Remaining with the Wound: Counter-Rituals of Care and Collective Healing after Clerical Betrayal

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Abstract: In 2010, when accounts of clerical abuse in Belgium were finally made public, the Church's long-standing claim to offer care came under sharp strain. Stories that had circulated quietly for years suddenly had to be faced in full daylight. In the months that followed, some parishioners went to their local parishes and asked that a brief note of de-baptism be added to the register. The gesture was modest, yet it marked an apparent refusal of unaccountable belonging and an effort to defend the conditions required for ethical and spiritual repair.

Analysis of institutional discourse together with longitudinal records of de-baptism requests from 2005 to 2015, reveals a pronounced and sustained increase in withdrawals following the public disclosures. The reactions in France, Italy, and Taiwan show just how much the surrounding culture and bureaucracy matter. In France and Italy, people usually make their decision known through the formal channels already in place. Taiwan is another story. There, dissent is often expressed face-to-face—through vigils, short marches, or quiet moments of mourning that refuse to let the memory fade.

Taken as a whole, these cases show that apologies or symbolic gestures do very little to heal the damage caused by institutional betrayal. What actually makes a difference is structural change—being honest about what happened, widening participation in decision-making, and giving people reliable ways to raise concerns.

Keywords: de-baptism; cultural trauma; counter-ritual; politics of care; healing; accountability.

1. Introduction

The Adriaenssens Commission's 2010 report in Belgium brought hundreds of clerical-abuse testimonies into public view—accounts long kept private. Their release broke with the familiar image of the Church as a protective institution and made it clear that the failures were systemic, not isolated. As survivors spoke, the depth of pastoral breakdown became impossible to ignore, raising a troubling question: how can healing begin when the institution charged with care becomes the source of harm?

In the months after the report, many Catholics went to their parish offices and asked their priests to add a brief de-baptism note to the register. Even though baptism cannot be undone in sacramental

terms, the request showed a deliberate step back from the community and revealed how much the trust holding that bond had worn down. Moreover, once parish staff entered the note into the book, the institution could no longer ignore the protest—or the hurt behind it.

These actions suggest that healing sometimes begins through refusal, especially when stepping back is the only way to preserve the moral conditions required for genuine care. This study approaches these responses through the idea of counter-ritual care, which describes how people redirect or unsettle the very rituals that once anchored belonging—through de-baptism, shared lament, or public witness.

Drawing on discourse analysis of institutional narratives and longitudinal data on de-baptism requests from 2005 to 2015, the study identifies a pronounced and sustained rise in withdrawal following the disclosures. A comparison with France, Italy, and Taiwan places the Belgian case within a broader context. In France and Italy, leaving the Church usually involves formal legal steps that have emerged from long debates over privacy. Taiwan presents a different picture. Because official documents seldom list a person's religion, responses to that question tend to surface in communal settings—small evening vigils where people from different traditions stood together in grief and mutual support. These contrasts show that the meaning of "care" varies across social settings, particularly when an institution has lost the trust of those it meant to serve.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1. De-Baptism in the Contemporary Landscape

In several places, the public release of clerical-abuse stories over the last two decades has changed the way many Catholics think about their Church and the moral ground it stands on. As these long-hidden stories surfaced across Europe, people began taking a harder look at Church leaders and asking what actually holds trust in place.

One notable response has been the growing number of de-baptism requests in countries such as Belgium, France, and Italy. While journalists often read these requests as proof that people are turning secular, scholarship on nonreligion shows that the choice to leave a religious institution today often grows out of moral judgment rather than disbelief (Day, 2011; Lee, 2015; Bullivant, 2019). In these situations, stepping away becomes a public act—driven by trauma, protest, and the demand for accountability—rather than a formal rejection of theology.

This following section draws on four strands of scholarship—cultural trauma, exit-as-voice, ritual theory, and care ethics—to develop a conceptual framework for interpreting de-baptism as a morally charged response to institutional betrayal.

2.2. Cultural Trauma and the Public Recognition of Harm

Cultural trauma theorists give us ways to see how harm moves from quiet, individual suffering into something a community comes to recognize as a fracture in its collective identity. According to Alexander (2004), a community experiences trauma when it interprets an event as a fundamental injury to its social fabric.

In Belgium, the Adriaenssens Commission hearings made public a great deal of testimony about clerical abuse ("No congregation escaped Belgian sex abuse," 2010). The disclosures pushed people to rethink what had long been treated as individual lapses, instead pointing to a more systemic breach of the Church's pastoral duty.

Once the stories were out in the open, the ground shifted. Silence started to resemble complicity, and being part of the Church came with questions that had not been asked before (Freyd & Birrell, 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2013). It is in that charged atmosphere that de-baptism took hold, as people tried to decide what responsibility looked like.

2.3. Withdrawal as Voice in the Wake of Betrayal

Hirschman (1970) drew a line between leaving an institution and speaking up from within it. He treated them as separate moves. However, later writers have pointed out that walking away can, in some situations, say as much as open protest, especially when others do the same or when the act carries obvious symbolic weight (Hoffmann, 2010).

De-baptism in Belgium followed this pattern. Leaving did not signal a loss of concern; it showed just how much the Church's moral failings unsettled many Catholics (Bullivant, 2019). The baptismal register played an important role here. Someone whom the institution has hurt may turn to small gestures that force the harm back into view or try to restore the moral boundaries that were crossed. Several studies on religious leaving also point out that stepping back can be an ethical stand rather than a loss of belief (Day, 2011; Lee, 2015). After trust has been damaged, exit can speak for itself—it becomes a way to make a moral point.

2.4. Ritual and Counter-Ritual: Reworking the Meaning of Belonging

A rite is not only about moving from one phase to another. It also spells out the moral framework and the relational ties a community takes for granted (Bell, 1992; Turner, 1969/2011). Counter-rituals take those same elements and bend or reverse them, making it difficult to ignore the ethical problems or inconsistencies within the group (Grimes, 2014; Kapferer, 2004).

De-baptism in Belgium followed a similar pattern. Walking away from the Church was not a sign of apathy. It signaled the extent to which the Church's moral breakdowns had shaken many Catholics (Bullivant, 2019).

In this context, the baptismal register assumed symbolic importance. When people feel harmed by an institution, they often seek small but meaningful gestures that force the injury back into public view or that attempt to restore the moral boundaries they believe were violated. A person who makes such a request ends up in an odd middle position—not fully outside the Church, but no longer comfortably inside it either. In that space, the terms of belonging need to be revisited. These acts demand that the injury be named, and they also call attention to the strained relationship that once made it possible for people to feel part of the Church.

2.5. Care, Responsibility, and Institutional Failure

From a care ethics perspective, care depends on responsibility and paying real attention to others (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993, 2013). Betrayal happens when an institution meant to safeguard people

fails to respond to harm—or hides it—and the resulting trauma grows out of the trust that has been broken (Freyd & Birrell, 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2013). In such cases, care does not disappear but may take adversarial forms.

2.6. Counter-Ritual Care: An Integrative Perspective

Putting these threads alongside one another makes it possible to read de-baptism as a counter-ritual care. It is a symbolic act that changes the meaning of membership after trust has been broken. By counter-ritual care, our study means gestures that interrupt customary rites—sometimes by reversing them—to keep the injury in view and to press for some form of accountability. When someone asks for a note to be put in the parish book, or turns up at a small vigil, or joins a few others in a quiet moment of lament, the gesture usually has the same feel: people try, in their own way, to hold on to whatever faith they still have, while also dealing with the disappointment that will not go away and looking, sometimes rather uncertainly, for a community they might be able to trust again.

The perspective outlined here helps us see how conversations about harm, the timing of responses, and differences across countries shape what withdrawal and repair look like in different contexts.

3. Method: Reading Ritual, Memory, and Collective Withdrawal

The method adopted here proposes to view debaptism as a symbolic form that enables people to put their concerns on display when they feel the Church has failed them. It is not treated as a phenomenon to be counted or plotted over time, since numerical measures cannot speak to the meaning the act carries (Bell, 1992; Grimes, 2014). Understanding this practice requires attention both to meaning—how harm was interpreted and shared—and to timing—how patterns of withdrawal clustered around public recognition of abuse (Alexander, 2004; Bernal et al., 2017).

The analysis draws on three sets of materials:

1. The survivor accounts gathered by the Adriaenssens Commission, which changed the way people talked about clerical abuse. People who had carried that hurt quietly—and almost out of sight—began to speak of it as a wound the Church itself had to confront.
2. Narratives in Belgian print and broadcast media between 2005 and 2015, which shaped the public reception of the disclosures and contributed to the moral intelligibility of the crisis ("Belgian child abuse report exposes Catholic clergy," 2010; "Belgian report: Suicides tied to priest abuse," 2010; Adriaenssens Commission, 2010).
3. The monthly numbers on debaptisms, which come from diocesan bulletins and various internal reports from the deKerkUit network, allowing for the observation of when withdrawal intensified, stabilized, or diminished ("Debaptism," n.d.; "A rash of requests for 'debaptisms,'" 2022).

Rather than laying out a tidy line of cause and effect, the method stays close to the events themselves and to the slow, sometimes uneven way meaning grew out of them—often moving in directions that were not straight at all: "public testimony → moral shock → ritualized withdrawal → institutional response" (Alexander, 2004; Freyd & Birrell, 2013). The analysis points to a shift in how people spoke about harm, increasingly describing it as care that had been breached. Moreover,

when someone tracks the timing of departures, they see a sharp jump right after the testimonies went public—not a slow, month-by-month rise, but a sudden spike.

The drop that comes after these lines up with the time when dioceses were setting up safeguarding offices, introducing compensation schemes, and bringing survivors into advisory positions—developments that opened the door again to meaningful participation (Belgian Bishops' Conference, 2011; "Catholic Church in Belgium to pay victims of abuse," 2011).

This analysis works from the assumption that stepping away from the institution cannot be read as mere non-affiliation. Instead, it operates as a ritualized speech act aimed at a community that has not cared as it should (Hirschman, 1970; Lee, 2015). Seen this way, debaptism works as a bodily way of asking for recognition, for accountability, and for a different ground on which to belong.

4. Findings: When the Wound Becomes Public

4.1. Testimony, Moral Shock, and the Surge of Public Refusal

When the Adriaenssens Commission report came out, it changed how the issue was dealt with in Belgium in a noticeable way. By releasing hundreds of survivor testimonies, the Commission moved clerical abuse out of private, often silent suffering and cast it as a moral problem that implicated the Church as a whole (Adriaenssens Commission, 2010; Alexander, 2004).

Belgian news coverage pushed this reframing further by emphasizing failures within the institution instead of presenting the cases as individual misdeeds ("Belgian child abuse report exposes Catholic clergy," 2010; "No congregation escaped Belgian sex abuse," 2010).

Together, the testimonies and the media response generated what Jasper (1997) calls moral shock—a rupture in the taken-for-granted moral order where silence itself appears ethically suspect. In this atmosphere, choosing not to act could be seen as helping conceal the harm (Freyd & Birrell, 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2013).

De-baptism surged directly within this climate of disruption. Diocesan records indicate that withdrawal requests rose to nearly four times their previous level immediately after August 2010, and this heightened activity continued for close to three years, as reported in “Record number of Belgians request Catholic disaffiliation” (2024) and “Belgium: 'De-Baptism' stirs up controversy” (2024)

More than a few people described their move as a moral stand rather than a change in faith. One of them put it this way: "I cannot belong to a community that refuses to see its wound."

What people wrote aligns with Hirschman's (1970) point that departing can convey more than submitting a complaint. Their words point to a loss of trust and to an institution no longer willing—or able—to hear those who speak. In that sense, de-baptism served as a ritual refusal.

It unsettled baptism's normal meaning as a sign of affiliation and brought the focus back to the moral ground on which belonging rests (Bell, 1992; Grimes, 2014). Institutional change came only after the public pressed for it over an extended period. From 2011 to 2013, the Belgian Bishops' Conference put in place national safeguarding systems, named coordinators in each diocese, established

compensation procedures, and created avenues for survivors to participate in the process (Belgian Bishops' Conference, 2011; "Belgian bishops approve compensation," 2011).

It is noteworthy that the decline in de-baptism corresponded not to changes in media coverage but to the moment these reforms were put into place. The pattern shows that survivors' growing influence over accountability efforts led fewer people to leave (Smith & Freyd, 2013; Tronto, 2013). Within this pattern, de-baptism appears less as a rejection of faith and more as a form of counter-ritual care—a refusal enacted to defend the ethical basis of communal life.

4.2. Contrasting Repertoires: Exit in Belgium and France/Italy, Presence in Taiwan

Looking across the two settings, it becomes evident that these counter-ritual practices do not take a single form. They grow out of the cultural environment and the bureaucratic rules that each society uses to sort out questions of religious identity. In France and Italy, robust data-protection laws have created institutionalized pathways for apostasy, enabling de-baptism to function as a civic mechanism for ethical refusal.

France now processes several thousand requests annually, and in Italy, the "*sbattezzo* movement" does much the same thing, relying on administrative notes as a way to send a public signal about one's relationship to the Church (Cipriani, 2014; Garelli, 2020; Introvigne, 2023; news reports, 2019, 2021).

In these systems, withdrawal is legible because it becomes part of the institutional record, amplifying its symbolic and moral weight. The situation in Taiwan looks quite different. Religious identity tends to be fluid and relational, and it is rarely recorded in official state documents (Katz & Rubinstein, 2003; Zhang, 2017).

Since there isn't any formal way to step out of the system, people turn to whatever practices make sense locally. Some gather to mourn together, and others wander into a vigil for a short while. Moments like these keep the harm from slipping away and shift some of the burden onto the broader community, not just those who were injured.

These practices allow a common space to emerge—one shaped by grief, accountability work, and interreligious forms of solidarity—without recourse to formal documentation. For all their contrasts, the Belgian mode of exit and the Taiwanese mode of presence share a similar logic. Both practices end up doing similar work.

In practice, each of these responses ends up doing similar work. They keep the harm from slipping out of sight and ensure its memory remains part of the community's life. Moreover, they also push the point that any sense of belonging, if it is to mean anything again, has to involve some form of accountability. Whether it takes the form of brief notes in a parish register or a group of people standing together in a public space, these actions nudge the community to rethink what it expects of itself after trust has been broken.

5. Discussion: Care as Conflict, Healing as Shared Labor

Lament often functions as a counter-ritual that disrupts institutional habits of turning away from painful realities and brings accountability back into sharper focus. However, these gestures do not

repair the injury and offer only limited closure. Instead, they prompt the wider community to reflect on how its moral ties have been shaped and strained by the harm that has come to light. In this sense, people sustain a sense of belonging by rebuilding it through accountable practices they can trust and recognize as genuine.

Moreover, care—often mistaken for a feeling—is, in this context, the slow and challenging work of reshaping the structures that can answer honestly to what went wrong (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993). Freyd's (1996) account of betrayal trauma suggests that recovery depends on confronting—rather than bypassing—the relational and organizational conditions that produced the wound.

The Belgian surge in de-baptism demonstrates one form of counter-ritual care—formal withdrawal forced ecclesial authorities to confront the seriousness of institutional betrayal. The wave of withdrawals did not fade quickly; it continued for more than three years and began to subside only after the Church put in place clearer safeguarding mechanisms—appointing dedicated coordinators and creating survivor advisory roles and more precise compensation mechanisms. As these forms of responsibility gradually solidified, the sense of urgency that had driven many to sever formal ties began to diminish (Tronto, 2013; Smith & Freyd, 2013). What started as a stance taken in opposition gradually shifted into a more collaborative form of care, underscoring that some measure of accountability is needed before trust, or any sense of belonging, can be rebuilt.

Taiwan unfolds a response that differs, yet remains closely intertwined with institutional harm. With few institutional pathways for stepping back from the Church, people relied instead on practices of presence—nightly vigils, interfaith gatherings of mourning, and small but steady acts of public witness.

These gatherings kept the wound in view and countered the more subtle institutional impulses to diminish or let the harm fade. The act of showing up countered that drift toward avoidance and opened a space in which memory could continue its work (Katz & Rubinstein, 2003; Zhang, 2017).

In this sense, lament was not about maintaining distance. It moved inward, drawing the community into a gentle yet steadfast nearness that quietly sought recognition. In this context, lament did not take the form of withdrawal. Instead, it moved toward the institution, drawing the community into an embodied solidarity aimed at making accountability visible.

Rather than maintaining distance, lament moved closer, drawing people into a steady yet insistent nearness that demanded recognition. Seen beside the Belgian experience, this contrast highlights the many forms community resistance can take, each reshaping the moral landscape of their life in common. Whether individuals step back or remain visibly present, such counter-ritual practices reveal the fractures that institutions often struggle even to name. They also remind us that healing does not emerge from administrative fixes alone but grows from political and relational work—work that requires genuine accountability before any meaningful repair can take shape.

By foregrounding these practices, we see how everyday actors articulate alternative grammars of care that challenge institutional narratives of closure and insist on new forms of ethical response. Having traced how communities mobilize counter-ritual practices of care, a further question arises: why have so many public narratives struggled to interpret these actions?

Common accounts draw on familiar tropes—waning religiosity, shifting media rhythms, or the assumption that people were attending to administrative matters. Such accounts are conventional, yet they sit uneasily with what actually occurred. The following section examines these interpretations in detail and shows how, in different ways, they obscure the ethical and relational claims that animated the response.

6. Alternative Explanations and the Politics of Misrecognition

Moves to diminish the weight of Belgium's recent wave of de-baptisms tend to lean on familiar themes—more secular social currents, media attention that comes and goes, or the idea that people were merely sorting out paperwork. However, none of these accounts really explain why the response came when it did, how widespread it became, or the moral language people used to justify their decisions.

Secularization theory helps explain the long, slow drift away from institutional religion in much of Western Europe (Davie, 1994; Martin, 2017). But the numbers from Belgium before 2010 point in another direction. For years, withdrawal requests moved along a slow and fairly predictable curve. What followed the publication of the clerical-abuse testimonies was something else entirely—a sharp rise that held at an unusually high level for several years ("Record number of Belgians request Catholic disaffiliation," 2024).

Alexander's work on cultural trauma argues that abrupt changes of this sort emerge when a community experiences a moral jolt, not from slow generational drift (Alexander, 2004). In this view, the de-baptism wave represents a communal answer to the stark disclosure of institutional abuse. Media-cycle theories, by contrast, offer a thin and insufficient account of what unfolded.

Research on news-attention cycles shows that media interest spikes quickly and usually fades within a matter of weeks or a few months (Boydstun, 2013). The trajectory of Belgium's de-baptism surge, however, looks nothing like that pattern: the elevated numbers persisted for nearly three years. Changes of this magnitude are far more consistent with a community jolted by a shared moral shock than with the slow, generational shifts that typically shape religious affiliation.

A bureaucratic explanation does not hold up. In Belgium, civil authorities do not record apostasy; the Church alone keeps those files. Because of that, many people who submitted the paperwork spoke about the act as taking a moral stand rather than sorting out an administrative detail ("Belgium: 'De-Baptism' stirs up controversy," 2024).

If the act were merely administrative, withdrawal would not align precisely with public testimony, nor would it decline when safeguarding reforms were implemented. These different explanations illustrate what Honneth (1995) describes as misrecognition—ways of interpreting events that hide the moral substance of a community's response.

One line of commentary sees the rise as evidence of secular drift, another as a burst of media-fueled emotion, and a third as nothing more than a record-cleanup effort. However, none of these readings captures the central point. The act of de-baptism served as a counter-ritual care, a way for personal injury to be publicly voiced in a call for accountability.

Conclusion: Remaining With the Wound

After a betrayal of that kind, a community cannot pretend that its old sense of belonging still holds. It has to redo its relationships so the wounded are not pushed aside. In Belgium, people turned to de-baptism for this reason—a counter-move that set the wound right inside the Church's documents. That action carried both refusal and care, urging the institution to face the vulnerable and to grapple with the systems that once kept the harm out of sight.

Taiwan moved in a different direction. Since stepping away from the Church publicly means little in Taiwan, people turned to simple acts of presence—keeping vigil, grieving together, and returning again and again so the wound would not drift out of sight. Those gatherings kept the memory alive and prevented the slow fading of the suffering.

Seen alongside the Belgian withdrawals, the two approaches—stepping out and staying present—both resist erasure, though in different ways. For a community to take even a small step forward, it needs to rethink the memories it carries, how it shares responsibility, and the closeness required so that the most exposed are not abandoned. Seen this way, the wound is not closed at all; it stays there.

In both contexts, the ones who carried the hurt and the people who kept company with them reached a similar understanding. Care does not wipe away the wound, and it is not a matter of returning things to how they used to be. The wound is left exposed. Paradoxically, that exposure becomes a social space in which an alternative form of belonging begins to emerge, sustained by honest conversation, explicit acknowledgment of responsibility, and shared efforts, however limited, to repair the damage done.

AI Usage Disclosure

This article was drafted and developed by the author. OpenAI's GPT-5.1 was used solely for language polishing, structural refinement, and formatting support. All research decisions, analytical claims, arguments, and interpretations originate entirely from the author.

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