

Article

What Do We Do with the Works of Scandalous Founders in the Catholic Church?

Juan Bautista Duhau 

CEFYT—Center for Philosophical and Theological Studies, Córdoba CP 5000, Argentina;
jbduhau@outlook.com.ar

Abstract: Throughout the 20th century, new religious movements (NRMs) emerged within established religions. Within Catholicism, these NRMs are known as new ecclesial movements and communities. A significant number of founders of these Catholic NRMs have been reported and found guilty of various types of abuses, including sexual abuse, abuse of power, abuse of conscience, and spiritual abuses. This article examines the repercussions of these scandalous behaviors on the foundations and institutions established by the accused founders. Firstly, we investigate how contemporary Catholic communities employ interpretations provided by traditional congregations regarding their founders in the postcouncil era. They utilize these interpretations to legitimize the charismatic founders of their respective movements. Secondly, we assess the feasibility of disentangling the accomplishments of these communities from the shadow cast by their controversial originators. Our findings advocate for the contextualization of works authored by individuals under scrutiny. This approach is presented as a more constructive and effective alternative to wholesale dismissal.

Keywords: spiritual communities; new religious movements; Catholic new movements and communities; founders; scandals; sexual and spiritual abuse; Catholic Church



Citation: Duhau, Juan Bautista. 2023. What Do We Do with the Works of Scandalous Founders in the Catholic Church? *Religions* 14: 1447. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121447>

Academic Editors: Ana Lourdes Suarez and Veronique Lecaros

Received: 20 October 2023
Revised: 7 November 2023
Accepted: 17 November 2023
Published: 22 November 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

It is very healthy to cast doubt on any mystification of authority or the excessive powers granted to certain charismatic leaders who become adored chieftains. Let's remember what has happened in recent decades with the founders of several Institutes of Consecrated Life, supposed masters of orthodoxy. (Fernández 2023)¹

The abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is not merely a series of isolated incidents involving individuals committing or concealing crimes, but rather, it is “the history of a complex institution grappling with a complicated past” (Faggioli 2023). Simplistic interpretations of the past have often depicted the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church as an issue originating primarily from celibate male clergy who engage in sexual misconduct against minors. However, the revelation of instances of abuse within predominantly lay institutions involving not only priests but also lay individuals calls this perspective into question. Reports of sexual, spiritual, power-related, and conscience-related abuses within new movements and communities introduce a novel dimension for understanding the crisis of abuse within the Catholic Church.

One element of this intricate historical context is the significance attributed during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI to new movements and communities, particularly to their charismatic founders. These new movements were seen as privileged agents of a new evangelization in a society undergoing a crisis of faith and growing disenchantment with religious institutions (Marzano 2013). However, over the course of a few years, the criminal and scandalous behavior of a significant number of charismatic founders and leaders of these movements has come to light. Consequently, questions arise regarding the role of ecclesial movements in the crisis of institutional Catholicism and the sexual abuse crisis. Only recently, prompted by the scandalous revelations of various

forms of abuse, have Catholic spiritual movements become actively engaged in discussions surrounding the global abuse crisis (Faggioli 2020).

2. Founders and Scandals in Catholic Communities Founded in the 20th Century

The term “new religious movements” (NRM) encompasses a diverse range of phenomena, including renewal movements that have emerged within well-established religious traditions, such as the new movements that have arisen within the Catholic Church (Hervieu-Léger 2000). Since its inception in the 1960s, research focused on NRMs has established itself as a distinct subfield within the discipline of the sociology of religion. This development has played a pivotal role in substantially enhancing the foundational knowledge required for a comprehensive understanding of religious movements on a broader scale (Moon 2023).

Throughout the 20th century, NRMs emerged within traditional religions, presenting a proposition for the renewal and revitalization of spiritual and communal experiences. Within the Catholic Church, this phenomenon unfolded on a global scale, initially manifesting with modest beginnings during the first half of the century followed by a surge in foundations during the latter half. This expansion commenced in Europe before radiating to other parts of the world (Suárez 2014).

In the Catholic field, these NRMs are referred to as new ecclesial movements and communities. Catholic NRMs encompass a variety of organizational forms for member assembly as well as diverse sensitivities and spiritual or religious choices. They offer rejuvenated expressions of religiosity, concretizing novel sets of practices, behaviors, and institutions that enable Catholic adherents to embody their beliefs.

The new communities received significant support from the Catholic Church hierarchy. Many bishops viewed these communities as privileged agents of the new evangelization, holding the promise of attracting numerous vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. This optimistic perspective, fueled by their ability to draw followers amidst declining Church attendance, led to a lack of vigilance regarding the actions of their founders and key leaders. Unfortunately, this lack of oversight has fostered an environment where abuses of authority have occurred, resulting in mistreatment of members concerning their conscience and spirituality and even sexually (Keul 2022).

The Catholic NRMs exhibit extensive variety and complexity, originating across diverse regions worldwide, featuring distinct categories of membership, sizes, roles within the Church, and theological orientations. Some embrace the reverberations of the Pentecostal phenomenon, linking the Catholic Charismatic Renewal experience (Freston 2012) to achievements in psychology and human relations theory. Others propose a novel monastic stream, establishing fresh monasteries that congregate monks and nuns (Palmisano and Jewdokimow 2019), or catalyzing movements championed by lay individuals intrigued by adopting ritualistic forms and adapting them to the pace of urban life (Ludueña 2017). Additionally, conservative communities emerge, perpetuating traditional liturgical forms. Moreover, numerous organizations are formed, amalgamating laypersons into currents of renewed spirituality or with specific service-oriented objectives.

Catholic new movements and communities have theologically grounded their emergence in two key categories: “charism” and “founder’s charism”. The term “charism” holds significant semantic richness, originating from New Testament texts and exhibiting noteworthy evolution in its theological significance. It is a neologism specific to religious discourse, initially denoting the gratuitous gift that God bestows upon a member of the community for the benefit of the assembly. Another theological meaning designates the ways in which the response to a personal or communal vocation is configured within the Catholic Church. The charism of a congregation or institute of religious life encompasses the nature, spirit, purpose, and character that constitute the spiritual heritage of each institution that gathers consecrated members within the Church.

Historically, this has led to the establishment of diverse religious families, united in institutes of consecrated life, composed of members who profess the evangelical counsels.

The way of life of these institutes has been termed the “charism of the institute” or “charism of the foundation”, indicating the qualities of the new religious family. The gift of the Spirit given to founders, whether men or women, to imbue them with certain capacities that render them capable of generating new communities of consecrated life within the Church is referred to as the “charism of the founders”. The new movements, communities, and novel forms of consecrated life that emerged within the Catholic Church in the 20th century are regarded as charismatic associative realities, possessing a distinct charism, with a founder as their originator.

A significant number of founders of these NRMs have been reported and found guilty of various types of abuses: sexual abuses, abuses of power and of conscience, and spiritual abuses. Several of these scandalous leaders were prominent Catholic figures regarded as spiritual mentors and prominent intellectuals. Among them are priests, deacons, religious brothers or monks, religious sisters or nuns, and laypeople (Duhau 2021).

Numerous highly significant initiators and charismatic figures have faced convictions for sexual offenses, with seventy of these establishments presenting diverse issues, as outlined by Vatican authorities (Legrand 2020). In the course of our investigations, we determined that 40 founders or charismatic figures associated with newly established foundations were identified as perpetrators of various forms of misconduct, including abuses of power, ethical violations, spiritual improprieties, and instances of sexual misconduct. Some were dismissed from their positions, others suspended from ordained ministry or declared guilty in civil or ecclesiastical proceedings; in other cases, historical investigations revealed their abuses after their death.

Among these charismatic leaders, there are notable examples. In France, there are recognized cases of a substantial number of leaders from new French communities that emerged from the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which were deeply investigated by Celine Hoyeau (2021) in a work with a very suggestive title: “The Betrayal of the Fathers.” Furthermore, in the French Catholic world, the cases of Jean Vanier (1928–2019), founder of The Arche; Thomas Philippe (1905–1993), co-founder of The Arche with Jean Vanier; and Marie-Dominique Philippe (1912–2006), brother of the former and founder of the Community of St. John, are highly relevant (Cavalin 2023; Granger et al. 2023).²

In Latin America, there exist several emblematic instances of abuse and misconduct within the Catholic Church. Notable cases include Marcial Maciel Degollado (1920–2008), the founder of the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ and the Regnum Christi Movement (Legion of Christ 2014);³ Luis Figari (1947), who served as the founder and inaugural Superior General of the Sodalitium of Christian Life; and German Doig Kingle (1957–2001), the closest collaborator of the founder and the initial leadership of the Movement of Christian Life (Figuerola Alvear and Tombs 2016, 2019, 2022, 2023).⁴

The number of cases is extensive and significant, encompassing only those instances that garnered public attention or were reported by ecclesiastical authorities. It is expected that the unveiling of these situations will continue in other Catholic NRMs.

The most relevant cases are those where the community or movement has many members, extensive geographical reach, significant economic power, and a high incidence within the Catholic Church. Furthermore, relevant cases include those in which the scandalous founder is the author of spiritual books and is therefore considered a teacher or intellectual with influence in religious culture.

In the context of these relevant cases, crucial queries emerge: Does the conduct and ideology of a founder serve to negate the merit of the establishment they initiated? How should we address the creations of these contentious spiritual leaders? To what degree might the behavior and ideology brought to light by ongoing inquiries into contemporary spiritual authors compel the invalidation of their propagation?

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that in the case of problematic founders, their “works” are not solely confined to books of spirituality; they encompass institutions, organizations, pastoral methods, models of authority, and more.

Discussions that have taken place in other contexts can shed light and provide us with some insights as investigations into charismatic leaders of the 20th century unfold. Can the work be separated from the author? This question is explored by the French sociologist Gisèle Sapiro (2020). She analyzes the interplay between the author's morality and the morality of the work, considering controversies that emerge within the realm of culture. Her work furnishes categories of analysis and conclusions to address the questions posed in our article.

Sapiro maintains that to study the relationship between the author and their work, it is necessary to analyze the production context and the horizon of expectations of the time of its creation. One of the contexts for analysis in studying the relationship between the controversial founder and their foundations is the theology of charisms and founder theology. The concepts of charisma and founder's charisma in Catholic theology are social constructs associated with beliefs and exhibit cultural and ideological differences between the present and the time when these communities were initiated.

3. Theological Context in the Foundation of New Catholic Spiritual Communities

The documents of the Second Vatican Council initiated within the Catholic Church a theological reflection on the action of the Holy Spirit; this systematic reflection gave the term "charism" a fuller meaning, not limited to extraordinary events but also encompassing the more habitual action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

In 2016, the letter "Iuvenescit Ecclesia" was published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This document, which took 16 years to develop and had limited ecclesial impact, aims to clarify the relationship between hierarchical and charismatic gifts, especially in response to the emergence of more recent associative realities that can be described as aggregations of faithful, ecclesial movements and new communities (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2016). This letter is the main theological foundation for the later intervention of Vatican authorities in the NRMs with serious difficulties and it encourages reform in the governance structures of the vast universe of new Catholic spiritual communities.

In this document, the most significant on charisms since Vatican II and a synthesis of the many postconciliar developments on this subject, the classical view of charisms is presented (Stayne 2022).

The charismatic gifts "are given to individual persons, and can even be shared by others in such ways as to continue in time a precious and effective heritage, serving as a source of a particular spiritual affinity among persons". [...] The charismatic gifts, when exercised, can generate affinities, closeness, and spiritual relationships. Through these the charismatic patrimony, originating in the person of the founder, is shared in and deepened, thereby giving life to true spiritual families. The new ecclesial groups, in their diverse forms present themselves as shared charismatic gifts. Ecclesial movements and new communities show how a determinate founding charism can gather the faithful together and help them to live fully their Christian vocation and proper state of life in service of the ecclesial mission. The concrete historical forms this sharing takes may vary; for this very reason, as the history of spirituality shows, diverse foundations may arise from a single original founding charism. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2016, § 16)

In the letter, two dimensions of charisma are recognized in close relation. On one hand, the personal nature of charisms is identified and described as the gift granted to an individual person to establish charismatic associative realities. On the other hand, the communal nature of charisms is distinguished, giving rise to this foundation with specific and distinctive characteristics.

The renewed awareness of the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church presented by the Second Vatican Council influenced the perspective on religious life. The council's work led to viewing consecrated life as part of the mystery of the Church and the People of God,

and the religious state began to be understood primarily as a charism, as a gift bestowed by God upon his Church for the common good, its growth, and its renewal.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed the value of religious life as expressed in the profession of the evangelical counsels and indicated that the Church's mission is to protect and promote "the special character of her various religious institutes" (Vatican Council II 1964, § 44). It also designated the holy founders as models and examples (Vatican Council II 1964, § 46) and entrusted the hierarchical dimension with the responsibility of ensuring that institutions within the charismatic dimension "grow and flourish according to the spirit of the founders" (Vatican Council II 1964, § 45). Furthermore, it propelled the renewal of institutions within the charismatic dimension by urging them to reclaim their original inspiration and achieve adaptation and updating (Vatican Council II 1965, § 2).⁵

With the reception of these conciliar proposals, a theology of founders was conceived as a chapter within the theology of religious life, and certain technical terms such as founder's charisma or foundation's charisma were distinguished and justified. The reception by the Vatican II prompted, during the decade of 1970–1980, the study of the charisma of the founders, carried out through general and specific research, and studies on the lives and works of various founders within different religious families (Lozano 1978).

The motivation behind these endeavors was to attain a more profound comprehension of the initiators of the religious family who had been overlooked or relegated to historical obscurity (Futrell 1971). The objective was to retrieve valuable aspects from the founding experience so that they could illuminate the present and become potent resources for discerning the mission of institutes and congregations.

Great effort was put forth by each religious family in rereading and interpreting the "original spirit of the institutes". This work had two main purposes: to faithfully guard "the mind and designs of the founders" and "to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creative and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the emerging in today's world". (Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life 2017)

The theological reflection on the founders in congregations and institutes of religious life is carried out by looking at personalities from the distant past. They are significant figures from ecclesiastical history such as Benedict of Nursia and Scholastica, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Dominic of Guzmán, and Ignatius of Loyola, to name a few. These inquiries scrutinize the founders; study the historical, social, and political context in which they established their foundations; and deeply analyze their biographies and writings to create a picture of their personalities and their governing styles. These investigations develop criteria and foundations to initiate a theology of the founders.

This impulse to rediscover the founders is manifested in a discourse that recovers the positive aspects of their figures and is constructed to highlight the exemplary nature of the initiators of religious families. In this perspective, the founders and foundresses are considered to be saints to imitate, founders to follow, teachers to heed, fathers to love, and intercessors to invoke. The founder is perceived not only as the initiator of a human mission but also as a person guided by the Holy Spirit, carrying out a task that is part of the divine salvific plan: "Love, knowledge and devotion to the Founder create a syntony with him, in such a way as to help us understand and follow his spiritual and apostolic way, by making us capable and available to the action of the Spirit" (Zago 1995).

The Theology of the Founders Applied to the New Foundations

The early postconciliar reflections developed the theology of the founders by looking to a chronologically distant past in which the founders and even the founding generation had already passed away. The work involved researching and interpreting historical data to construct a perspective on the foundational events and the role of the founder. Subsequently, NRMs use the resulting doctrine to assess a contemporary phenomenon wherein charismatic figures either live or have recently died.

In Catholic NRMs, the founder lives and is highly present in the development of the new community. The founder is the primary transmitter of the charismatic experience, the singular reference point against which to align the organization's identity with the needs of evangelization, and the unifying factor for the diverse individuals and activities that constitute the new spiritual family. Due to the plurality of vocations that shape the new community, the founder serves as the unifying element amid the diversity of callings, realities, and services within the same spiritual family (Parodi 2011).

Examining the discourses and perceptions surrounding the founders within the context of the postconciliar era and the emerging charismatic paradigms posed a challenge. This intricacy stemmed largely from the prevalent trend in the ecclesial literature, which predominantly takes the form of hagiography when discussing these founders. Leaders within emerging religious movements are, to a considerable extent, the byproducts of narratological processes or hagiographic constructions (Rothstein 2016). Works focused on these movements and their charismatic figures commonly tend to highlight their contributions to evangelization and assert their roles within the Church's framework. This is frequently accompanied by a pronounced apologetic emphasis in response to any criticisms they might face (Faggioli 2016).

The theology of the founders, developed through the pursuit of postconciliar *aggiornamento* in the older congregations and institutes, is subsequently employed to establish the leadership role of the different founders or founding groups in the NRMs. In certain instances, the inaugural leaders employ the theology of the founders to characterize their roles as initiators of NRMs. This theological discourse is used by the founders themselves to legitimize their decisions and their authoritarian and unipersonal style of governance.

The utilization of the theology of the founders enabled the construction of highly idealized pneumatic and charismatic figures identified as saintly. This justified practices of deference, favor, and unwarranted reverence towards the founders and fostered a culture of deferential obedience (Lennan 2019), wherein individuals acquiesce to the judgments of others without upholding their own. The need to legitimize the authority of the founder found, in the doctrine developed by traditional congregations, a potent discourse to support the highly idealized figure of the leader.

Traditional congregations and institutes developed the theology of the founders in a clear response to the documents of the Second Vatican Council. This generated a current of renewal and a reassessment of the life and mission of these organizations. In contrast, Catholic NRMs embrace this theological perspective for intrinsic and apologetic purposes. This includes the substantiation of the founder's centralized authority to both their internal constituents and the broader Church community. Moreover, it serves to validate the founders' autonomy within the ecclesiastical context, particularly in response to critiques emerging from diverse ecclesial quarters, such as the perception of functioning as "parallel churches".⁶

The utilization of theology surrounding the founder, without considering the context and in an ahistorical manner, constructed a charismatic idealization of the community leader within Catholic NRMs. Moreover, other factors created conditions that made abuses possible within these new spiritual communities:

1. Highly dependent relationships between the founder and disciples, based on a distorted understanding of obedience, coupled with a stringent religious culture that prohibited and penalized criticism (Donneaud 2017).
2. Neglect of fundamental norms of the spiritual tradition (separation between internal and external forums), leading to abuses even in the sacrament of confession (Zollner 2018).
3. The concentration of authority in the founder, coupled with a lack of established control and balance mechanisms, and the presence of unclear governance structures fostering ambiguous hierarchical boundaries (CIASE 2021).
4. Mentalities of "trench" or "cluster" that isolate and discredit open communication (Zollner 2018).

The final report of the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church in France (or Sauvé Report) provides important elements for reflecting on the danger posed by a false conception of charisms and their attraction, which makes them susceptible to manipulation that can evolve into dynamics of seduction and spiritual manipulation. The risk of abuse exists when excessive space is granted to personal charisma and the seduction that a founder or charismatic personality exerts over disciples under their influence. Particularly dangerous is the prioritization of a supposed action of the Holy Spirit that generates paradoxical and illusory illuminations over charity and respect for personal integrity. The experience of abusive relationships demonstrates the misguided emphasis placed on the excessive admiration of creative or pastorally influential individuals, often referred to as “charismatic” personalities. It is necessary to reflect upon the construction of relationships based on fascination, personal influence, or the special status that some individuals enjoy within the religious sphere (CIASE 2021).

John Paul II (1998), when describing the dynamics of new foundations and the role given to their initiators, spoke of the “mysterious allure of the founder”. However, considering the ongoing revelations of issues arising in the relationship with the founder as an irrefutable charismatic personality, we find ourselves obliged to reevaluate such assertions. For example, former members of the groups founded by Marcial Maciel point out that in the institutions founded by him, “the founder was a revered and unquestionable leader, qualities that were attributed to all superiors and directors” (Espinosa Méndez et al. 2023). In this manner, the utilization of the founders’ theological doctrine to rationalize the position accorded to them within the NRMs facilitated the engrossment with alluring narcissistic personas upheld by morally dubious arrangements, ultimately deflecting the imperative for critical discernment and contributing to a notable contagion (Thiel 2023).

4. Is It Feasible to Disentangle the Accomplished Foundation from the Controversial Founder?

The presence of founders marred by severe criminal, abusive, or immoral conduct leaves members of Catholic NRMs in a state of bewilderment. This situation prompts the inquiry into the role and standing they should occupy, not only in the contemporary context but also throughout historical epochs and within the trajectory of charismatic organizations that emerged under their guidance.

Currently, various strategies have been implemented within the Catholic Church by Vatican authorities or by affected movements and communities to deal with the damage caused by a criminal founder. In some cases, it is proposed to separate the community that emerged from its initiator, acknowledging their role as the founder but asserting the impossibility for their persona or their ideas to guide or dictate communal and individual actions. In other scenarios, the notion of refounding the community is put forth, deliberately leaving behind its founder and reconstructing the doctrinal and spiritual foundations that bind the community members. Lastly, in other communities, the proposition involves advocating for continuity through an overt and systematic critical examination of the historical errors that have been brought to the fore.

Is it possible to separate the work from the author? Sapiro (2020) addresses this question by examining the relationships between the author’s morality and the work’s morality in the face of controversies arising in the cultural sphere. She points out that there are two simultaneous responses.

First, it is possible to separate the work from its author. This is because the complete identification of the work with the author never occurs; the work always eludes the author. It escapes in the process of production and escapes through the path of appropriation by those who receive it; works acquire meaning because of a collective effort that requires countless intermediaries. The meaning of a work dissolves in the multiple interpretations of the individuals who receive the author’s creation, whether they are readers, followers, disciples, volunteers in a project, etc. In this sense, it is necessary to look at the medi-

ators who collaborated with the initiator and who have given practical existence to the initiated work.

This positive response is neither naive nor simplistic. It must be accompanied by a serious study of the creations of this scandalous initiator to understand and evaluate the worldviews that may have been tolerable in the context in which their endeavors were born but are now contestable (racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, or violent views).

Second, it is not possible to separate the initiator from their work because within it is conveyed a worldview and an ethical–political position that is sublimated, transformed, and hidden and which needs to be discussed openly.

One approach to the impossibility of separating the work from the author is to propose a series of warning messages for the works of these controversial authors. Sapiro believes that providing appropriate contextualization for the works of questioned authors is a more positive and effective initiative than cancellation. This would allow those who wish to access the works to understand the reasons indicating the existence of problematic and questionable content.

We will take Jean Vanier as a paradigmatic case in a still very preliminary reading of the report *Control and Abuse* (Granger et al. 2023). The revelations that caused a major scandal invite us to reexamine his writings through the lens of their relationship with that scandalous past and to explore the epistemic unconscious they have contributed to shaping. Given his role as a spiritual teacher and the wide dissemination of his ideas in the religious sphere, it is necessary to propose a series of cautionary messages when delving back into his spiritual writings. This would allow those who wish to access his works to understand the reasons that point to the existence of problematic and questionable content.

Recognizing the need to delve deeper into these analyses, we highlight the following issues. First, his works are a very personal reading of biblical texts with imaginary psychological interpretations that present distortions in favor of his own thinking. For example, in his perspective on the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth, there is an insistence on secrecy, concealment, and mystery. This persistent idea then forms the basis for the way communion between Jesus and his mother is understood, a concept that underpins an incestuous reading conducive to spiritual abuse both in Vanier’s spirituality and that of Thomas Philippe.

Second, in the development of the spirituality of communion and covenant that Jean Vanier proposes in his writings, the category of “communion” takes a prominent place. According to theological studies conducted on his work, this category quickly shifts towards nuptial tendencies that mark a spirituality of “fusion”, which became an ideological foundation for the commission of abuses in the context of spiritual accompaniment.

Third, Brock (2023) suggests that another problematic aspect of Vanier’s theological legacy resides in its deliberate and informed theological concealment of the inherent power dynamics within spiritual guidance.

Furthermore, Brock (2023) views Vanier’s use of traditional Christian language in a dual-coded manner as a matter of significant concern, with specific attention to his use of “friendship language.” What is even more troubling is his incorporation of Christian practices as a concealed means of apology and a pedagogical tool for sexualized forms of spiritual guidance. This practice runs counter to his own teachings on the significance of respecting vulnerability and engaging empathetically with those who have experienced harm.

Stephan Posner, head of the Arche International, when the report *Control and Abuse* was made public, responded to the following question in an interview:

“What would you say to someone who says, «I don’t care about all these stories, I have received a lot from Jean Vanier, and I don’t want to keep these news in my memory? » Posner replied: “I would tell them that they are denying reality. I believe that our path as men and women is to confront reality and fully embrace it as it is. Therefore, I would recommend integrating everything that has been

discovered about Jean Vanier into the way we consider him because it cannot be postponed or ignored.” (Posner 2023)

5. Conclusions

An unconsidered reality within the theological doctrine concerning founders in the Catholic Church is the existence of uncomfortable or scandalous founders. These initiators, due to serious criminal, abusive, or immoral behaviors, perplex both their followers and ecclesiastical authorities when it comes to determining their place or status both in the present and in historical and future contexts of the charismatic organizations that emerged under their leadership.

This issue is relevant for reflection within the framework of new movements and associations that have faced revelations of abuses committed by their founders and significant charismatic figures in recent years within the Church. We believe that one of the strategies to prevent the future rise of individuals of enigmatic allure is to promote a reasoned and reflective discourse capable of explaining the appeal of certain leadership within the Church.

A historical perspective, in harmony with the theological principle of incarnation, is indispensable for the examination of the founders and the outcomes of their endeavors. Frequently, lurking behind spiritually revered figures, one encounters disembodied theologies of grace, where the attribution of causality for all occurrences rests exclusively upon the actions of the Holy Spirit with no consideration of human will.

The abuse of power by the founder is analogous to the abuse of power by the clergy, as both are considered “pneumatic,” charismatic, and vocational figures. The same practices of deference, approval, and undeserved reverence inherent in the Catholic doctrine of priesthood are found in the theology surrounding founders as charismatic figures. This entails the collective construction of an ecclesiastical elitism, erroneously grounded in the theological category of charisma, which provides fertile ground for abuse. This elitism imparts a sense of exceptionalism that allows them to consider themselves exempt from complying with ecclesiastical and even civil norms (Abellanosa 2020).

The experience of the abuse crisis elucidates that the authority vested in a founder or charismatic person should not assume the characteristics of a private authority, devoid of external references and controls, even when it is ostensibly legitimized through spiritual claims grounded in charisma or the divine grace associated with one’s ecclesiastical status or role. Contemporary examinations of authority within Catholic NRMs find it misguided to assign the founder the exclusive role of interpreting a charisma or to misconstrue the idea that pneumatic authority or charismatic grace bestows upon them an exemption from the norms articulated in the universal Church law (*Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* 2017).

Regrettably, the undue acclaim of purported innovation in their pastoral methodologies coupled with a substantial following during a period of Catholic Church membership decline facilitated the hierarchical authorities in intensifying the cultivation of an environment characterized by ecclesiastical elitism around the founders. Consequently, the Church chose to dismiss the limited historical regulatory mechanisms that were in place to monitor these charismatic figures, viewing them as obstacles to the innovative establishment of new foundations.

The complex journey of the Catholic Church in France, marked by the reception of the Sauvé Report (CIASE 2021), indicates potential pathways to foster a healthy future for Catholic NRMs. Following the report’s publication, working groups have been established to deliberate on how to implement the recommendations proposed by the CIASE. The novelty and hope of these efforts stand out for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, the working groups are composed of 50% women and 67% laypersons, include one or more victims, and are coordinated by lay faithful. Secondly, critical issues are being explored, such as spiritual charisms, essential mechanisms for supervising and controlling groups that arise from specific charisms, systems of governance and authority that incorporate multiple

levels of oversight and transparency, and the relationship between pastoral effectiveness and best governance practices (Thiel 2023).

Finally, we wish to share some reflections on the feasibility of separating the works of scandalous or criminal founders, acknowledging the complexity of the circumstances surrounding the Catholic Church.

At times, the Catholic hierarchy has chosen to suspend the activities of contentious NRMs with scandalous founders. These cases often involve smaller NRMs with limited geographical presence, a relatively small membership, and numerous challenges in terms of restructuring their operational and governance systems.

However, the situation becomes significantly more intricate in instances where the creations of founders encompass a wide range of activities, hold substantial influence in both civil and ecclesiastical realms, and encompass spiritual texts, pastoral proposals, and educational and social works.

In these more complex cases, our findings advocate for the contextualization of the works created by individuals under scrutiny. This approach is presented as a more constructive and effective alternative to wholesale rejection. This would allow those who engage with their creations to comprehend the reasons indicating the existence of problematic and questionable content. Given that these endeavors involve many individuals engaged in numerous educational, social, and pastoral projects, carrying out processes of cancellation or total oblivion of their contentious origins is unfeasible.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, the recently appointed Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, made statements about the relationship between abuse, clericalism, and synodality on his Facebook profile. There, he made the following statement in Spanish: “Es muy saludable poner bajo sospecha toda mistificación de la autoridad, o las excesivas atribuciones que se dan a ciertos líderes atractivos que se convierten en caudillos adorados. Recordemos lo que ha ocurrido en las últimas décadas con los fundadores de varios Institutos de vida consagrada, supuestos maestros de ortodoxia” (Fernández 2023).
- ² The report titled “Control and Abuse: Investigation on Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier, and L’Arche (1950–2019)” is the outcome of the survey conducted by the Study Commission appointed by L’Arche Internationale in the autumn of 2020. This survey aimed to uncover the history and motivations behind the founding of L’Arche, as well as to identify the cultural and institutional dynamics within L’Arche that may have enabled instances of abuse. The general conclusions of the report indicate that the work carried out enables us to analyze the mechanisms deployed by Thomas Philippe and Jean Vanier themselves from within. These mechanisms include influence, sexual abuse, collective delirium, theological corruption of fundamental Christian concepts, spiritual deviation, manipulation, and incestuous representations of relationships between Jesus and Mary. The report is extensive and the diagnosis may appear severe, but it is supported by very strong evidence (Granger et al. 2023). Furthermore, starting in the spring of 2019 and echoing the voices of the victims, the media brought to light the sexual abuses committed by Thomas Philippe and Marie-Dominique Philippe over the span of decades against numerous consecrated women and lay individuals who were under their canonical or spiritual authority. These blood brothers and religious figures emerged as the source of a scandalous gnostic and sectarian deviation while concealing their criminal actions. This revelation significantly rocked the foundations where they held influential positions (Tixier 2023). The conclusions of this work were fully published in the book *The Case: The Dominicans Confront the Scandal of the Philippe Brothers* (Cavalin 2023).
- ³ The Legionaries of Christ Congregation has acknowledged the extremely serious and objectively immoral behaviors of Marcial Maciel Degollado, which included the abuse of underage seminarians, immoral acts with adult men and women, the arbitrary use of his authority and assets, excessive consumption of addictive medications, and presenting writings published by third parties as his own (Legion of Christ 2014).
- ⁴ The Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, also known as the Sodalitium of Christian Life (SCV), was established in 1971 by Luis Fernando Figari and a group of conservative Catholics in Peru. Its membership primarily consisted of lay ministers who resided together

in communal settings. Investigations into the Sodalitium began to uncover significant deficiencies in the leadership of the organization, implicating Figari and his closest associate German Doig, among others. In 2010, Peruvian journalist Pedro Salinas, a former Sodalicio member, accused Figari and other leaders of physical, psychological, and sexual abuses (Salinas 2015, 2022). In response, the Sodalicio established a special commission that conducted interviews with over fifty current and former members, subsequently publishing a final report confirming the allegations (Comisión de Ética para la Justicia y la Reconciliación 2016). Figari was sanctioned by the Vatican in 2017 and is now prohibited from having any contact with the communities he founded. The Sodalicio acknowledged 66 victims and allocated nearly USD 2.6 million to a fund for their support (Figueroa Alvear and Tombs 2016, 2019, 2022, 2023).

⁵ For all Church documents, I utilize the Vatican's own English translations where available.

⁶ The favorable perspective of Pope John Paul II regarding the contribution of new movements to evangelization in secularized societies did not garner unanimous support from all local church leaders. During the 1987 Synod on the Laity, significant members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy articulated viewpoints that posed challenges. Notably, Cardinals Martini, Lorscheider, and Tomasek referred to these movements as "parallel churches", presenting an alternative viewpoint that diverged from the positive stance advocated by the Pope (Faggioli 2016).

References

- Abellanosa, Rhoderick John S. 2020. Abuse, Elitism and Accountability: Challenges to the Philippine Church. *Asian Horizons* 14: 361–80.
- Brock, Brian. 2023. The Troubled Inheritance of Jean Vanier: Locating the Fatal Theological Mistakes. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36: 433–56. [CrossRef]
- Cavalin, Tangi. 2023. *L'affaire, Les Dominicains Face au Scandale des Frères Philippe*. Paris: Cerf.
- Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église. 2021. Les violences sexuelles dans l'Église catholique. France 1950–2020, Rapport de la commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l'Église. Available online: <https://www.ciase.fr/medias/Ciase-Rapport-5-octobre-2021-Les-violences-sexuelles-dans-l-Eglise-catholique-France-1950-2020.pdf> (accessed on 19 November 2023).
- Comisión de Ética para la Justicia y la Reconciliación—"Informe Final". 2016. Available online: <https://comisionetica.org/blog/2016/04/16/informe-final/> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2016. *Iuvenescit Ecclesia: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding the Relationship between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church*. Vatican City: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160516_iuvenescit-ecclesia_en.html (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. 2017. *New Wine in New Wineskins. The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Available online: <https://www.vitaconsacrata.va/content/dam/vitaconsacrata/LibriPDF/Inglese/New%20Wine%20in%20new%20Wineskins.pdf> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Donneaud, Henry. 2017. Liberté et obéissance dans les Communautés nouvelles. *Communio* 42: 39–52. [CrossRef]
- Duhau, Juan Bautista. 2021. Revisión y actualización de la teología de los fundadores a partir de la crisis de los abusos. *Teología y Vida* 62: 46–49. [CrossRef]
- Espinosa Méndez, María Eliana, Susana Barroilhet Costabal, Macarena Vargas Larraín, Francisca Ruiz Moreno Navarro, Daniela Muñoz Hinrichsen, Rosario Correa, Lucía Ruiz Moreno Navarro, María José Portales Donoso, Aura Escudero, María José Peña, and et al. 2023. Carta Abierta de un Grupo de ex Consagradas. Santiago de Chile. Available online: <https://www.scribd.com/document/669279581/Carta-ExconsagradasOK> (accessed on 16 September 2023).
- Faggioli, Massimo. 2016. *The Rising Laity: Ecclesial Movements Since Vatican II*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.
- Faggioli, Massimo. 2020. Ecclesial Lay Movements in 21st-Century Global Catholicism: Open Questions in light of the Sex Abuse Crisis. *Japan Mission Journal* 74: 75–86.
- Faggioli, Massimo. 2023. Chapter 16: The Need for the Historiographical Approach to Understand and Address the Sex Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church. *Journal of Moral Theology* 12: 265–80. [CrossRef]
- Fernández, Víctor Manuel. 2023. Abuso, Clericalismo y Sinodalidad. Facebook. Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/victormanuel.fernandez.378> (accessed on 16 October 2023).
- Figueroa Alvear, Rocío, and David Tombs. 2016. *Listening to Male Survivors of Church Sexual Abuse: Voices from Survivors of Sodalicio Abuses in Peru*. Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago. Dunedin: University of Otago. Available online: <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7053> (accessed on 16 September 2023).
- Figueroa Alvear, Rocío, and Tombs David. 2019. Lived Religion and the Traumatic Impact of Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru. In *Trauma and Lived Religion. Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Challenges*. Edited by Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [CrossRef]
- Figueroa Alvear, Rocío, and Tombs David. 2022. El abuso espiritual de las religiosas. Estudio de caso: Las Siervas del Plan de Dios. *Teología y Vida* 63: 399–424. [CrossRef]
- Figueroa Alvear, Rocío, and Tombs David. 2023. Discipline, Obedience and Abuse in the Sodalitium. *Concilium* (00105236) 4: 46–55.

- Freston, Paul. 2012. Las dos transiciones futuras: Católicos, protestantes y sociedad en América Latina. In *Religión, Política y Cultura en América Latina: Nuevas Miradas*. Edited by Parcker Christian. Santiago de Chile: Universidad de Santiago de Chile, pp. 77–97. Available online: <https://hdl.handle.net/10535/9699> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Futrell, John Carroll. 1971. Discovering the founder's charism. *Way Supplement* 14: 62–70.
- Granger, Bernard, Jeannet Nicole, Michel Florian, Mourges Antoine, Rimbaut Gwennola, and Vincent-Mory Claire. 2023. *Control and Abuse: Investigation on Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier and L'Arche (1950–2019)*. Châteauneuf-sur-Charente: Frémur Publications. Available online: https://commissiondetude-jeanvanier.org/commissiondetudeindependante2023-empriseetabus/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Report_Control-and-Abuse_EN.pdf (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Hervieu-Léger, Danielle. 2000. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Hoyeau, Celine. 2021. *La Trahison des Pères. Emprise et Abus des Fondateurs de Communautés Nouvelles*. Montrouge: Bayard.
- John Paul II. 1998. *Speech of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II Meeting with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, Saturday, 30 May 1998*. Vatican City: Vatican Council II. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980530_riflessioni.html (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Keul, Hildegund. 2022. Vulnerability, Vulnerance and Resilience—Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Violence in New Spiritual Communities. *Religions* 13: 425. [CrossRef]
- Legion of Christ. 2014. Message from the Extraordinary General Chapter of the Legionaries of Christ on the Path of Renewal We Are Undertaking, 20 January 2014. (legionariosdecristo.org). Available online: <http://www.general-chapter-communique-Legionaries-of-Christ.pdf> (accessed on 19 November 2023).
- Legrand, Hervé. 2020. Les dimensions systémiques de la crise des abus dans l'Église catholique et la réforme de l'ecclésiologie courante. *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 104: 551–87. [CrossRef]
- Lennan, Richard. 2019. Beyond Scandal and Shame? Ecclesiology and the Longing for a Transformed Church. *Theological Studies* 80: 590–610. [CrossRef]
- Lozano, Juan Manuel. 1978. Founder and Community: Inspiration and Charism. *Review for Religious* 37: 219–23.
- Ludueña, Gustavo Andrés. 2017. A worldly monasticism. New Catholic spiritualities and secularisation of monastic culture in Latin America. In *Monasticism in Modern Times*. Edited by Isabelle Jonveaux and Stefania Palmisano. New York: Taylor & Francis, pp. 137–53.
- Marzano, Marco. 2013. The 'sectarian' Church. Catholicism in Italy since John Paul II. *Social Compass* 60: 302–14. [CrossRef]
- Moon, Minyoung. 2023. Toward an integrated analysis of social movements and new religious movements research. *Sociology Compass*, e13134. [CrossRef]
- Palmisano, Stefania, and Marcin Jewdokimow. 2019. New Monasticism: An Answer to the Contemporary Challenges of Catholic Monasticism? *Religions* 10: 411. [CrossRef]
- Parodi, Virginia. 2011. *El Vínculo con el Fundador*. Florencio Varela: Schoenstatt Nazaret.
- Posner, Stephan. 2023. *Révélation sur Jean Vanier: Entretien avec Stephan Posner, 9 February 2023*. Paris: KTO Télévision. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGu4vMCCI7Q&t=6s> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Rothstein, Mikael. 2016. Hagiography: A Note on the Narrative Exaltation of Sect Leaders and Heads of New Religions. In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II*, 2nd ed. Edited by James R. Lewis and Inga Tøllefsen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford Handbooks (2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, 7 July 2016).
- Salinas, Pedro. 2015. *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados: Todo lo que el Sodalicio no quiere que sepa*. Lima: Planeta.
- Salinas, Pedro. 2022. *Sin noticias de dios. Sodalicio: Crónica de una impunidad*. Lima: Pedro Salinas.
- Sapiro, Giselle. 2020. *Peut-on dissocier l'oeuvre de l'auteur?* Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Stayne, John. 2022. Post-Conciliar Developments in the Catholic Doctrine of Charisms: Lumen Gentium and Iuvenescit Ecclesia Compared. *Irish Theological Quarterly* 87: 192–211. [CrossRef]
- Suárez, Ana Lourdes. 2014. Nuevos movimientos y comunidades eclesiales "católicas" ¿Qué renuevan? *Sociedad y Religión: Sociología, Antropología e Historia de la Religión en el Cono Sur* 24: 92–131. Available online: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=387239045005> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Thiel, Marie Jo. 2023. Et voici que l'Œuvre en ligne directe avec le Ciel devient l'Affaire: Des abus spirituels et sexuels «invraisemblables». *Revue D'éthique et de Théologie Morale* 320: 103–15. Available online: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-{}-{}2023-4-page-103.htm> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Tixier, Nicolas. 2023. Communiqué du frère Nicolas Tixier, o.p., 30 February 2023. Available online: <https://dominicains.fr/les-dominicains-face-au-scandale-des-freres-philippe/> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Vatican Council II. 1964. Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Vatican City: Vatican Council II. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Vatican Council II. 1965. Perfectae Caritatis: Decree on the adaptation and renewal of Religious Life. Vatican City: Vatican Council II. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html (accessed on 16 August 2023).

- Zago, Marcello. 1995. Renewing ourselves in the charism of Eugene de Mazenod. Letter to the Oblates in First Formation. Rome. Available online: <https://www.omiworld.org/wp-content/uploads/RENEWING-OURSELVES-IN-THE-CHARISM-OF-EUGENE-DE-MAZENOD.pdf> (accessed on 16 August 2023).
- Zollner, Hans. 2018. Las heridas espirituales del abuso sexual. *La Civiltà Cattolica Iberoamericana* 2: 51–61. Available online: <https://www.laciviltacattolica.es/2022/01/28/las-heridas-espirituales-causadas-por-los-abusos-sexuales/> (accessed on 16 August 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.