

WEEDS AMONG THE WHEAT

The Impurity of the Church Between Tolerance, Solace, and Guilt Denial

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Pope Benedict and sexual abuse in the Catholic Church

During his visit to Germany in September 2011, then pope Benedict XVI met with victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests and was expected to address this subject publicly. He did so only indirectly in a sermon in the Berlin Olympic Stadium, speaking in a soft voice about the “painful experience that there are good and bad fish, wheat and weeds in the Church.”¹ Almost eight years later, the pope, meanwhile retired, returns to these metaphors in a comprehensive article entitled “The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse”:

Jesus Himself compared the Church to a fishing net in which good and bad fish are ultimately separated by God Himself. There is also the parable of the Church as a field on which the good grain that God Himself has sown grows, but also the weeds that “an enemy” secretly sown onto it. Indeed, the weeds in God’s field, the Church, are excessively visible, and the evil fish in the net also show their strength. Nevertheless, the field is still God’s field and the net is God’s fishing net. And at all times, there are not only the weeds and the evil fish, but also the crops of God and the good fish. To proclaim both with emphasis is not a false form of apologetics, but a necessary service to the Truth.²

For Benedict, the situation of the Church has evidently gotten so dire that one must be grateful to still find some good fish in the net and to spot some kernels of grain amidst all the weeds!

The disturbing element in this article is not so much what the media focused on, namely Benedict's assessment of sexual revolution in the West since the 1960s or the crisis of twentieth-century Catholic moral theology; it is doubtful that these trends contributed to sexual abuse in the Church. What is upsetting is the fact that the pope emeritus does not question the leniency of Church authorities and its exceeding forbearance, for which he himself bears responsibility, a failure that accrued grave guilt.

From a secular external vantage point, the Catholic Church appears as little more than a secret society of celibate men whose first priority consists of the protection of their members from legal prosecution of most depraved crimes and whose arcane clerical disciplines prevent any information sharing with the public. But this fails to fully explain the silence of so many bishops and priests as well as of laypersons holding church offices when questioned by state prosecutors. It is not sympathy with the perpetrators, although that complicity is less astonishing in those cases where bishops or cardinals themselves acted as sexual predators. There are other reasons, why church leaders failed to intervene energetically although they condemned and suffered the consequences of these offenses. It remains baffling why a pope who evidently feels ashamed cannot come to a consciousness of guilt, recognize and confess it, in order to make it "productive" for the victims as well as the future of the Church.³ In the following, I will argue that it is, among others, the suggestive power of certain Biblical metaphors that restrain the response by Benedict and others.

Corpus Permixtum: pure and impure in the Church

Since its beginnings, Christianity had to deal with the fact that many of its followers and functionaries did not live up to the high ethical demands, which they themselves proclaimed on the basis of the Gospels. Early on, one had to decide what should be done about "impurity" in local congregations and the Church at large, when brotherly admonitions and ecclesial penalties failed to stop minor trespasses and even serious infractions.⁴ In principle, there are several possibilities: First, one can

deny the existence of evil in oneself and one's group and pretend that everything is fine. This leads to duplicity and hypocrisy. The second possibility calls for violent suppression of evil in one's own ranks—which gave rise to religious terror as soon as church and state linked forces. Third, one can unswervingly exclude all impurity from the community, and thereby draw closer to the ideal of a “pure church” but only at the price of permanent reductions until one is left with a very small circle of “the pure”—who are then tempted to become self-righteous and hence impure. Fourth, one can reluctantly accept the presence of impurity and try to integrate it in some way into the Church, thereby losing the status of a pure Church. A church that claims to be pure cannot, at the same time, accept its own impurity. This disturbing idea requires metaphors that are more compelling than Augustine's idea of the *corpus permixtum*, in which he distinguished the “mixed” from the “true” body (*corpus verum*) of Christ, a confusing idea that remained relevant and effective until the Reformation.⁵

There were several Biblical stories that provided the root metaphors. One was drawn from Noah's story of the Flood in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 6:5-19), in which the church becomes the ship that traverses the storms of history. The analogy of the Church as the ark (*arca significat ecclesiam*)⁶ provided allegorical-ecclesiological exegeses the opportunity to consider God's express command to Noah to save not just the clean but also the unclean animals from the Flood (Gen 7:2).⁷ This unmistakably affirmed the presence of sinners as legitimate: Sinners belong in the Church and may not be excluded since God wants to save them as well. In the face of considerable resistance to this idea, the analogy was pressed further by Augustine who argued that unclean animals did not sneak onto the ark as stowaways or extort passage as pirates. Augustine writes: “Unclean animals did not break a hole according to their kind in order to secure entry into the ark. Rather, they all entered through the same door that the shipbuilder had made.”⁸ The inevitability of impurity, according to Augustine's *City of God*, is grounded in the notion of the Church as a world-church rather than as an elite circle of the pious: “as long as the Church is filled by many nations, it will encompass the clean and the unclean in unity until the predetermined end.”⁹ This also means that the Last Judgment will finish this mixture. And the Christian preachers of the Middle Ages similarly leave no doubt that this necessary mixture of pure and

impure in the Church remains restricted to this time on earth. “Let us be clean animals and birds,” one of them called out to his audience, “for nothing unclean or sullied will enter the heavenly fatherland” (*in coelestem tamen patriam nihil intrabit immundum aut inquinatum*).¹⁰

Toleration of the impure in the Church is limited to time before the Last Judgment, which breaks with the metaphorical logic of the flood allegory. There, God intends to save all of the unclean animals, so that they, like the pure animals, shall survive the Flood and increase and multiply. For this eschatological reservation, different metaphorical notions and their traditional interpretations will evidently have to come into play, namely the safe arrival of the ship of the church after its dangerous voyage across the sea of the world. In particular, there are two parables from the New Testament that were useful to address the question of the fate of the impure in the future judgment. One of these is the parable of the good and bad fish in the net:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels, but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.
(RSV Mt 13:47-50).

Although Matthew is above all concerned with the thought of divine judgment, which will separate the evil from the good, Christian exegesis focused on reading the dragnet as an image for a Church that includes good and bad people. Gregory the Great, who was already harking back to a long tradition beginning with Origen, preached that “we now find ourselves, good and evil, in the net of faith, like a mixed haul of fish. But on the shore will be revealed what the net of the holy Church has pulled out” (*Nunc enim bonos malosque communiter quasi permixtos pisces fidei sagena nos continet, sed litus indicat sagena sanctae ecclesiae quid trahebat*).¹¹

Then, there is the parable of wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24-30), which was often linked to the story of the pure and impure animals on Noah’s ark. Most recently, the church historian Arnold Angenendt used this parable for his history of religious toleration in Christianity.¹² The modern

notion of tolerance, which presupposes respect for those who are tolerated, is however definitely not what these biblical passages had in mind. Tolerance is also a problematic term, when we do not merely speak of theological disagreements but rather sin and misconduct, such as corruption in the church, or simony, as well as sexual offenses, for which tolerance is principally not appropriate. Hence, we should take another look at this parable and its history of interpretation.

“Let both grow together until the harvest”

The parable according to Matthew reads:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while the men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’.

(Mt 13:24-30).

This parable is so familiar that it is easy to miss that its cogency does not originate in life experience. No farmer has ever been surprised by the fact that weeds grow amidst the grain in their field. The claim that an enemy took the effort to obtain weed seed to carefully sow it alongside recently planted good seed evokes conspiracy theories among modern readers. These are intriguing images that, above all, warn of imminent judgment and impending punishment. According to Matthew, this is the interpretation that Jesus himself provides for this parable:

And his disciples came to him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered: ‘He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one,

and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears let him hear'. (Mt 13:36-43).

This turns the focus entirely on the ending, the separation of good and evil, the disposal of the weeds and the punishment of the evil in the fires of hell. Nobody was more intrigued by the detail of Mt 13:30, which specifies that the weeds are bound and burnt in bundles, than Gregory the Great. To him, this signified the perfect justice of God's punishment: "Like reapers, the angels gather together the weeds in bundles for burning, whereby like is united with like in the same torment, the proud burn with the proud, the lustful with the lustful, the greedy with the greedy, the deceivers with the deceivers, the envious with the envious, the unbelieving with unbelieving."¹³ The same guilt (*culpa*) receives the same punishments (*tormenta*). This provided a central trope for divine judgment day and visions of punishment in hell for medieval theology.

One often finds exhortations in the history of interpretation that ask the weed to turn into wheat, although that breaks the logic of the metaphor.¹⁴ After all, the evil ought to receive the opportunity to change for the better. Athanasius, for example, says: "If you wish, you can change and become wheat."¹⁵ And in a poem, Isaac of Antioch begs death to give him a postponement "until I have become a good seed of wheat."¹⁶

The field is most often identified as the Christian Church, although Jesus' own interpretation pointed beyond the community ("the field is the world"; Mt 13:38). The main point of the parable is almost always the command of the householder not to rip out the weeds but to let them grow till the harvest, so that they can be separated from each other at that point. Thus, Origen writes: "As the weed is permitted to grow together with the wheat in the Gospel... here too in Jerusalem... it is obviously not possible to purify the Church completely, as long as it is on earth."¹⁷ Along with the realization that it is impossible to create a pure church, there is the warning that the damage might exceed the benefit,

once the wheat is ripped out together with the weeds (Mt 13:29). John Chrysostom is thinking of violent religious war as possible consequence of attempts to rip out the weed: “And this He said to hinder wars from arising, and blood and slaughter. For it is not right to put a heretic to death, since an implacable war would be brought into the world.” His second argument, as incongruous as it appears, maintains that the evil must be given the opportunity to improve and better themselves.¹⁸ The hope that sinners “who are of unclean seed” would improve if they remained in the Church keeps showing up in sermons in the Middle Ages.

This parable served to prohibit the exclusion of sinners from the Church, or worse, their execution. It was also used to exhort good Christians not to leave the Church over the presence of impurity within the community. After all, accusations of impurity were the most important reason for schism and heresy, especially when it applied to church officials and their dispensing of the sacraments. The German word for “heretic,” *Ketzer*, for instance, derives from the Greek *katharós* (clean) and refers to those who wanted to remain pure. Already Cyprian of Carthage warned critical Christians to stay in the Church: “Although there are obviously weeds in the Church, neither our faith nor our love should take offense to the point of leaving the Church, just because we notice the presence of weed.”¹⁹ Similarly, Augustine invokes this parable to argue that the assumption that one should separate oneself from the impure to prevent being tainted by their sins was nothing but arrogant impudence (*ut peccatis eorum non inquinemur*).²⁰

“Tear it out!”

Despite the clear mandate of the Gospel to permit the weeds to grow, it is quite surprising to find church dignitaries using the same image to argue the exact opposite. For instance, Pope Gregory the Great ordered the bishops of Numidia to resist all the heresies in the Church: As soon as weeds sprout amid the wheat and damages the budding harvest, the hand of the farmer must rip it up immediately with its roots, “lest the future fruit of the good seedlings are strangled by it.” This is precisely where Gregory sees the task of the official Church, namely to tend the “field of the Lord” by immediately freeing the seedlings “from every weed like scandal” (*ab omni zizaniorum scandalo*).²¹ Christian exegetes clearly tried to relativize the unambiguous mandate of the Gospel, which is

exceptional in its protection of the weeds. More often, the thorns and thistles of vice and sins were portrayed as threatening to choke the good crop, which needed urgent and thorough purgation as primary task of those entrusted with spiritual and political affairs.

Augustine, who used this parable repeatedly in his battle against the Donatists' quest for purity, at the same time counseled Church leaders to remain vigilant: Even when one is quite certain that the good grain is firmly rooted, "the harshness of discipline should not slumber" (*non dormiat seueritas disciplinae*).²² The position that the weed was only protected because its eradication might harm the wheat permitted merciless treatment of those identified as "weeds" in the Church. The eschatological reservation to avoid premature judgment and to await the return of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 4:5) was readily ignored, especially once the papacy was strengthened after the investiture controversy. Now the pope acted in the seat of God. Peter Damian, for example, demanded that the pope annihilate all of the weeds that the evil enemy had sown, using the hoe of right doctrine (*sanae doctrinae sarculo*), and to separate the bad fish from the good ones.²³

Purgation was ordinarily accomplished by earthly justice. For instance, Thomas Aquinas was forced to refute an objection to the death penalty, which had maintained on the basis of this parable that one could not remove the evil from the circle of the good by execution. That was true, Thomas conceded, but only if the good sustained damage—and the eradication of the weed threatened to rip out the good.²⁴ Since heresy was the worst of all crimes, Thomas was able to justify the once highly controversial execution of heretics by citing the same parable that had been used to reject it.²⁵ In this context, Thomas builds on Augustine's dictum that unless there was good reason to fear damage to the wheat, the severity of discipline should not be allowed to "sleep."²⁶ This became one important prerequisite for the Inquisition, when Pope Gregory IX ordered the Inquisitor Conrad of Marburg to begin eradicating all of the weed from the field of the Lord that the devil had sown all over Germany amid the good seed of the faith.²⁷ Hence, the same text, which had called for the toleration of impurity, was now deployed to justify its destruction.

Tolerance, solace, and guilt denial

There were opponents to this merciless rhetoric in Christian literature, who spoke out in horror over the killings of heretics. In his commentary

on the Psalms, Gerhoh of Reichersberg called for moderation, granting priests the authority to exercise “angelic services” (*angelica ministeria*) before the end of the world by “binding together evil vices like weeds marking them for punishment in the fires of hell, while classifying the virtuous as wheat for future heavenly reward.” But, he maintained, ultimately it was not up to the priests to decide this about people “in the present-day Church.” The evil remains “mixed in” until the end of the world. The Lord commands us to bear with them when he says, “let both grow together until the harvest.”²⁸ Peter Abelard too thought that the enemy of humankind never stopped sowing weeds in the Church before the harvest, which is why schismatics and heretics had to be tolerated.²⁹ None of this can be called tolerance in the modern sense. Tolerance was also not the goal of humanists and reformers, quite to the contrary. Referring to the Anabaptists, Martin Luther applies Jesus’ words about letting weeds and wheat grow together only to preachers, while at the same time delegating the task of killing heretics to the secular authorities, all the more energetically.³⁰ Zwingli and Calvin were themselves involved in gruesome executions, as we know. Disputes over the execution of heretics were likely the historical context in which the concept of tolerance was developed, arguably in the work of Castellio, who called for a kind of respect for different ways of thinking.³¹ Slowly, the idea that plurality of thought does not constitute a sin against God, and therefore a crime, took root in Europe.

On the other hand, an earlier different strand of toleration existed that can be best characterized as resigned surrender to the inevitability of impurity in the Church. This is the context in which people are counseled to find solace and accept consolation for something that cannot be changed or escaped. The missionary St. Boniface, for instance, who complained bitterly to Bishop Daniel of Winchester for having to work not only with heathens, but also with sinful Christians was told about the parable of the wheat and the tares for “solace and counsel” (*solacium vel consilium*).³² He was also reminded of Augustine’s interpretation of the pure and impure animals in Noah’s ark (*Et munda et immunda animalia, ut ait Augustinus, introisse in arcam leguntur*)³³ Similarly, Luther applied the parable for the consolation of the pious (*ad consolationem piorum, ne terreatur*) lest they despair over the magnitude of the infestation: “We will have to suffer it in the churches.”³⁴ Even John Calvin offered the parable to

console pastors who couldn't manage "to set the community free from every sort of filth."³⁵ As happens whenever solace is dispensed for situations of inevitability, this quickly morphs into justification for inaction. Augustine had already warned about this.³⁶ And the strict Hippolytus of Rome rebuked Callixtus I, around the year 200 A.D., for linking this parable to the ark-argument in order to get around intervening against sinners in the Church: "Moreover, the parable of the tares, he claimed, had been spoken in view of this situation. 'Let the tares grow together with the wheat'—that is, let the sinners grow in the church. Still more, he said that Noah's ark—in which there were dogs, wolves, crows, everything clean and unclean—is a symbol of the church. By this means, he claimed that it is necessary for 'clean and unclean' to be in the church."³⁷

Strikingly, Pope Benedict does not endorse any of these contrasting interpretative traditions as he speaks about clerical sexual abuse today. He takes no stance on the position that either validates patience with weeds in the Church or demands their energetic uprooting. These options fade in the background as the Church suffers from a situation in which apparently nothing can be done. This may explain why members of the hierarchy like Pope Benedict show few signs of recognition of guilt. Metaphorical arguments that plead for tolerance and patience serve, by way of the idea of consolation, as justification for doing nothing or certainly not enough against violations in an institution for which one bears responsibility. It is easy to defend against guilt with reference to tolerance and excessive leniency. To change this situation in light of a "productive" guilt, this link between tolerance, solace, and guilt denial must be recognized and dissolved.

Notes

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26. Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa theologica* II-II. q. 10, art. 8 (“utrum infideles compellendi sint ad fidem. In Mt. 13”).
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