

"Souls in Purgatory," detail, by José Guadalupe Posada, Mexican, 1871-1913 (Art Institute of Chicago)



by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

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Editor's note: *Eugene Cullen Kennedy, who died June 3, 2015, was one of the most prolific and insightful observers of the Catholic Church in the modern era. Following is the first of two pieces on the clergy culture and the sex abuse crisis that were part of a larger work underway when he died. The manuscript, last worked on in January 2015, was shared with NCR by his widow, Sara Charles Kennedy, who noted the happy coincidence that Kennedy's date of death was the same as that of St. Pope John XXIII, whom he greatly admired. John XXIII died in 1963. The longer manuscript was lightly edited for clarity and divided into two parts. The second part will appear tomorrow.*

As the Mississippi is the father of all waters, the sex abuse crisis is the mother of all church scandals. Much like flood managers, who allow the river to have its own way, church officials initially stayed clear of the crisis, letting it pretty much have its own way as it cut now this way and tomorrow that on through the Catholic community. The raging waters have ravaged the Church, leaving many of its people, especially victims, feeling spiritually dispossessed. Yet nobody — and no official — has made a serious attempt to track the source of this great river of sexual scandal. Nor have they seriously tried to dam or even divert it; instead, like the Mississippi, the crisis plows its wild energy back into itself and keeps on rolling along.

The scandal seesaws, almost reaching a highpoint of progress before its two-fold gravity — that of the scandal and that of ancient church structure — pulls it down again to irresolution. It therefore continues largely unexplained and untreated, as are many of its victims. The latter's wounds were inflicted on the unconscious level of their personalities and, since there is no time in the unconscious, these injuries are always as fresh and traumatic as the moment they were inflicted.

Bureaucracy has its own time zone, however, and it deals even with such urgent problems as the sex abuse crisis in slow motion. We are well into the century on whose doorstep this scandal was left like a foundling crying out against its abandonment. Despite the sounds of gears at last being more fully engaged by Pope Francis, who can claim that we are any closer to closure for this ongoing debasement of everything Catholic?

Granting the good will and integrity of all participants, hard as that may be to do, everything that is now said and every structure now proposed has been said or proposed before, usually with the same mannered expressions of contrition and the same semi-firm purpose of amendment. Imagine the official church as an airplane with a crew that counts circling the field as a hard day's work.

Handling the sex abuse scandal in such a passive-aggressive manner mocks the magisterial biblical pronouncement, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End." Time fills the sandbags piled up by officials to hold off the muck-filled rush of waters. Progress is stopped, as if by an official's flag whose flutter suddenly closes the river, in identifying and dealing with wounds whose pain is forever outside time and forever fresh for victims.

Wounded sex abuse victims have lived, since the moment of their sexual violation, in this Middle, this place that is not the beginning and certainly not the ending, where the hands on the clock never move.

Sex abuse's out-of-time condition is a function of its origin in hierarchical structures, the multi-level hive in which the worker bees of ecclesiastical bureaucracy thrive. Even believers who have never been directly abused sexually feel trapped in this New Purgatory, this Middle, of an endless intermission that never lets the curtain rise on the final act that, in traditional drama, is the setting for a true catharsis that brings resolution to the conflict of the play.

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Hierarchical structures, like rich black earth, offered just the right conditions for clergy sex abuse to take root and finally yield a bumper harvest of pain and suffering for its victims. These top down structures, based on an ancient misinterpretation of a universe divided into the heavens above and the earth below, hallowed a bifurcated Church and, indeed, a divided image of human personality that worked against rather than for the healthy integration of personality, the wholeness without which there can be no holiness.

Purity and power were the divinely determined inheritance of those on the highest level while the divinely wrought destiny of those at the bottom was, like that of Downton Abbey servants, to obey their betters above them even as they struggled

with the sinful earthiness left to them by fallen first parents.

The origin of hierarchy

The concept of hierarchy is rooted not in the Last Supper or any other Gospel event but in slowly unfolding psychological and historical processes.

In his *Atlas of World Mythology* (New York, Harper & Row, 1988) Joseph Campbell explains how the differing mythological themes and symbols arose in the human imagination to explain and interpret the principal features of their experience of the world. In the era termed that of Hunters and Gatherers, their experience was dominated by the hunting and sacrifice of animals.

At practically the same time, the techniques of agriculture were being developed, reordering human experience and endowing the world with a new mythology based on the planting and harvesting of crops. This became known as the Way of the Seeded Earth.

The third model, as Campbell writes, "to take possession of the human mind and will (Part 1, The Sacrifice, p. 76 ff.) reshaping it all to its order was of the planets and moon and in the measured regularities of their courses through the constellations of fixed stars."

"The historic transfer of the spiritual focus," Campbell continues, "from animal forms and the seeded earth to the celestial lights occurred when it was realized that these enigmatic travelers of the star-strewn heavenly vault were moving through constellations at various mathematically determined discoverable speeds and that these constituted in concert of cosmic order mathematically determined."

This hierarchical display of the universe, endorsed by the Council of Trent as Jesus's will for his Church, made the sexual abuse of lesser persons possible by leaving them powerless beneath the upperclass hierarchs who were invested with full power over the lowest level of a divided Church. By divine right those at the pinnacle of hierarchy enjoyed privileges and respect along with immunity from any challenge, investigation, or charge by members on the lower levels of the hierarchical Church.

This Eiffel Tower model for the Church, much like that for monarchies smashed by the twentieth century's two World Wars, has been fully and finally invalidated as a divine plan for creation by our entrance into the Space/Information Age. The long accepted organizing concepts of hierarchy — a Center and an Up and Down — do

not exist in Space. Top heavy and top-down hierarchies searched for new designs as the liberation of information also eliminated the staple of hierarchy of mid-level mediation between executive and worker.



Infrared image from NASA's Spitzer Space Telescope of the W40 nebula — a giant cloud of gas and dust in space where new stars may form (NASA/JPL-Caltech)

The Church anticipated the impact of the Space/Information Age by returning to its original collegiality in Vatican II that opened in 1962 just a month after President John F. Kennedy initiated America's Space Age by calling for a manned voyage to the moon before that decade ended. The impact of this new age may be *compared* to that ushered in by Gutenberg's invention of moveable type. That discovery shattered the official Church's exclusive control over the publication, distribution, and interpretation of the scriptures. So, too, the Space/Information Age has pried open the fist of control clenched so tightly for so long over the flow of information by hierarchically platted organizations or governments.

Such control from the top by the few over the many is an essential note of hierarchical power. However, the failure of its inner controls left it scattered like a gutted clock across a jeweler's work space.

Hierarchy's dream of restoration

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 was adumbrated by its inability to control the information about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster that occurred three years before. In hierarchies, information is considered a "stock" good that is placed on the top shelf of a locked closet to which only the powerful few at the top have the keys. Information is, however, by its very nature, a "flow" good that seeks ever to disseminate itself.

Old fashioned hierarchies and dictatorships can no longer control access to information as a "stock" good. The conditions of the Space/Information Age free it as a "flow" good that disseminates itself beyond control by the powerful at the top of any hierarchical institution.

The well advanced fracturing of the hierarchical control of the administrative Church is obvious in its inability to maintain the integrity of information at the highest level of its structure, the bedside stand of Pope Benedict XVI from which confidential papers disappeared. One day we may understand that Pope Benedict XVI's resignation was, perhaps primarily, a function of the fall of the great but dead redwood of hierarchy that he labored to replant at the center of what he viewed as the Eden of the pre-Vatican II Church.

He was successful for a while, pleasing many with his fulfillment of Saint John Paul II's vision of a restored Vatican I Catholicism. Many rallied to his call for a new generation of clerics to become crusaders, so to speak, in rescuing the holy places and practices of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. This exhausting effort could not, however, succeed or long survive in the Space/Information Age. Spacecraft built according to hierarchical blueprints incinerate in a sheath of flame as they enter the atmosphere of the Space/Information universe. Benedict broke himself struggling mightily to guide the barque of Peter back to the deep water port of Vatican I where the clock of history is permanently set to hierarchical standard time.

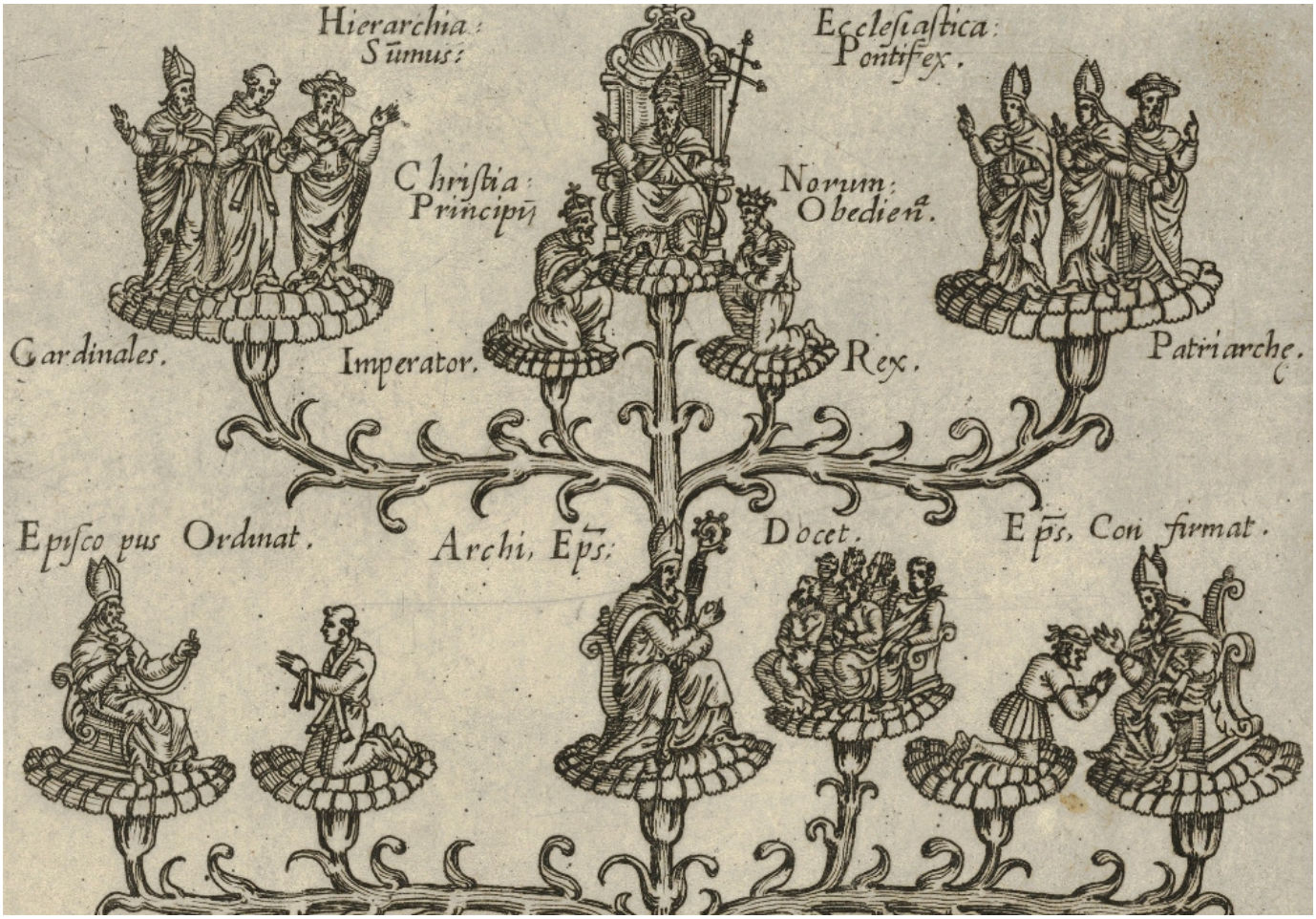
So too, Vladimir Putin, terming the implosion of the old Soviet Union "a national tragedy on an enormous scale," (ABC News, Feb. 12, 2014) has not been shy in his blunt efforts to restore the lost glories of the Soviet Union in a hierarchy ruled by

him as a strongman leader from the top down. Like Benedict, Putin has enjoyed some early success by, for example, seizing Crimea and invading Ukraine, bold steps in recreating the archipelago of occupied Eastern European countries that had constituted the Soviet Union. For all his synthetic macho posturing, Putin eventually will be as worn down and depleted as Benedict XVI by the ultimately frustrating task of reviving a monarchy in the Space/Information Age.

The Middle: Progress or delay?

Bishops, who with few exceptions are good and earnest men, have been subjected to great pressure to defend and restore the hierarchical form. This has forced them to take positions that make them seem more committed to the restoration of dead structures than to healing of the living persons affected so deeply by the Sex Abuse Crisis. This has made easy targets of them for critics and for the lawyers whose suits place at risk the values of hierarchical assets that their own lawyers and insurers tell them that they must defend.

This is one of the ironies of the legal jousting that make it so difficult to break free of the Middle of this crisis. The lawyers cannot have it otherwise without destroying the universe on which their activity depends.



The hierarchy of the church in the form of a tree, a plate from a book, detail from the upper half, circa 1550-1650 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Those who have presided at the top of the Church still do not fully grasp that this great hulking caravan, as ponderous, spuriously colorful, and outdated as a circus, no longer draws crowds to its parades and processions. In contrast to the buckling and emptying hierarchical church structures, store front churches, even in traditionally Catholic countries, are multiplying like biblical loaves because they are free of the crushing weight of hierarchical forms and free of the catalog of possessions that go along with them. The rise of store front churches is a function not of the far-sighted but of the near-sighted bureaucrats who cannot see that failing hierarchy is crushing them beneath its weight.

The long underground history of sex abuse, described by Richard Sipe, Thomas Doyle, and Patrick Wall (*Sex, Priests, and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church's 2,000-Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse*, Taylor Trade Publishing, 2006) was finally noisily exposed not by the official Church's deliberately breaking the sound barrier on its

secrets but because of the thunderous collapse from within of the multi-tiered stadium that once housed hierarchy.

When the dead tree of hierarchy, weakened by its knowledge of good and evil, toppled, the well feathered nests of the once powerful hierarchs were also pitched from its petrified branches. The inability of this ancient but now rotted tree to take root in the Space/Information Age means the loss of power and privilege for those who had perched contentedly within it. As a result, the official Church no longer enjoys the unquestioned power to cover up scandals, avoid suspicion, indictment, civil litigation, and the undisputed control of its records and other information.

New revelations are published almost every day about the Sex Abuse Crisis, scandalizing and souring many Catholics, not on their faith but on the defensiveness of its bureaucrats against asking, much less answering, questions about the unhealthy side-effects of the hierarchical system in whose regal courts its officials had longed to become crown princes.

For example, Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide, Australia, testified to a government commission that until 2001, when bishops sought to discipline sex abusing priests, "the Congregation of the Clergy consistently made things difficult for them in trying to do that." (Catholic World News, June 25, 2014) Furthermore, that congregation "regularly supported accused priests who wanted to remain in active ministry."

The hierarchical Church made sex abuse possible by creating, without quite realizing its long term effects, a heavily fortified zone of privilege and respect for the clerical class whose innocence was never to be doubted and whose small foibles were really evidence, like the scarred hands of a coal miner, of their hard work rather than evidence, like the trembling hands of a heavy drinker, of their losing their grip on power.

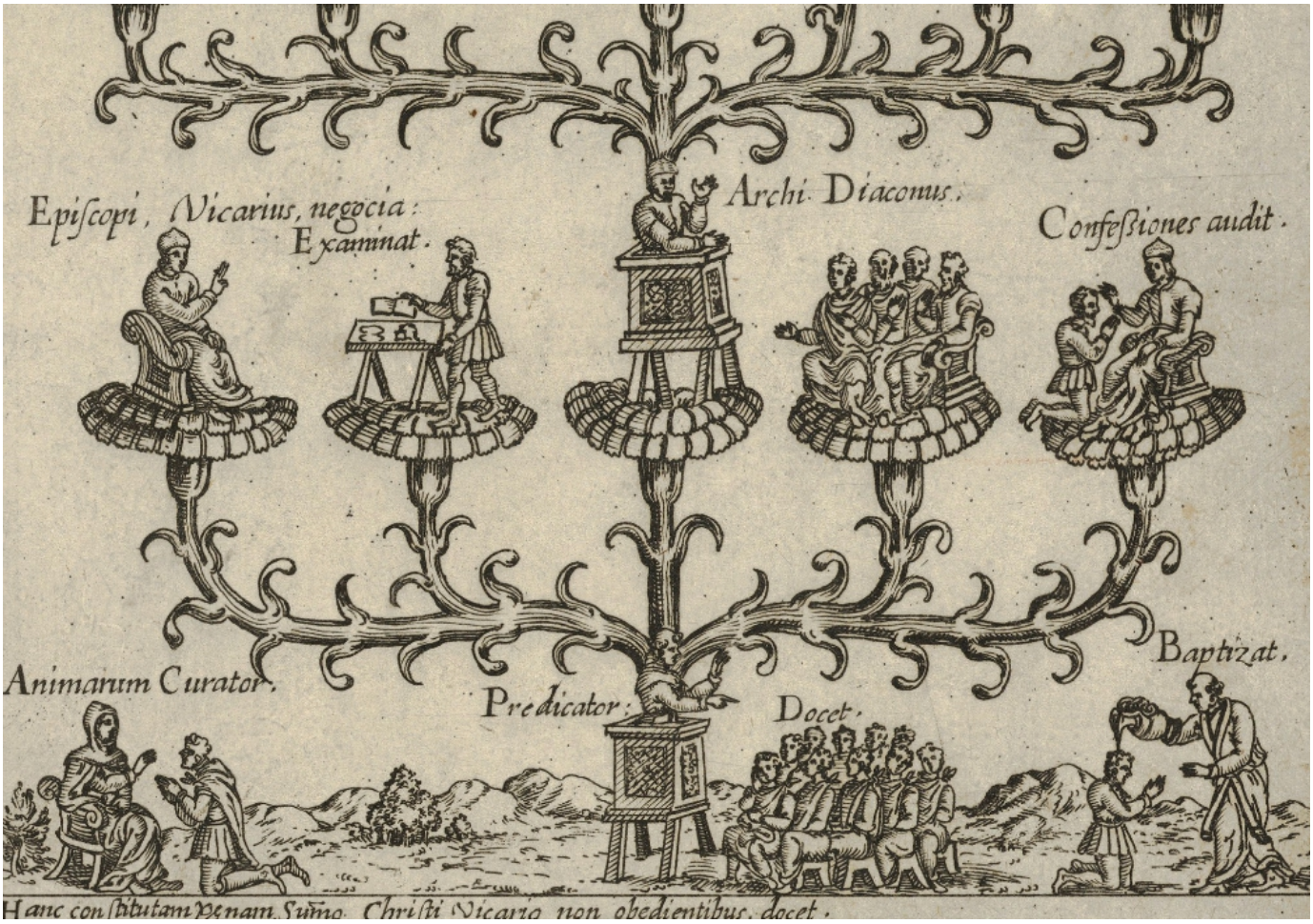
Hierarchy in disarray loses its vigilance and its ability to control not only its confidential information but its entrances and exits and, as an aging ruin, becomes an enabler for those seeking sexual relief in its shadows. Under the pressures of times no longer congenial to hierarchy (Cf, among others, *The Starfish and the Spider* by Brafman and Beckstrom, Portfolio Books, 2006, an analysis of the search for viable organizational forms in a post-hierarchical age) the once vaunted obedience of priests to bishops had already shifted at the high point of the pre-

Vatican II Church.

Priests were then famous for complaining about their controlling pastors and bishops but they subtly sought a Northwest Passage through ecclesiastical restraints, discovering ways around their bishops and superiors so that they could do what they wanted when they wanted to without much, if any, effective ecclesiastical monitoring or interference.

As the late Dr. Frank Kobler noted in analyzing the data from the psychological study of Catholic Bishops (Sheehan and Kobler) done at Loyola University of Chicago, "It is a myth that the Catholic Church in this country is a monolithic, authoritarian entity. ... I know of no group of men who are more free to do as they please and who, in general, do it, than the priests of the United States."

The hard maze of the "old" Church may have been filled with blind alleys and secret passages but many priests found routes through it so that they could move freely and, because of the confidence invested in them because of their higher, read *hierarchical,* callings, to manipulate and abuse the innocents who trusted them, from the heart of families whose infants some abused as they volunteered to help a tired mother put them to bed, to the altar boys and others they took on overnight trips, to the team members and fatherless children they took to and for themselves in the vast spaces, like air pockets in collapsed buildings, that they found in the wreckage of hierarchical forms.



The hierarchy of the church in the form of a tree, a plate from a book, detail from the lower half, circa 1550-1650 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

They had reconnoitered the territory, knew how to handle or put off their pastors or bishops and where and how, in the places and times of their own choosing, they could seduce their carefully chosen prey. Unwittingly the bishops who tried to implement the orders of Popes Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI to restore hierarchical forms and to suppress the return of the collegial model of Vatican II, were in fact enablers of the sex abusing priests who gamed that system for years in order to operate like sexual terrorists beneath their noble posturing as dutiful and virtuous clerics within it.

The moldering hulk of hierarchy became both shelter and shield for the forms of life that burrowed into its depths, scurried down its ropes into the everyday world, and, sated by blindly sought satisfaction, clambered back onto the vessel of hierarchy to the safety it offered within its many decked interior.

A dynamic of the hierarchical system

Most threatening to hierarchy's bureaucratic legions is the growing awareness of how a central dynamic of the hierarchical system and that of the sex abuse scandal resonates like the overlapping thunder strokes of great bells yoked together in a cathedral tower.

The chosen, that is, those at elevated levels in the ecclesiastical culture, take pride in their "higher" callings but do not consciously admit even to themselves the incidental, and perhaps unconscious, rewards of exercising their canonical power over those who must bare their innermost lives to them when petitioning them for permission to regularize their lives within the official Church whether through clearing up marriage problems or seeking dispensations.

Often, petitioners are humiliated by the need to submit themselves to these invasive procedures. That is to say, those with canonical power use it, often to delay or deny the simple human requests of the powerless who trust them to guide them pastorally rather than officiously through the house of mirrors of Church regulations.

No group has been more humiliated by hierarchical processes than priests who seek the Church's permission to marry. These men who forsake the supposed glory of their high celibate station to join themselves in love to a woman, constitute an elevated threat to the hierarchs, many of whom thank God that they are not like the rest of such men who abandon their "higher" callings to become laypeople again. This is unthinkable to bureaucrats who look down on those who cannot remain as chaste or celibate as these officials would like you to think they are.

In short, the "old" church now idealized in retrospect by so many, was, at its apparent zenith, already falling apart. Its dilapidated state enabled the sex abuse scandal to originate and survive within its decaying halls. If the scandal is a measure of the porous borders of hierarchy, it also resembles iatrogenic disease, the illness one can acquire in a hospital, an institution dedicated to health. Hospitals, unlike hierarchical institutions, are ever alert to the possibilities of such illnesses. In medicine they speak of taking "cultures" of such infectious agents so that they can study, identify, and eliminate them.

The counterpart of hierarchy's incurable infectious agent has long been termed a culture, the clerical culture that was, so to speak, immaculately conceived by hierarchy. Because it is so much a part of the system in which hierarchs are

embedded, the latter cannot observe, fully understand, or easily take measures to reform it. As long as this situation remains static, the Sex Abuse scandal remains an active infection in the Church.

Sex abusers survive within disintegrating hierarchical forms as snipers do in a city whose ruins protect them as they pick out and pick off their victims. The continuing revelations about ongoing Sex Abuse or of cases disinterred from burial in the past, provide further evidence of the facilitating character of power wielding hierarchical structures for the sexual abuse of powerless believers. We are still living in what we might term the symptom rich Middle of the disease, in that No Man's Land of being sick, waiting for the fever to break so that the next steps of overseeing a cure and supporting convalescence restores the Church to health.

Read this next: The hierarchical spirit that will not die
A version of this story appeared in the **June 14-27, 2019** print issue under the headline: The purgatory of the sex abuse crisis.