the Pontifical Gregorian University, is to move from simple norms to a **culture of care**: an empathetic and transformative approach capable of eradicating the deep roots of abuse and ensuring real protection for every individual.

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