

The Theological Imperative Informing Safeguarding

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An Icon of the Child in Our Midst

By

Gill Goulding CJ

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2026

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-6735-7

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-6736-4

This book is dedicated

Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

And to all who serve in the ministry of safeguarding
children and vulnerable adults

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge with gratitude the kind assistance and encouragement of Jane Leek and Steffen Eikenbusch for facilitating a grant that enabled this work to proceed. I am very grateful to Don Giulio Maspero, Dean of Theology at the Pontifical University of Santa Croce for providing office space for me to work in the library. In addition, I am indebted to him and colleagues Ilaria Vigorelli and Fr. Jordi Puhl for stimulating conversations on the subject matter. Andrea Zanni and Ilaria provided invaluable assistance towards publication along with Amanda and Adam at Cambridge Scholars Press. I am grateful to Fr. John Wauck who assisted the work by helping me to remain buoyant amidst all! I am finally deeply grateful to my sisters and friends who prayed for me as I wrote.

INTRODUCTION

The title, *The Theological Imperative Informing Safeguarding: An Icon of the Child in Our Midst*, is a reference to scripture, where Jesus took a child and placed that child in the midst of the disciples, saying “anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”¹ Christ aligns himself with children and the most vulnerable. The action of welcoming is to engage another with openness and receptivity and to indicate the value of their presence. Jesus asserts that to welcome the child is to welcome him and not just him but the one who sent him, namely the Father. This is a profound and most fundamental theological truth. It is vital to reiterate the ongoing presence of Christ in our midst, because this is where he is to be found and most especially is he to be found amongst the poorest and most vulnerable – the child who has been abused. To believe in this truth is to be on the road of hope, because it is to recall the irrevocable commitment of God to each human person, and particularly those in greatest need.

In addition, the title references the fact that Jesus, himself, is ongoingly the child in our midst. In every generation he is the eternal child of the Father. He reveals the Trinitarian depths of loving mercy as he aligns himself irrevocably with all who have been abused. The title also refers to the reality that in any response to the crisis of abuse in the Catholic Church, the child or vulnerable person needs to be central to that response and participative in it. For this to be the case, there is a need to reclaim key theological truths and prominent among these is the Christian vision of the human person, which emphasizes the ultimate value and dignity of each human life made in the image and likeness of God.

¹ Mark 9:36

This book came into being as the result of a request from the European funding body who kindly gave me a grant to produce two short texts in 2022. One of these texts was directed towards the Bishops of the Catholic Church and was ultimately translated and was then available in four languages: English, Italian, French and Spanish. The present work has not just a greater length, but with that expanded space a greater depth. In particular it asserts that we have within the theological tradition significant resources to contribute to a life-giving response to the abuse crisis. Such a response may provide another small step forward for a survivor and for the wider church. Accordingly, it is a book that focuses on re-appropriating key theological dimensions of faith.

It is a short book that is offered as a resource, to assist personal pondering and oral or written responses to the abuse crisis and safeguarding. The publications produced by regional bishops' conferences have addressed the crisis of sexual abuse by members of the clergy, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience and have endeavoured to give clear advice according to the regulations of different countries. A good example of this was the publication produced by the Canadian Bishops Conference in 2018 entitled "Protecting Minors from Sexual Abuse". In addition, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith produced in March 2021 a *Vademecum* that gave real clarity and assistance to Bishops around the world concerning protocols, policies and procedures. In all these documents, however, primary attention was given to legal, canonical, procedural, psychological, financial and sociological factors with little, if any, attention paid to theological concerns. A final example would be the annual report on church policies and procedures for safeguarding issued by the Commission for the Protection of Minors in December 2024 in five languages.

Yet within all these different documents the forgotten dimension is the theology informing our response as Church to this crisis. I suggest that within the Christian faith tradition there are theological resources that may be re-appropriated, that bring life-giving insights not found elsewhere. To access these, it is important that we acknowledge that abuse is not just wrong or sinful (of course it is) but that it profoundly wounds both those

who are abused and the body of Christ.² At its heart it is a profanation of the very person of Christ. It is Jesus himself who asserts this reality “whatever you do to the least You do to me”³. It is Christ, the eternal child of the Father, who is desecrated by the action of abuse. When we glimpse this most profound truth, by the grace of God, there is the possibility of ongoing conversion for members of the Church and a possible further step in the journey of healing on the part of survivors of abuse.

There is a pragmatic orientation to this work. Though theologically grounded, I see it opening a deeper perspective and bringing to light an accessible dimension of theological discourse that might speak also beyond the academy to a wider audience. This might include: the survivor who perceives that the depths of their pain has in some sense been glimpsed and might therefore be encouraged to take another step forward in healing and possibly even engage with faith and church; the bishop striving to continue ministry with the weight of dealing with a legacy of clerical abusers and numerous survivors, who might draw strength from the text to keep moving forward; and others both within and without the Church who are looking for a deeper meaning to both what has occurred in the Church and to a more profound response from the Church. We are called as the people of God to plumb the depths of what has occurred within the body of Christ. We are not dealing with an issue or a problem or even a scandal, we are engaged with the pain of abuse suffered by countless children and vulnerable human persons. In the face of such acknowledged pain, we are challenged to respond – to recognize a theological imperative and act accordingly.

This book has nine chapters and each chapter is composed of three sections. In accordance with what has already been stated, it begins by reclaiming the theological vision of the human person at the heart of the Christian faith. The second chapter moves to a more contemporary setting and considers lessons learned from the pandemic and the recovery of relationality. The

² C.f. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” I Cor 12:26. Pope Francis stated that such abuse involved “Crimes that inflict deep wounds of pain and powerlessness, primarily among the victims, but also in their family members and in the larger community of believers and nonbelievers alike.” Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God, 20th August 2018, Vatican City.

³ Matthew 25: 40

third chapter explores the question of authority raising some of the key theological concerns regarding power and authority, and identifying the exemplary exercise of authority by Jesus – authority as service. It is the abuse of authority that underlies most acts of abuse. In the light of these three chapters, chapter four focuses the importance of the child privileged by Christ, while chapter five considers what it means to be children of God. Chapter six, brings us to the profound dimension of the eternal child who is Christ, himself, and indicates how he draws us to a deeper Trinitarian understanding. We return in chapter seven to our contemporary context to explore the interconnected nature of all forms of abuse and even to link this also to abuse of the earth. In chapter eight we trace some of the voices of survivors and responses to these voices in considering reports from Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The final chapter engages with the synodal process seeing lessons that can be learned for our engagement with survivors and it explores the fundamental theological importance of vulnerability. In the conclusion there are also suggestions for a way forward.

The book is purposefully short, to make it more readily accessible to a greater number of people and in order that it can be a working resource.

Gill Goulding CJ
Feast of St. Joseph 19th March 2026.

CHAPTER I

RECLAIMING THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF THE HUMAN PERSON

This chapter sets the contextual theological foundation that is vital for a deeper understanding of the reality of abuse. At the heart of this foundation is an imperative that seeks to reclaim the Christian vision of the being of the human person, the wonder of - and indeed gratitude for - the 'givenness' of being. Such a vision also affirms the fundamental link between human life and divine life. This living awareness of humanity and our relationship with God, inexorably leads to a consideration of our interior life. Here, the yearning for God is congruent with an inner fervour that finds expression in an understanding of the interconnected nature of each human person, an appreciation of "a disciplined and intrinsic relating."⁴ None of us lives only for ourselves. Rather in our interconnected nature, we may glimpse something of the mysterious and inaccessible glory that is essential to the gift of each human person made in the image and likeness of God. I suggest that a failure to apprehend such an understanding and thus the interconnected nature of each human person, is one step along a path that can lead ultimately to abusive behaviour.

This chapter is divided into three sections: the first focuses on the gift of our creation; the second leads into a substantial consideration of the divine dynamic love operative in creation that calls human persons to both flourish in that love, and to engage in sharing the good news of that love with others in all forms of relating. The final section raises the difficult question of the

⁴ Romano Guardini *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) 94. He continues: "A dynamic core exists that has within it possibilities of order ... yet also of the anchoring of the one in the loyalty and responsibility of the other". Ibid.

way in which culture can demean human persons and indeed in a systemic failure can aid the spread of abusive behaviour.

The gift of our creation

There is a religious quest for ultimacy that relates to the mystery of our being.⁵ The Abrahamic faiths posit a God who creates *ex nihilo*⁶. The Christian faith fleshes this out in terms of creation arising out of a divine loving gratuitous generosity and asserts that time and human life are both created and sustained by God. This presupposes that temporal reality is held within the dimension of infinity and that within the very form of human creation, there is an inbuilt capacity for wonder and an appreciation of beauty.⁷ Perhaps this is best understood by an example in the reality of the dawn of a new day. Out of darkness God brings forth light, it is a gradual event and often with the beauty of a sky tinged with the colours of red and pink and violet, as light spreads rapidly to call to awareness the beginning of a new day. Birds welcome the dawn with a chorus of song, and human persons with a diverse response to the alarm clock. Though we take for granted that day follows night, there is something very wonder-ful to be present at the dawning of a new day. Each day is a gift and our lives also are offered to us once more day after day as we wake from sleep, just as we were given to ourselves in the very act of our creation. “The Christian affirms that all things, including our very selves ‘come to be’ *because* of the

⁵ C.f. “Religious faith is faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found and explained.” William James *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956),51.

⁶ *Creatio ex nihilo* – literally creation out of nothing. Creation has no independent power of being, or aseity, but is contingent, absolutely dependent upon the creative divine power. In other words, God did not create the universe out of pre-existent matter.

⁷ “The movement toward God in Christ is not something tacked on, as it were, to a space and time and matter originally constituted on their own and in abstraction from this movement. On the contrary, the movement toward God in Christ lies at the core of space, time and matter in their original constitution, and hence in their original meaning precisely *as* space and *as* time and *as* matter.” David L. Schindler, ‘Trinity, Creation and the Order of Intelligence in the Modern Academy.’ *Communio: International Catholic Review* 28 (2001) 406-428 [410]

specific act of the Creator.”⁸ The wonder of dawn is a reminder of this reality.

Then we come to the human person made in the image and likeness of God, the human person is destined to participate “in the very life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”⁹ Accordingly, there is an in-built capacity for God that finds fullness in becoming sons and daughters of God, such that, we are able to enter into the intimacy of calling the Father ‘Abba’! There has been a certain disfigurement of the human person by the reality of sin. Nevertheless, “the notion of the [human person] as *imago Dei*, implies recognition that the [human person] is never, in any aspect or at any moment of its meaning or existence, unaffected by [both] grace and sin.”¹⁰

Here, there is an ontology of creatureliness that reveals being as gift and this is in a two-fold manner. The *telos* of the human person and indeed of the whole cosmos is towards union with the divine mystery of love that brought all into being. In addition, human persons are created in and through the gift of God who in God-self is an eternal gift of Trinitarian love. “God’s ever gratuitous life posits the finite creature and makes it be itself within himself without annihilating it.”¹¹ Thus the ever loving self-gift within the Trinity between the persons of Father, Son and Spirit overflows into creating human persons with an integrity of their own and yet “intrinsicly dependent in

⁸ Ephraim Radner *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the shape of a Human Life*, (Waco, Texas: Baylor university press, 2016) 7. He continues “This relationship to a divine act outside of us and outside of our own times makes our creaturehood something singular, in comparison with other relationships we have with people and things past and present.” Ibid.

⁹ St. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, Rich in Mercy, Encyclical Letter 30 November 1980, 7:4

¹⁰ David L. Schindler, ‘Trinity, Creation and the Order of Intelligence in the Modern Academy.’ *Communio: International Catholic Review* 28 (2001) 406-428 [416] He continues: “This does not imply a denial of the essential natural integrity of the creature as such; it implies only that this natural integrity is never neutral with respect to the event of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ or to the Church that is the sacrament of this event.” Ibid.

¹¹ Antonio López F.S.C.B. ‘Donum Domini: An Approach to a Theology of Gift’ in eds. Nicholas J. Healy Jr. and D.C. Schindler *Being Holy in the World: Theology and Culture in the Thought of David L. Schindler*, (Grand Rapids Michigan/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2011) 252-280 [254]

their very distinction from God upon their participation in God's own life for their being and meaning."¹²

What I am positing here is that it is important to renew our perspective as we look at the world, ourselves and other human persons. We are so used to considering this as our world and God benevolently keeping it and us in being. The truth, however, is that it is God's world into which we have been created by the gift of our being. We are given to ourselves as gift in God's world. Such an understanding involves a distinct mind-shift to appreciate something of "the exhaustive divine comprehension of our temporal life"¹³ This does not mean that we cannot learn from science, non-Christian anthropology and any other investigative disciplines about the truth of the human person. Rather we do so with an understanding that we are beloved creatures in God's world and that as Ephraim Radner affirms: "Creaturally life itself finally shows that scriptural life is primordial to all other ways of construing life."¹⁴

The Christian community is often reminded by their pastors, that they are pilgrims on a journey toward eschatological fullness. We make this journey not as individuals but always in the context of relationship with the Other who is God and the others who are other human persons with whom we have a wide variety of, more or less demanding relationships. Growing maturity in understanding our common humanity and the way we engage in these relationships is vital, to avoid the pitfalls of various forms of abusive behaviour. Paul O'Callaghan asserts that "*the human being is eccentric*"¹⁵

¹² Michael Hanby, 'Beyond Mechanism: The Cosmological significance of David L. Schindler's *Communio* Ontology' in eds. Nicholas J. Healy Jr. and D.C. Schindler *Being Holy in the World: Theology and Culture in the Thought of David L. Schindler*, (Grand Rapids Michigan/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2011) 162-189 [162]

¹³ Ephraim Radner *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the shape of a Human Life*, (Waco, Texas: Baylor university press, 2016) 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* He continues 'and thus [no life that exists] is apart from the God in Christ who is revealed to us singularly and exhaustively in the scriptures.'

¹⁵ Paul O'Callaghan, *Children of God in the World: An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 5. Alongside the stress on relationship which define this sense of eccentricity he states there is: "the fact that we express ourselves beyond ourselves, in friendship, in art, in music, in literary criticism, in conversation". Yet human beings are eccentric also

as human persons operate within a basic transcendent perspective and for the Christian that perspective is in the light of the Incarnation, the Word who becomes flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Here, we might recall the point made in *Gaudium et Spes* that it is Jesus Christ who reveals the true nature of the human person and their destiny “in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love. ... There is no ‘life’ that somehow exists apart from God.”¹⁶

The transformative dynamic of love

“[The human person] is constructed from within, in the image of God, to be loved and to love ... In the Trinity, Love’s own essence portrays itself. [The human person] is in God’s image and thereby ... is a being whose innermost dynamic is likewise directed towards the receiving and giving of love.”¹⁷

This citation from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger makes clear that, love is basic for human being and acting. If this is the case, then our creaturely being is brought about through love, a love first given to us by God and thus gifted to us, such that we are in our very origin giftedness – as we have already seen – given to ourselves gratuitously by the generosity of our loving Triune God. God’s love is fundamental for our lives. This is the reality of our being made in the image and likeness of God. I belong not to myself but to God, who has ensured that within each human person there is an anteriorly given ontological receptivity that brings a dynamic energy to ontological activity. In this light, all human life and activity are meant to become responses to the gift of divine love that loved us into being¹⁸ and in Christ Jesus loved us

because our desire to know ourselves – to do anthropology – is carried out principally in the context of the other, that is, on the basis of an external, transcendent perspective.

¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965, 22.

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World*, trans. Henry Taylor, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002) 189

¹⁸ “God loved me first, before I myself could love at all. It was only because he knew me, and loved me, that I was made. So, I was not thrown into the world by some operation of chance, as Heidegger says, and now have to do my best to swim around in this ocean of life, but I am preceded by a perception of me, an idea and a love of me. They are present in the ground of my being ... God is there first and loves me.

to the end, through his life, passion, death and resurrection. Here we encounter love in its most radical form, as Jesus gives himself up, even to death on a cross, for the salvation of all human persons. Contemplating the reality of the cross causes us to realize what it means to say that God is love. “It is from [the cross] that our definition of love must begin.”¹⁹

The whole of salvation history is ordered towards Christ and flows from him as the climax and meaning which fulfills it.²⁰ Accordingly, as St Paul states, our lives are “hidden with Christ in God”²¹ and it is Christ himself, who is the criterion of what it means to be a human person. “The great mystery and wonder of being a creature is that the very realities that mark our human lives are all gifts of [Christ].”²² Christ is – at it were – the living perspective! Indeed, it is the figure of Christ who gives flesh and blood to our understanding of this transformative dynamic of love. It is a love that in faithfulness has left for us a visible sign of presence in the Eucharist. The institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper as body and blood of the Lord gives enduring reality to that love. The Eucharist draws us into the very dynamic of Jesus’ self-giving, in the movement of the offering to the Father of the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.²³

Thus, as David Schindler asserts, “My original giftedness as a creature is a finite participation in the Creator’s ‘givingness’. Receiving and giving, or

And that is the trustworthy ground on which my life is standing, and on which I myself can construct it.” Joseph Ratzinger, op cit. 26-27.

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est*, God is Love, Encyclical Letter, 2006, 12.

²⁰ C.f. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994) 21. Balthasar also indicates the work of the theologian in this regard. “The business of theology is not to keep one eye on philosophy, but with its gaze obediently turned toward Jesus Christ, simply and directly to describe how he stands in time and in history as the heart and norm of all that is historical.”²⁶

²¹ Colossians 3:3

²² Ephraim Radner *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the shape of a Human Life*, (Waco, Texas: Baylor university press, 2016) 8.

²³ Pope Benedict XVI spoke of this as sacramental ‘mysticism’ “The sacramental ‘mysticism’ grounded in God’s condescension towards us, operates at a radically different level and lifts us to far greater heights than anything that any human mystical elevation could ever accomplish.” Pope Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est*, God is Love, Encyclical Letter 2006, 13.

loving, is thus my deepest and most fundamental act as a creature.”²⁴ The profound truth of our existence is that all creation, and in particular every human person, is a result of the fecundity of God’s loving activity. This love that we know from scripture, tradition and our own personal experience, is without limit, faithful and everlasting.

It is one of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar’s central assertions that love alone is credible.²⁵ Indeed, he asserts that the common destiny of every human person is a vocation of love in Christ. *Caritas Christi urget nos*, it is the love of Christ that impels us.²⁶ It is this love, Balthasar maintains, that is the transformative dynamic at the heart of any life. God is not only love, the eternal act of perichoretic indwelling between the Father and the Son hypostasized as the Spirit who is Love, but God also loves the human person on whom he freely chooses to disclose divine love in the fullness of the act of creating. The Trinity is love *ad-intra* and *ad-extra*. Accordingly, God’s love is a mutual manifestation of the revelation of the divine Persons, in whom they are Lover, Beloved and Love and an external revelation of love as God’s nature to each human person. Further consideration of this Trinitarian horizon occurs in a later chapter.²⁷

If I am indeed a gift given to myself and called into both receiving and giving in my response to God, then that inextricably involves my engagement with others whom I encounter in the journey of life. They are a gift to me as I am called to be a gift to them.²⁸ So this givenness of being is

²⁴ David L. Schindler, ‘Being, Gift, Self-Gift’ in *The Generosity of Creation*, (Washington DC: Human Academic Press, 2018) 123-232 at 211.

²⁵ Balthasar even wrote a book with this title in the English translation.

²⁶ C.f. “Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. ... I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become his own.” Pope Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est*, God is Love, Encyclical Letter 2006,14.

²⁷ For Balthasar, everything that may be known must have some characteristics of mystery as “all objects of knowledge have a *creaturely* character. This leads to the conclusion that the final truth of all things is hidden in the mind of the Creator who may utter their eternal names.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I: Truth of the World* trans. Adrian J. Walker, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) 17.

²⁸ “In the act of creation, I am given to myself as ordered by and toward love, in a filial ...order that is inscribed in my flesh. The human other ... is thus also given to me together with the gift of myself.” Op cit. 228.

a way of relating that essentially relies on the notion of gift. In addition, if the most fundamental human act is grateful receptivity both of oneself in a truly filial response of love and of the other human person as given by God to me for a fruitfulness of engagement, this has significant repercussions for our mediatory role as Church, in the exercise of spiritual authority.²⁹

This love that brought each one of us into being, that loved us into existence from all eternity is both the reality of our own life and the reality of the witness that we are called to share with those with whom we live and work and with all with whom we engage. Therefore, it must be a fundamental disposition, especially for all those who exercise authority within the Church, for it is the ground of the mediation that characterizes the life of the Church. So important was this understanding for Pope Benedict XVI that his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, elaborated the reality of “the love which God lavishes upon us, and which we, in turn, must share with others.”³⁰

These others are the ‘neighbours’ referred to in the great commandment of love of God and love of neighbour. As the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) makes evident, anyone who needs us and to whom we can offer assistance is our neighbour. As Pope Benedict draws to our attention, the Last Judgment scene³¹ presented in (Matthew 25: 31-46) makes clear that the criterion for judgment concerning the worth of any life is the presence or absence of love, which expresses itself in loving deeds.³² There is an irrevocable bond between love of God and love of neighbour. Thus, we can see that love is not a mere sentiment but rather the outworking of the love of God that has been experienced and must be shared. In God and with God, we are called to love also those we do not like, those who are hostile to us, and even those we do not know.

²⁹ This question of authority is explored in depth in chapter III

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, (Washington DC: USCCB, 2006), 2.

³¹ Also represented in the Sistine Chapel, such that it is before all the electors of a new pope in any conclave.

³² “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40) Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.” Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, (Washington DC: USCCB, 2006), 15.

The Lord reminds us of his prevenient love, and this draws forth a response of love from us and enables us to wait upon the discerned word of the Lord's leading. We become aware of the divine initiative that is always present with us, and that is the sure ground on which we walk forth into the future. Once we come to the realization that God is the centre of all things as a loving Creator, we become disposed to see all things, in their very givenness, as gift. From the depths of this appreciation, we can apprehend that everything participates in the reality of the loving gratuitous generosity of God.

It is then precisely in the person for whom God asserts a primordial concern, the most vulnerable, the child, the vulnerable adult – in the history of Israel the focus on widows and orphans – that we are called to realize the greatest fecundity, in recognition of the givenness of being as gift and in the interactions we undertake. For we are called to recognize an ontological kinship more profound than any designation of ethnicity, class or clan.

The consonance and dissonance of culture

If we are to embrace this ontological kinship so fundamental to mature and non-abusive relations with others, it is important to recognize certain contemporary cultural trends that militate against such recognition. This section focuses just two of such trends. The first is the influence of technological advancement and the popularity of the so-called New Atheists.³³ The second brings attention to the seemingly contradictory signals about the dignity of the child that are sent forth in contemporary society.

Artificial Intelligence

It is, in our contemporary context, an overworked truism to say that our society is dominated by technological advances and principally in the area of communications media. This has, however, raised certain fundamental questions and specifically with regard to the safety and safeguarding of

³³ Prominent among whom are: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens.

children and vulnerable people. The advances of artificial intelligence notably in the communication sector, has caused concern. Though Balthasar lived long before the current proliferation of devices such as sophisticated computers, cell phones and even watches that can serve as mini computers, his concern about the seductive influence on young people of television has a contemporary resonance. He spoke of young people who “assaulted by a multitude of chaotic images flitting across the screen, are no longer capable of asking questions about the meaning of life.”³⁴

The proliferation of more and more unregulated advances in artificial intelligence brought ethical concerns to the fore in discussions involving major players like Google and Microsoft along with the Pontifical Academy for Life. This resulted in the ‘Rome Call for AI ethics’³⁵ in 2020 signed by all who participated in the meeting that year in Rome. In addition, in June 2024 Pope Francis became the first Pope to address the G7 meeting on the question of AI ethics. He was concerned to emphasize the crucial role of ‘healthy politics’ in harnessing the power of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity. He stressed that any developments in artificial intelligence must keep at the forefront of policy concerns, the importance of guaranteeing fundamental human rights, promoting peace and guarding against disinformation, discrimination and distortion.³⁶ There are also key concerns about the exploitation of children and vulnerable people online through: grooming, sex-texting, webcams, and the sharing of pornographic

³⁴ He continued: “I remember one of the last lectures of Gabriel Marcel, at which, leaving his notes aside and glancing up at the ceiling, he said that watching television reminded him of seeing a tiny patch of the ocean floor through the hatch of a submarine, imagining it to be the whole world.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Test Everything: Hold Fast to What is Good*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989) 26.

³⁵ Rome, February 28th 2020. The Pontifical Academy for Life, Microsoft, IBM, FAO, the Italian Ministry of Innovation (part of the Italian Government), signed the first “Call for an AI Ethics”, a document developed to support an ethical approach to Artificial Intelligence and promote a sense of responsibility among organizations, governments, institutions and the private sector with the aim to create a future in which digital innovation and technological progress serve human genius and creativity and not their gradual replacement. <https://www.romecall.org/> accessed 15/05/2025.

³⁶ The full text may be found at; <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-06/pope-g7-artificial-intelligence-objective-neutral.html>

images. The increase incident of suicide amongst young people because of some form of cyber-bullying also make grim statistics.

Alongside these developments in technology which have brought about a radical immanentism, the popularity of the so-called New Atheists and the concurrent atheistic movements manifest a deep cultural sense that ‘truth’ and ‘freedom’ are threatened by the existence of God (or, perhaps more accurately, the Abrahamic religions’ teaching about God). Modern philosophy’s characteristic ‘turn to the subject’ valorized human reason and conceived of truth as the correspondence between ‘the world’ and the human person’s determined, innate structures for knowing the world. To know the truth of a thing, in this ‘modern’ paradigm, is therefore to have a clear and distinct concept of the thing, and therefore to overcome, as far as possible, any lack of clarity, difference or ‘otherness’ in knowing.³⁷

When this notion of truth informs discussions of human freedom, (whether freedom as an inherent property of a person or within the political realm), the understanding of an absolute truth (held by God or an earthly authority), is abhorrent to contemporary culture. The latter asserts that such a notion must somehow be opposed or resisted, since such a totalizing truth would necessarily homogenize the difference and otherness necessary for freedom. One can see how such a view is also opposed to an understanding of the gifted and given nature of being, that calls for a recognition of the mystery of creatureliness, and the truth of dependence, clearly evident in children and vulnerable adults.

While knowledge and mystery are opposed in the ‘modern’ notion of truth, it is possible to conceive of truth in such a way that mystery and ‘difference’ are an intrinsic part of it. Grounded in Jesus’ revelation of a Triune God, Balthasar has formulated a non-reductive ‘dramatic’ structure of truth that is capable of uniting independent terms into an intelligible whole, while simultaneously maintaining an abiding difference (mystery) between them.

³⁷ The reductive notion of truth also leads to significant anxiety. Amidst the media pressure to focus attention on material wealth, success and sexual pleasure as the means of self-realization, economic well-being and immediate emotional satisfaction, still there is a pervading anxiety that these foci do not provide the lasting happiness that is sought.

This is of considerable importance when trying to plumb the mystery of identity and the human person.

Contradictory cultural conceptions about children

In a seminal article, “We Are Not Our Own”³⁸, David L. Schindler addressed what he considered to be the contradictory signals that contemporary culture sends regarding the dignity of children and which one might analogously extend to anyone deemed a vulnerable person. On the one hand he states that there is a special care for children in: advanced medical treatment; a variety of education possibilities; special needs provision; access to facilities for those with specific artistic talents etc. On the other hand, there is a sense of acceptance of the right to abortion and the use of embryos for research. Clearly this is a provocative point that is being made, but it draws to our attention a dichotomy that he feels is being overlooked and that is relevant to the argument of this book because it indicates a significant ambiguity in culture with regard to children. Indeed, rather than a culture that is child-centred, Schindler asserts that the cultural situation as it concerns children is incoherent, as it is able “to recognize the dignity and rights of children only ambiguously.”³⁹

There is still a cultural ambivalence towards children, perhaps rooted in Rousseau’s romantic idealism of childhood or Kant’s view of children as unformed and animal-like and a preparation for the adulthood that is to come when childhood disappears. “Modern liberal culture links dignity with the adult power of self-conscious rationality and self-determining agency, all the while associating the dependence of the child primarily with a weakness expected to be outgrown over time.”⁴⁰ At the same time, it is generally recognized that the integrity of any culture significantly depends upon the way it responds to the basic needs of its children.

³⁸ David L. Schindler, “We Are Not Our Own: Childhood and the Integrity of the Human in a Technological Age”, in *The Generosity of Creation*, (Washington DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018) 3-31.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 7.

⁴⁰ David L. Schindler, “We Are Not Our Own: Childhood and the Integrity of the Human in a Technological Age”, in *The Generosity of Creation*, (Washington DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018) 3-31 [4].

These different representations take little or no account of children's agency, even though the notion of the agency of the child is pivotal to the various subdisciplines of the humanities, that have flourished since the end of the last century, variously named as *childhood studies*, *social studies of childhood* or *the sociology of childhood*. I suggest that it is vital that we challenge our ongoing cultural assumptions about: what constitutes real knowledge and the capacities required for reliable communication; the nature of children; and the difficulties of honest conversation about pain and suffering, even more so when it is a child that one desires above all to shield and protect from suffering. I suggest that it is possible and necessary to speak with children about their experiences, because children are knowing persons, inter-subjective subjects, indeed, communicating subjects by reason of their fundamental inter-subjectivity. While they often lack capacities for abstract formulation, children have a drive for knowledge and a gift for creative meaning-making. They are able to communicate and engage in dialogue with others, including adults, through conversation, but especially through art, stories and play. We have much to learn from children and not least because the gospel imperative is that we should pay attention to children, not just to protect them but also to learn from them.⁴¹

Conclusion

This chapter has opened the conversation of the book. It has introduced a context of fundamental theological anthropological underpinnings. It has asserted the need to reclaim the Christian vision of the human person as vital if we are to perceive something more profound about the graced integrity of the gift we have been given; and the profanity that has occurred with the

⁴¹ Indeed, David Schindler stresses that "Jesus makes becoming childlike a condition for entrance into heaven, and hence for the everlasting participation in divine life to which we are all invited. ... The human being is not only to begin as a child but also to end as one. ... The child's legitimate maturation into adulthood is a matter not so much of growing *out* of childhood, as of simultaneously, and indeed essentially, growing ever more deeply *into* childhood, such that the face of full adulthood bears an inner childlike character." David L. Schindler, "We Are Not Our Own: Childhood and the Integrity of the Human in a Technological Age", in *The Generosity of Creation*, (Washington DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018) 3-31 [8] This theme also will be explored in more depth in a later chapter. The importance of the child privileged by Christ is explored in chapter IV.

occurrence of abuse. Such a vision is also necessary to form persons (in initial and ongoing formation) in life-giving and therefore non-abusive relationships. Knowing ourselves as gift given to ourselves by God in our 'creatureliness' and knowing other human persons as gifts to us also, draws us to consider the transformative dynamic of love. It is divine love which brought us into being and calls us to a never-ending process of giving and receiving love. This love is basic to our relationship with God but also our relationship with others. Here, Christ is both the exemplar of this love and the living perspective, in whom we are both enabled to receive and to give faithful love to others. It is within the perspective of this love that we can encounter the other as gift and participate in the loving gratuitous generosity of God. From this perspective also, we are called to view the most vulnerable, for whom the child stands as an icon.

It is important not to ignore the way culture can impact upon our understanding of the human person, and the final section of this chapter raised up three significant areas. The explosion of artificial intelligence over the first quarter of the twenty-first century, particularly around communications, has raised significant ethical issues regarding the systemic lack of regulation. Over the last ten years the Catholic Church has taken important initiatives to involve the major communication multinational companies in discussions around AI ethics. The impact of AI technology on young people - where abuse can occur by peers as well as by adults - has been of particular concern. Alongside such technological development new atheistic strands have emerged that undermine the Christian vision of the human person and the ontological kinship so necessary to our truthful interactions. The final area of focus was the way in which contemporary culture is significantly ambiguous in the way in which it understands and thus treats children. Having raised themes that in each case could be expanded into a book, and that reappear in more depth in later chapters, we turn now to consider the lessons we learned from the COVID pandemic of 2020-2023 and more specifically, the need to recover a more profound understanding of the importance of relationships.

CHAPTER II

LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC AND THE RECOVERY OF RELATIONALITY⁴²

This chapter begins in the dimension of memory as we recall the experience of living through the pandemic of Covid 19. Pope Francis always insisted on the importance of memory and of remembering, for example, he said, “We must not ask people to forget” indeed “we cannot allow present and future generations to lose the memory of what happened... It is a memory that ensures and encourages the building of a more fair and fraternal future”.⁴³ For him it was necessary to keep alive the light of our collective conscience concerning what occurred in the pandemic.

The second section of this chapter moves to the important action of reclaiming relationality, recalling how important it was for people during the pandemic to be able to relate to others through the digital media, and other forms of improvisation, when it was impossible to meet in person. The power of relationships to be life-giving was self-evident during this time and this recalls the inherent relations at the heart of the Trinity. The Italian theologian Giulio Maspero is an important interlocutor in these considerations. The final section of the chapter explores the importance of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ in enabling us to appreciate the unique reality of each individual person.

⁴² An excellent resource in this area and one to which I am indebted and which I reference at different points in this chapter is by Giulio Maspero, *After Pandemic, After Modernity: The Relational Revolution*, (South Bend, Indiana: St Augustine’s Press, 2022)

⁴³ Pope Francis Letter on the Renewal of the study of Church History 21 November 2024.

Lessons learned from the Pandemic

Central to our lived experience of the pandemic of 2019 into 2023 and beyond, has been the revelation of vulnerability, fragility and the need for a robust consideration of the ‘common good’. Vast swathes of the most specifically vulnerable populations – particularly the elderly and infirm - were ravaged in the early months of the pandemic.⁴⁴ In addition, the ethnic susceptibility of some to the virus devastated certain marginal communities.⁴⁵ None of us have escaped the fear associated with the recognition of our own profound vulnerability. The poorest and the weakest worldwide were, and are, those most at risk of contracting the virus and dying and also the least likely to receive medical protection and prevention in the form of vaccine provision.⁴⁶ Our common humanity was revealed⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Italy was one of the hardest-hit countries in the early stages of the pandemic with >400,000 confirmed cases and >36,000 COVID-attributed deaths as of mid-October 2020 (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center: COVID-19 Map, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (2020))

⁴⁵ “77 studies comprising over 200,000,000 participants were included. Compared with White majority populations, we observed an increased risk of testing positive for infection for people from Black (adjusted Risk Ratio [aRR]:1.78, 95% CI:1.59–1.99, $I^2 = 99.1$), South Asian (aRR:3.00, 95% CI:1.59–5.66, $I^2 = 99.1$), Mixed (aRR:1.64, 95% CI:1.02–1.67, $I^2 = 93.2$) and Other ethnic groups (aRR:1.36, 95% CI:1.01–1.82, $I^2 = 85.6$). Black, Hispanic, and South Asian people were more likely to be seropositive. Among population-based studies, Black and Hispanic ethnic groups and Indigenous peoples had an increased risk of hospitalisation; Black, Hispanic, South Asian, East Asian and Mixed ethnic groups and Indigenous peoples had an increased risk of ICU admission. Mortality risk was increased for Hispanic, Mixed, and Indigenous groups.” *The Lancet* Volume 57101877March 2023.

⁴⁶ In September 2021, the WHO set a target of vaccinating 70% of the world population but less than 1% of the population of lower-income countries and 10% in lower-middle-income countries have been vaccinated against more than 50% of the population belonging to high-income countries. According to a report released by the United Nations (UN) on March 28, 2022, although the distribution of vaccines has risen worldwide, so has inequality. Of the 10 billion doses distributed worldwide, only 1% went to lower-income countries, which meant that almost 2.8 billion people are still waiting for their first dose. Even the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) failed to procure and allocate vaccines for lower-income countries. (. Sharing technology and vaccine doses to address global vaccine inequity and end the COVID-19 pandemic. Kavanagh MM, Gostin LO, Sunder M. *JAMA*. 2021;326:219–220. [PubMed] [Google Scholar])

⁴⁷ As Pope Francis stated: “Our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and

during this time of pandemic and brought forth in all sections of society actions of real fraternity⁴⁸ and heroism⁴⁹, alongside actions that revealed self-indulgence and moral turpitude.⁵⁰ “All is related, all is connected. Today more than ever.”⁵¹ Pope Francis stated and his assertion here is at the heart of his two social encyclicals, *Laudato Si* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020). The Holy Father also insisted that the only way to honour the sacrifice that had been made by so many in the service of others is by not forgetting the lessons that had been learned from the pandemic. Indeed, such lessons need to be the impulse towards building a deeper fraternity amongst nations and peoples.

There was a gradual emergence of what would become a world-wide pandemic. It came to common consciousness as a sickness – a seeming form of pneumonia - affecting Wuhan a city in central China early in 2020. Pope Francis prayed for the sick in an Angelus address in early February. Later that same month the virus appeared in northern Italy, and it was evident that

magazine headlines, or on the latest television show, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, ... They understand that no one is saved alone ... How many people daily exercise patience and offer hope, taking care to spread not panic, but shared responsibility.” Pope Francis, Meditation in the Time of Pandemic, 27th March 2020, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29th March 2020, 10.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, on fraternity and social friendship, October 4th 2020 speaks eloquently about fraternity.

⁴⁹ An example would be the dedication and determination of health care workers world-wide to the needs of their patients many of whom were frail and elderly unable to be visited by their families. Alongside the normal stress of their work was the escalating numbers of dying patients and the limited number of personal protective equipment available to them. The physical and mental toll for many health workers was unprecedented. Many health care workers on the front lines lost their lives, while others lost friends and colleagues.

⁵⁰ The so-called ‘partygate’ scandal in the UK would be exemplary of this. Despite clear covid lockdown rules, government ministers and notoriously the prime minister of the day engaged in parties in No. 10 Downing Street both in the garden and at other times indoors. At a time when members of the public were unable to attend their dying relatives and when the Queen sat alone at the funeral of her husband Prince Philip, this behaviour, when later revealed, resulted in a public backlash and the eventual resignation of the Prime Minister.

⁵¹ Jorge Mario Bergoglio Pope Francis, *The Autobiography*, with Carlo Musso, trans. Richard Dixon, (Canada: Random House, 2025) 214.

it had a deadly nature and it was spreading rapidly through the country and across continents. “The picture everywhere became more disturbing: people begging for help from balconies, hospitals on the point of collapse, corpses piling up.”⁵² On March 11th 2020, with 114 countries affected, the World Health Organization officially declared a state of pandemic.

Amidst the darkness of this world-wide pandemic our faith was sorely tried. Yet in the rain-soaked St Peter’s square March 27th 2020, Pope Francis presided over an extraordinary *Statio Orbis*⁵³ moment of prayer from the *Sagrato* of St Peter’s Basilica. Walking alone through the rain, without an umbrella, the figure of Pope Francis was seen by millions, vulnerable and exposed to the elements of that day, but purposefully focused on his mission to convey the loving mercy of God to all who watched that broadcast, through the many forms of media connection. It was both a universal acknowledgement of fragility and a reconciling moment of hope.⁵⁴

He took for his text the storm on the sea of Galilee when Jesus is asleep in the boat and the disciples awake him fearful that they will all drown.⁵⁵ Pope Francis said of the storm that it “exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities.”⁵⁶ The Pope drew

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The *Urbi et Orbi* (*to the city and the world*) addresses of the Pope are normally reserved for Christmas and Easter. This was an extraordinary address *Statio Orbis* due to the world crisis. It has been stated that over 11 million people watched the address from all around the world.

⁵⁴ “I walked alone, and in my heart, I could say that I felt everybody’s solitude. I felt their footsteps in mine, their feet in my shoes. In that silence I felt the echo of millions of pleas and a universal need for hope.” Ibid. 216. “I asked the Lord to banish evil with his hand, and for the gift of creativity to know how to open new forms of fraternity and solidarity, even in this situation that was unfamiliar to us. So that, in me and in the whole Church, the urgency of prayer is accompanied immediately by that of service.” Ibid. 217.

⁵⁵ Mark 4: 35-41

⁵⁶ He continued: “It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly ‘save’ us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We