

On the Impracticality of Lists

LISTS OF PRIESTS FORM THE documentary infrastructure of clerical sexual abuse.¹ The Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson, Arizona, released the first of these lists on 21 June 2002. Part Church file, part police record, with the strong feel of a confession, its fifteen names set out “to deal as openly as possible [about clerical sexual abuse] with members of the [Roman Catholic] community.”² Several more gestures toward transparency followed, with 158 dioceses and 24 religious order provinces in the United States releasing their own lists.³ Others have appeared around the world: in Argentina, Canada, Mexico, India, Colombia, Australia, Chile, and several European countries. Some of these lists echo the purported earnestness of the first list from Tucson, while many more exist merely to comply with the nonmonetary requirements of legal settlements, and yet all of them raise fundamental questions about the form and function of these lists as well as the ends that they might serve. For me, these questions are grounded and urgent, because of my own research on clerical sexual abuse in Central America. Over the years, during the course of this fieldwork, I have encountered many such lists, but none as striking as the one that Father Guillermo handed me inside his prison cell.

Compiled deep inside the Centro de Detención Preventiva de Guatemala, a desperately underfunded prison facility operating at over 500 percent capacity, the title of Father Guillermo’s list is itself something of a list. Translated from Spanish into English, it reads: “Guatemalan clerics with problems of sexual abuse, homosexuality, domestic violence, paternity claims, and other issues.” Its fifty-two entries include the names of Roman Catholic priests and bishops as well as the full legal name of Father Guillermo himself. “I didn’t want to just accuse priests from inside this cell,” he explained amid the thump of reggaeton music, “so I put myself on the list [at number fifteen].”

Several years into a forty-year prison sentence for the sexual abuse of minors, Father Guillermo still cuts a priestly figure. He has greying temples, wire-rim

ABSTRACT Lists of Roman Catholic priests form the documentary infrastructure of clerical sexual abuse. Based on an ethnography of one such list—a document compiled deep inside a Central American prison by a convicted cleric—this essay argues that such lists are, formally speaking, impractical. Impracticality names the way in which some lists may appear to be flat and referential but in fact are more concerned with evoking affects. It is an ambiguity that Church leaders manipulate to conjure the feeling (but not the fact) of transparency. *REPRESENTATIONS* 161. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1–19. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.161.1.1>.

glasses, and comfortable shoes. He also has a stash of theology books resting at his bedside, but he has no obvious access to source materials. So I asked him how he put together his list. Father Guillermo answered me in a matter-of-fact way: “I made it from the confessions that I’ve heard from my fellow priests.” In confessing this sin to me, in a prison cell roughly the size of a confession box, this priest signaled what I have come to understand as the impracticality of not just his list but almost every one of these lists of suspected priests.⁴

These lists are impractical in an immediate sense: their slapdash methodologies rarely allow them to set the record straight. They are hardly ever complete. But impracticality here is also a formal property: it signals an ambiguity that can sow confusion and doubt. This essay, in response, engages both the mechanics and the politics of this impracticality by lingering ethnographically on a distinction between so-called practical lists (discussed in part 1) and poetic lists (parts 2, 3, and 4). Practical lists connect signifiers with signifieds while poetic lists are affective: their recitation conjures effervescence.⁵ A third kind of list—what I call an impractical list (part 5)—hovers tactically between the referential and the effervescent to evoke the feeling (but not the fact) of transparency. The net effect is the manipulation of not just genre but also justice—when, for example, Church leaders promise their people a (practical) list of suspected priests but instead deliver a (poetic and ultimately impractical) litany of sinners.

Part 1: Practical Lists

Father Guillermo spends much of his time making lists. One is an encyclopedic account of animals that appear inside the prison, with the taxonomic rank of biological classification organizing his inventory. His entry for the Guatemalan deer mouse goes something like this:

Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Class	Mammalia
Order	Rodentia
Family	Cricetidae
Subfamily	Neotominae
Genus	Peromyscus
Species	Peromyscus guatemalensis

Father Guillermo also maintains a list of foodstuffs, which allows him to navigate a jumble of plastic containers piled high against one of his walls:

- | | | |
|-------------|-----------|-----------------|
| 1. Corn | 6. Salt | 11. Rice |
| 2. Beans | 7. Pepper | 12. Dried chili |
| 3. Clove | 8. Sugar | 13. Garlic |
| 4. Cinnamon | 9. Ginger | 14. Coffee |
| 5. Pasta | 10. Chili | 15. Flour |

He also keeps close track of my visits. “Today is your sixteenth trip,” he told me one Saturday morning. “I make a note every time you visit me. I list what we talked about, what you brought me, what you wore.” This might have unnerved me, if I wasn’t also doing the same. In an old fieldwork heuristic, I keep a sprawling list of items that appear inside Father Guillermo’s prison cell, adding ten new entries every time I visit him.⁶ My first ten were eclectic:

- | | |
|-------------|----------------------|
| 1. Mattress | 6. Pen |
| 2. Chair | 7. Lamp |
| 3. Bible | 8. Rosary |
| 4. Bowl | 9. Paper |
| 5. Crucifix | 10. Can of bug spray |

But as my visits added up, so too did the entries, eventually producing multiple lists that I ended up organizing by category. A partial list of these lists includes:

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Foodstuffs | 6. Items of clothing |
| 2. Pieces of furniture | 7. Reading materials |
| 3. Pest control | 8. Religious paraphernalia |
| 4. Medicines | 9. Wall hangings |
| 5. Writing utensils | 10. Legal documents |

This tenth list has always been the most important to me because my visits (as Father Guillermo knows well) are motivated. I have an anthropological interest in his list of victims—young girls whom he:

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Admired | 6. Threatened |
| 2. Befriended | 7. Gaslighted |
| 3. Groomed | 8. Molested |
| 4. Manipulated | 9. Discredited |
| 5. Photographed | 10. Raped |

All of these lists, both his and mine, are by definition “practical,” meaning that “they confer unity on a set of objects that, no matter how dissimilar, are subject to a *contextual pressure*.”⁷ Umberto Eco emphasizes the pressure of context to signal the internal, seemingly centripetal force of practical lists: how they pull items together in the appearance of order and then corral them with what another scholar calls “the gentle knot of the comma.”⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the defining characteristics of practical lists are themselves capable of being organized by the form itself. A preliminary list of these characteristics would include:

1. Minimal: Neither prose nor poetry, often devoid of context, there are few forms of writing as sparse as a practical list.⁹
2. Referential: Practical lists connect signifiers (words on a list) with signifieds (people and objects in the world).
3. Responsive: Never assembled without cause or purpose, practical lists are always an answer to a question.¹⁰
4. Elastic: The practical list has no force of closure; it is always possible to add yet another entry or subtract one more item.¹¹
5. Spatial: Either vertically lineated or horizontally bounded, practical lists take up space.¹² They spread across a page.
6. Flat: While there can be bad, chaotic, and nonnormal lists, the emotional force of a practical list tends to be “lowly, mechanical, dull.”¹³
7. Secular: Practical lists are modes of representation stripped of enchantment and effervescence.¹⁴
8. Descriptive: Practical lists are not arguments. They have no thesis, and they lack the capacity to correlate entries into tables, diagrams, maps, and graphs.¹⁵
9. Fast: Easily translated, quickly digested, and readily circulated, practical lists are an exceedingly efficient means of communication.¹⁶
10. Analogical: The abstraction of a shared characteristic can place even ostensibly dissimilar items on the same list.¹⁷
11. Interpellative: The act of assembling a practical list also serves to assemble the listmaker. As Jean Baudrillard observes about the collection of items: “It is invariably oneself that one collects.”¹⁸
12. Stable: Practical lists affirm the order of things—until they do not.

We might remember that Michel Foucault famously laughed at “a certain Chinese encyclopedia” imagined by Jorge Luis Borges.¹⁹ Under the heading “Animals,” there sat a list of such unexpected categories as “belonging to the Emperor” and “that from a long way off look like flies.”²⁰ This list evoked not only what Foucault called “the impossibility of thinking *that*”

but also, for my purposes, an ethnographic interest in how *that* could have ever ended up on paper.²¹ Foucault's sense of utter disbelief reminds us that not all lists are practical. Some are poetic: these are lists that are more concerned with feeling than knowing.²² My time with Father Guillermo, for one, made it abundantly clear that his list of fifty-two names is far more poetic than practical. Born of and structured as a confession, filtered through a thicket of sacraments and secrets, the intention of his list has never been referential. He authored his list instead to conjure a set of emotions—to convey a sense of vertigo (part 2), shame (part 3), and contrition (part 4). The utter impracticality of this exercise emerged in stark ethnographic detail whenever it became clear that his list (and these emotions) were of no use to law enforcement officials, survivors of clerical sexual abuse, or even the Vatican. All anyone has ever wanted from Church leaders is a complete and accurate list of suspected priests. All anyone has ever received is a bundle of emotions.

Part 2: Vertigo

Father Guillermo wrote the word “confidential” at the top of his list. He also told me not to share the document with anyone. He was very clear about this last point. “This [list] is for you,” he told me. His hushed tone transformed his secret into a gift, one that sought (as gifts often do) not just intimacy but also hierarchy and domination. “The handing over of wealth,” Bronislaw Malinowski writes, “is the expression of the superiority of the giver over the recipient.”²³ I assured Father Guillermo that he could trust me as I pocketed the piece of paper.

Given the stakes of our exchange, with almost every priest on his list serving a parish, I could be forgiven (perhaps) for breaking Father Guillermo's trust almost immediately.²⁴ The only thing that slowed me down was the arduous process of exiting the prison: a fantastically archaic system that gradually accounts for the day's list of visitors. There are checkpoints, pat-downs, and digital photographs—a veritable gauntlet of procedures to connect names on a list with visitors in the prison—but once outside the institution, even before my eyes could adjust to the midday sun, I hailed a taxi to take me to the offices of the Guatemalan National Police. I wanted to speak with someone in their Sex Crimes Unit.

The conversation did not go well, for a variety of reasons: Guatemala's penal code is notoriously underdeveloped; the sex crime laws that do exist largely protect women rather than children; and the prospects for justice in this postwar country are incredibly low.²⁵ Today, sexual violence in Guatemala carries a 6 percent conviction rate.²⁶ But the biggest problem proved

to be the list itself. It was of no use to the law enforcement officials with whom I spoke on that day and on every day since.

“¿Es una denuncia?” one of the officers asked me with a confused look on her face.

The term *denuncia* can be translated as “denunciation” or “accusation” but is closest to “indictment.” In an everyday context, the term might describe an aggrieved citizen issuing a public complaint against her neighbor, prompting the police to open an investigation.²⁷ Traditionally a performance enacted in front of a crowd, the practice has become slightly muted over the years. Hamstrung by bureaucracy, most governments in Latin America now require *denunciante*s to list their full legal names, permanent addresses, and current phone numbers before delivering their pleas for justice. But make no mistake: the *denuncia* is not list-like in form but rather testimonial in origin, with recognizable roots in Christian witnessing.²⁸ At least one scholar traces the practice back to the *denunciatio* of canon law in medieval Europe and speculates that the Spanish Inquisition’s legal apparatus brought the form to the Americas.²⁹

“No,” I answered the officer in Spanish, “this is a list.”

“Can you tell me how to read it?” she asked. “[Because] not all of these are crimes.” She read the title of Father Guillermo’s list out loud: “Guatemalan clerics with problems of sexual abuse, homosexuality, domestic violence, paternity claims, and other issues.” She was patient but perplexed.

I did my best, but my explanation, if I am honest, must have sounded like I was saying that some of the priests on the list belong to the Emperor and others from a long way off look like flies. The list conjured a certain impossibility of thinking *that*—because of the country’s penal code and the hegemony of the *denuncia*, for sure. There are also good reasons to suspect that law enforcement officials in this historically Roman Catholic country might protect their priests, as police have done elsewhere in the Americas.³⁰ But one of the most important reasons that Father Guillermo’s list was not “felicitous,” as J. L. Austin might say, is because his list is not practical.³¹ It is poetic.

A poetic list is less concerned with enumerating or ranking entries than with evoking an affect. “Poetic lists are *open*,” writes Eco with some emphasis, “and in some way presuppose a final *etcetera*. They aim at suggesting an infinity of persons, objects, events.”³² Eco then adds that the poetic list’s true ability is to arouse “the vertigo of infinity,” a sense that the total quantity of items that could be listed is in fact too vast to be written down. It is something of a literary take on Aristotle’s philosophical point that the reality of infinity exceeds the finite capacity of human thought.³³ Rather than ever attaining actual infinity, Aristotle insists that one can only pursue potential infinity through the act of continually adding one to the previous

number in a sequence. By doing so, one produces not only a list-like sequence of rational numbers without a final element but also, according to Eco, a kind of conceptual dizziness. Eco anchors this abstract point with a rather concrete example: the Roman Catholic litany.³⁴

A litany, from the Latin *litania*, is a series of invocations and supplications for use in church services and processions. It is as much a prayer as it is a petition, and little about it is meant to be understood. Until 1965, Roman Catholic priests celebrated church services in Latin, a language that most parishioners did not understand. Instead, the litany is meant to be felt. Its repetition of names creates a sensation: what Émile Durkheim calls collective effervescence or what Victor Turner understood to be *communitas*.³⁵ One case in point is the Litany of Saints.³⁶ Having originated around 595 with Pope Gregory (590–604), the Latin and Greek texts each offer 135 verses (V) with an additional 135 responses (R). Today scored as a musical work, with braces, clefs, and bar lines, the Litany of Saints reverberates across cavernous church interiors. One does not read this litany or even listen to it so much as feel it:

V. O God the Son, Redeemer of the world.

R. Have mercy upon us.

V. O God the Holy Ghost.

R. Have mercy upon us.

V. O Holy Trinity, one God.

R. Have mercy upon us.

V. Holy Mary.

R. Pray for us.

V. Holy Mother of God.

R. Pray for us.

V. Holy Virgin of virgins.

R. Pray for us.

V. Saint Michael.

R. Pray for us.

V. Saint Gabriel.

R. Pray for us.

V. Saint Raphael.

R. Pray for us.³⁷

The litany includes a total of fifty-two saints—not to offer an encyclopedic account of these figures (the Roman Catholic Church formally recognizes more than 3,000 saints) but to orchestrate a feeling that “the quantity

of things is too vast to be recorded.”³⁸ The moral logic of this feeling appears in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seven times seventy times.”³⁹

As critics note, the parable does not suggest that Peter should forgive his neighbor as many as (but no more than) 490 times but rather that he should forgive someone an infinite number of times.⁴⁰ Here, the number 490 “enumerates something that eludes our capacity for control and denomination.”⁴¹ The same can be said of the number fifty-two—for both the Litany of Saints and Father Guillermo’s list of fifty-two clerics. His Litany of Sinners, so to speak, is not meant to be exhaustive so much as exhausting: his list performs the aesthetic and affective work necessary to invoke the feeling that the actual number of abusive priests in Guatemala is too vast to be recorded.

“There are other [priests] that I didn’t put on the list,” Father Guillermo told me: “There are many more.”

Lord, have mercy.

Part 3: Shame

Father Guillermo’s cell measures 152 cm by 203 cm. I know this because I once counted my steps, heel to toe, and then I did the math in my notebook. There are no windows, and a rickety loft holds his mattress very close to an already squat ceiling. “It’s like a catacomb,” he once joked. Underneath his bed, we sit on red plastic chairs. The space is so tight that we have to face each other directly, and this means that the tips of our knees sometimes touch. At first, these moments of physical contact caught me by surprise, shocking me into attention, but now I hardly notice them.

We mostly read to each other, and I admit to feeding Father Guillermo a list of books that allow me to ask some rather leading questions. We first read a Spanish translation of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (“Do you think God listens to castaways?”) and then a translation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (“Aren’t we all at least a little monstrous?”), but it was Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* that struck a chord with Father Guillermo.⁴² We debated the unconscious for hours, and then we explored his unconscious. “I often dream of running down a mountainside,” he once told me. “I am running away from a village as fast as I can.”

I am an anthropologist, not a psychoanalyst, and so I do not have a therapeutic agenda when I speak with Father Guillermo about his dreams.⁴³ I am certain that a trained professional could help this priest distinguish between the manifest and latent content of his thoughts, but my ethnographic interest has never been in Father Guillermo's desires so much as in the assumptions that organize his lists. And so as we discussed castaways, monsters, and Oedipus, it became clear to me (as to him) that his list of fifty-two priests depends less on a theory of *Weltanschauung* and more on Freud's almost theological appreciation for how sexual desire structures the human condition.⁴⁴

One conversation with Father Guillermo stood out for me. Of dreams in which one is naked in the presence of strangers Freud writes that "it is only in our childhood that we are seen in inadequate clothing both by members of our family and by strangers—nurses, maid-servants, and visitors; and it is only then that we feel no shame at our nakedness."⁴⁵ Then, describing children in varying stages of undress, Freud adds that "this is why mankind [was] naked in Paradise and [was] without shame in another's presence; till a moment arrived when shame and anxiety awoke, expulsion followed, and sexual life and the tasks of cultural activity began."⁴⁶ Father Guillermo sat up in his chair when I read those lines to him. His interest could have been piqued by Freud's description of naked children ("They laugh and jump about and slap themselves"), but it was Freud's biblical references to paradise, shame, and expulsion that held his attention.⁴⁷ "A sin is a shameful act," Father Guillermo told me, "and our shame of sin is a fundamental condition of our human existence." He then asked if I was familiar with Augustine's metaphysics of concupiscence.

"Of course," I said.

Concupiscence in the Roman Catholic tradition is a consequence of original sin. Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve lived in a state of integrity: a harmonious condition in which human beings could willingly know and love God.⁴⁸ They had complete control over themselves. As Foucault explains, "if Adam wanted to procreate in Paradise, he could do it in the same way and with the same control as he could, for instance, sow seeds in the earth. Every part of his body was like the fingers, which one can control in all their gestures."⁴⁹ But then original sin permanently damaged human nature, thus casting Adam and Eve from Paradise, with concupiscence naming the body's now rambunctious desire for pleasure. After the Fall, Foucault writes, Adam lost control of himself:

His body, and parts of his body, stopped obeying his commands, revolted against him, and the sexual parts of his body were the first to rise up in this disobedience. The famous gesture of Adam covering his genitals with a fig leaf is, according to Augustine, due not to the simple fact that Adam was ashamed of their presence but to the fact that his sexual organs were moving by themselves without his consent.⁵⁰

Concupiscence is the word for those twitches of desire, but Augustine also has a term for this shame when read onto the human condition: *massa damnata*. Although it's sometimes translated as "condemned crowd," Augustine's sense of *massa* is more ontological than sociological. Better translated as "paste," as the matter out of which God made humankind, the metaphor allows Augustine to express how all human beings share in the sin of Adam.⁵¹ No one is exempt.

"Is your list of priests a *massa damnata*?" I asked Father Guillermo.

"Yes," he said. "All of these lists [of priests] are." The intention of these lists is not to enumerate individual offenders, as survivors of clerical sexual abuse have demanded, but rather to reaffirm the theological fact that all human beings (Roman Catholic priests included) are, in the words of Augustine, "one condemned mass of sin."⁵² It is a theological point that forced me to recalibrate my own referential expectations of these lists. Rather than functioning like a phone book or a ship's manifest (exhaustive, itemized, and standardized), these lists gesture toward a scale of culpability that exceeds the criminal activity of individual priests, and this is why the standards governing these lists can be so capacious. Take those lists published by 158 dioceses and 24 religious order provinces in the United States.⁵³ They vary enormously in the criteria that they use to determine who counts as an abuser and who counts as a victim, and a close reading of them makes it eminently clear that criminological precision does not matter at all:

1. Many of these lists of suspected priests use the terms *credible* and *substantial accusation* interchangeably, but some Church review boards determine credibility and then substantiate it. Others have no criteria for differentiating allegations.
2. Some of these lists only include cases of sexual abuse involving children under the age of eighteen. Others include vulnerable people, such as those with intellectual disabilities, who may have been over the legal age of consent at the time of abuse.
3. Some lists disclose the names of deceased clergy. Others do not.
4. Lists that are the result of court-ordered settlements only include priests formally named in legal complaints.
5. Some lists only name priests ordained within a particular diocese, even if a priest from a religious order sexually abused children while working at a diocesan church or a diocesan school.
6. Many of these lists only account for allegations of sexual abuse occurring within the exact geographical boundaries of a diocese. This excludes acts of sexual abuse perpetrated at retreat houses, on vacations, or on short-term mission trips.

7. Few of these lists include the names of religious brothers, religious sisters, seminarians, and laypersons, even if some of these persons have been credibly accused while serving as an agent of the Church.
8. Most lists only name priests who have been formally accused by a victim. This excludes priests caught in possession of child pornography—because there is no direct victim in these cases.

These 182 lists of suspected priests, Father Guillermo's included, are concerned less with a practical kind of accuracy and more with conveying poetically that the priesthood, whichever way you cut it, is composed of sinners. And so when read as practical (and thus descriptive, referential, and secular), these lists can appear to be criminally incomplete. But when read as litanic testaments to a *massa damnata* (and thus poetic, affective, and theological), they are consistent, at least to the Church leaders who author them.

"What are the criteria that organize your list?" I asked Father Guillermo.

"It's the Sixth Commandment"—thou shall not commit adultery—"but what does it matter?" he shot back. "The intention is to admit that the Church has sinned, that its priesthood is made of sinners, that I am a sinner. We all are." Father Guillermo didn't have evidentiary standards or comprehensiveness in mind. Instead, his list attested to a metaphysical rather than an individual truth, that "our shame of sin is a fundamental condition of our human existence."

No one is exempt.

Part 4: Contrition

Father Guillermo treasures (above all else) two pieces of paper. The first is a letter signed by the archbishop of Guatemala. It states that Father Guillermo can continue his full clerical activities while in prison. He can, for example, hear confessions, consecrate the Eucharist, and offer last rites to the dying. The second is a letter signed by the warden, which grants Father Guillermo permission to have in his possession several of the vestments and liturgical objects needed to celebrate the sacraments: chalice, paten, and ciborium as well as alb, cincture, and stole. Father Guillermo keeps in his prison cell several thimbles of wine.

Sometimes, when the momentum of our conversations begins to flag, when the writings of Defoe, Stevenson, or Freud fail to inspire us, Father Guillermo offers to hear my confession. I always decline. He always insists, and so I inevitably agree, listing some venial sins as we go through the sacramental motions. "It is important to confess," he told me one morning as he tucked his stole back under his mattress: "Confession allows the soul to heal from sin."

We spent the rest of that morning discussing my upcoming trip to the Vatican: a research venture to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This is the oldest among the nine congregations of the Roman Curia, seated at the Palace of the Holy Office in Rome. It was founded in 1542 to defend the Roman Catholic Church from heresy, and today it is the ecclesiastical body responsible for managing the global phenomenon of clerical sexual abuse.

“Do me a favor,” Father Guillermo whispered as we walked from his cell to the first of several checkpoints. I felt him slip something into my back pocket. It was a USB flash drive. “Take this and print the list [of the fifty-two priests, saved to this device]. Deliver it to the Congregation [for the Doctrine of the Faith].” I declined. He insisted, and so I agreed.

“Why?” I asked.

“It is my confession,” he said.

I am glad that I asked—because the confessional qualities of his list have never been immediately obvious to me. Maybe it is because the term *confession* tends to evoke scenes of rigorous self-interrogation far more dramatic than Father Guillermo’s quiet list-making: Foucault’s image of the kneeling prisoner, or Augustinian motifs and techniques.⁵⁴ His list of names, in contrast, appears minimal and flat: an insufficient effort at extracting the truth from the depths of his soul.⁵⁵ And yet there is something admittedly individualizing about Father Guillermo’s document. He had placed his full legal name at number fifteen and, thus, engages in a Foucauldian “ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement.”⁵⁶ This particular point might have convinced me of his list’s confessional qualities, but my interlocutors at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were incredulous.

“What is this?” an administrator asked in English with far less patience than the Guatemalan law enforcement official with whom I had met several months earlier. We spoke in the Palace of the Holy Office’s central courtyard.

“It is a confession,” I dutifully recounted on behalf of Father Guillermo.

“No, it is not,” he said curtly. “It is a list of names, and a list is not a confession. These are two very different things.”

This man’s obvious irritation aside, the distinction is worth appreciating, especially from an investigative body whose founding name is the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition. Originally designed to combat the spread of Protestantism in Italy, the Roman Inquisition’s mandate quickly expanded to include a system of tribunals that punished heretics for the spiritual crimes of sorcery, blasphemy, and witchcraft. The Roman Inquisition famously placed Nicolaus Copernicus’s *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* on the Church’s Index of Forbidden Books

(*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*) and found Galileo Galilei's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* "vehemently suspect of heresy."⁵⁷ The Roman Inquisition also tortured and executed thousands of people, even burning some at the stake, but the vast majority of those questioned in court confessed their sins in exchange for a penance. The legal parameters of these confessions slowly emerged over centuries through the development of inquisition manuals: books whose authors agreed that the hallmark of a proper confession is a confessor's remorse and willingness to be corrected.⁵⁸ Above all else, a confession must be sincere.

"The author of the list is on the list," I explained in Father Guillermo's defense. "Here he is," I said while pointing with my finger: "the author of the list is number 15."

"This list is not a confession," he repeated. "There is no context. There is no testimony. There is no evidence. This list is of no use to the Congregation. It is useless."

This cleric's fixation with utility is in part juridical. Since 2001, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has had sole jurisdiction over sins committed by clerics against minors, with appeals to the Congregation often resulting in canon law trials. These trials are held in secret, involve a defense attorney and a prosecutor, and routinely include the testimony of witnesses. None of this happens, however, without credible and substantial accusations, and Father Guillermo's list is neither credible nor substantial by the Congregation's standards. What the Congregation wanted would likely not have looked much like a list at all, for lists lack the context and detail required for litigation. But Father Guillermo knew this.

"I just wanted them to see the list," Father Guillermo told me after I explained to him that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith did not recognize his list as a confession: "This [list] was for me, not [the Congregation]."

Six months before Father Guillermo told me to deliver his list to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Francis spoke in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace to the Roman Curia, the administrative unit of the Holy See. Pope Francis urged priests around the world who had raped or molested children to turn themselves in "to human justice, and prepare for divine justice."⁵⁹ Amid evidence that clerics continued to perpetrate and cover up acts of sexual abuse, Pope Francis compared these priests to Judas Iscariot, the disciple who reveals Jesus's identity to a crowd intent on arresting and eventually crucifying him.⁶⁰ "Judas Iscariot will always be present in the Church," Pope Francis argued, calling him an "icon[] of the sins and crimes committed by those who are chosen and consecrated."⁶¹ And Father Guillermo agreed: "Each of the men on this list," he told me, "turned away from Christ just like Judas

Iscariot.” What brought these fifty-two names together for Father Guillermo was not the criminal code they had violated, but the clerical vows they had betrayed. Each name on the list signaled for Father Guillermo a betrayal of divine justice; each name, as Pope Francis explained, is a man “chosen by the Lord who [sold] out [his] Master and hand[ed] him over to death.”⁶²

Father Guillermo had registered to some extent the consequences of his actions and clearly understood Pope Francis’s call to confess. But the list Father Guillermo provided in response to this call was a peculiar kind of document, a poetic list in the guise of a practical one: it seemed to satisfy his own personal standards of sincerity while remaining absolutely unrecognizable and apparently “useless” to a governing body that could possibly take action against him and the other fifty-one priests listed. All of which made Father Guillermo’s list of suspected priests, at least for the purposes of this essay, impractical.

Part 5: Impractical Lists

I admit to experiencing a rush of excitement, a punch of adrenaline, the moment Father Guillermo handed me his list of fifty-two priests. We had discussed at length the possibility of his providing me with some leads for my fieldwork. He even mentioned from time to time the possibility of giving me a few names, but I never could have anticipated what first appeared to be such a breakthrough. His list gave the impression of being clear, concise, and authoritative: unambiguous in the information it seemed to convey. Organized into two columns, with each of the names evenly spaced and dutifully formatted, the document’s formal properties—its minimalism, its referentiality, its spatiality—suggested to me a watershed moment for the study of clerical sexual abuse in Central America.

But this feeling of exhilaration quickly tripped into something closer to bewilderment, as members of the Guatemalan National Police failed to make head or tail of the list, as Father Guillermo admitted to the list’s self-serving intentions and surreptitious methodologies, and as the Vatican administrator dismissed the document outright as useless. I could only reply that the list, as well as almost every other list of suspected priests, is not useless so much as impractical.

A list is impractical when its poetic intentions do not satisfy the practical demands of a given moment or situation: when the effervescent and the referential are at cross purposes. Roman Catholic dioceses and religious orders from around the world publish lists of priests suspected of sexual abuse. At first blush, these lists, like Father Guillermo’s, appear to be descriptive and referential, but, on closer review, they are not just criminally

incomplete but also fundamentally affective and theological in their intentions and their guiding assumptions. They are litanies that look like ledgers.

More than any other literary form, the list lends itself to such impracticality because its ambiguity and austerity can set the conditions for misrecognition. Poetic and practical lists often look almost identical to each other and frequently share many of the same characteristics: minimalism, elasticity, responsiveness, spatiality, and speed, for example. This means that the distinguishing criterion between a practical and a poetic list is often not found in its appearance, as if the latter might be more baroque than the former. Instead, the difference between the two consists in the author's intention and the list's social effect. All of which makes the recognition and analysis of impracticality uniquely dependent upon ethnographic observation: on detailing at the everyday level evidence of authorial intention and of the kinds of confusions and misinterpretations that some lists can get caught up in.

The history of anthropological thought is rife with examples of this misrecognition. Claude Lévi-Strauss offers one in his much-discussed "Writing Lesson," in which he reports on how the chief of a Brazilian tribe produced a "list" to regulate the exchange of objects between his own tribe and a visiting group.⁶³ "As soon as he had got the company together," Lévi-Strauss remembers of the nonliterate chief, "he took from a basket a piece of paper covered with wavy lines and made a show of reading it, pretending to hesitate as he checked on it the list of objects."⁶⁴ The chief's list conveyed no real-world knowledge: instead, it functioned to shore up his power in front of an audience. Lévi-Strauss comments that "this farce went on for two hours."⁶⁵

It is not possible to put a time stamp on Father Guillermo's list, as Lévi-Strauss could with the chief's routine, and it is not fair to say that his list of fifty-two names amounts to "a piece of paper covered with wavy lines." But there is something improbable, even farcical, about Father Guillermo's list-making performance that exceeds the strict utility of practical lists. Through the course of fieldwork in Guatemala City and Vatican City, in prison cells and palace courtyards, it became clear to me that Father Guillermo's list of priests does not align signifiers (names of priests) with signifieds (priests) so much as engineer a sense of vertigo, shame, and contrition.

This last point foregrounds the fact that impractical lists are not infelicitous: these are not performances gone wrong. The Brazilian chief who seemed to irritate Lévi-Strauss so much performed a poetic list in the guise of practicality to observably impractical ends. In doing so, the chief may have strained the patience of a foreign anthropologist but nonetheless galvanized his community with the appearance of bureaucratic precision. The impracticality of Father Guillermo's list, in turn, should also be read as

similarly deliberate and equally tactical. Impracticality, above all else, is a devilishly effective technique of governance. But to what ends?

Impractical lists allow Church leaders from around the world to approximate the feeling of contrition without having to weather the consequences of a true confession. For all of Father Guillermo's posturing, the list that he compiled proved to be of no use to either civil or canon authorities: it was completely impractical to police officers in Guatemala and to agents of the Vatican. His list and the many others like it may create the semblance of practicality, but they counterfeit the vulnerability that true transparency generates while defying the kind of contextual pressure that often defines a practical list. In their arbitrariness, their incompleteness, and their lack of context, these lists deliberately fail to meet the evidentiary requirements that would make them actionable. As Father Guillermo insisted in his prison cell, "Confession allows the soul to heal from sin," but the impracticality of these lists has allowed these gestures toward transparency to be resolutely self-serving ventures: allowing Church leaders to mend their souls while an untold number of survivors of clerical sexual abuse around the world are left to question themselves and doubt their experiences because their abusers may or may not appear on a list.

Notes

1. This essay draws on fieldwork completed in Guatemala City and Vatican City between 2017 and 2020. Those whom I have interviewed remain anonymous or are cited by pseudonym, and except where otherwise noted all translations are my own. Quotations are from recorded interviews or from detailed notes. Juan Bautista Mesa provided research support, Philip Sayers writing support, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada financial support.
2. Manuel D. Moreno and Gerald F. Kicanas, "The Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson, News Release," BishopAccountability.org, 21 June 2002, www.bishop-accountability.org/az_tucson/2002_06_21_Moreno_and_Kicanas_News_Release.htm.
3. "Lists of Accused Priests Released by Dioceses and Religious Institutes," BishopAccountability.org, www.bishop-accountability.org/AtAGlance/diocesan_and_order_lists.html.
4. For the Church's teaching on the Seal of Confession as inviolable, see "The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation," in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City, 2005), 401–11.
5. Umberto Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 122–24.
6. For an account of the list-making practices involved in fieldwork, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York, 2005), 133–35.
7. Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists* (New York, 2009), 123.

8. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis, 2012), 38.
9. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), 42.
10. Urs Stäheli, "Listing the Global: Dis/connectivity Beyond Representation?," *Distinktion* 13, no. 3 (2012): 237.
11. *Ibid.*, 239.
12. *Ibid.*, 238.
13. For bad lists, see Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, ed., "Building a Better Description," in "Description Across Disciplines," special issue, *Representations* 135 (Summer 2016): 6. For chaotic and nonnormal lists, see Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist*, 178, 188. For "lowly, mechanical, dull" lists, see Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 137.
14. Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998), 265, and Charles Hirschkind, "Is There a Secular Body?," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (November 2011): 638.
15. Cannon Schmitt, "Interpret or Describe?," in "Description Across Disciplines," ed. Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, special issue, *Representations* 135 (Summer 2016): 102–18. Here, lists are conceptually prior to what Ian Hacking describes as the "avalanche of printed numbers." See Ian Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers," *Humanities in Society* 5 (Fall 1982): 279–95.
16. Stäheli, "Listing the Global," 237.
17. John Law and Annemarie Mol, "Complexities: An Introduction," in *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices*, ed. John Law and Annemarie Mol (Durham, NC, 2002), 7.
18. Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," trans. Roger Cardinal, in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 12.
19. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," in *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin, 1993), and Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1970), xvi.
20. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xvi.
21. *Ibid.*
22. See, for example, Lochlann Jain, *Things that Art: A Graphic Menagerie of Enchanting Curiosity* (Toronto, 2019).
23. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York, 1961 [1922]), 177.
24. Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association, approved February 2009, www.americananthro.org/ParticipateAndAdvocate/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1656.
25. Victoria Sanford, *Guatemala: Del genocidio al feminicidio* (Guatemala City, 2008), and Código Penal de Guatemala 2009, Decreto No. 17–73, www.srp.gov.gt/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Codigo-Penal.pdf. For the civil war (1960–96), see Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Memoria del Silencio* (Guatemala City, 1999), and Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI), *Guatemala: Nunca Más* (Guatemala City, 1998).

26. For rates of conviction, see International Justice Mission, *Guatemalan Criminal Justice System Performance Study*, August 2013, www.ijm.org/studies/guatemalan-criminal-justice-system-performance-study-2008-2012.
27. Robert Samet, "The Denouncers: Populism and the Press in Venezuela," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 49, no. 1 (February 2017): 1–27.
28. John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 11–28; George Yúdice, "Testimonio and Postmodernism," *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 15–31.
29. Referenced in Samet, "The Denouncers," 3. See Paul Fournier, *Les officialités au moyen age* (Paris, 1880); Henry Charles Lea, *The Inquisition in the Spanish Dependencies* (London, 1922); and Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World* (Durham, NC, 2004).
30. Sarah Larson, "'Spotlight' and Its Revelations," *New Yorker*, 8 December 2015, www.newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/spotlight-and-its-revelations.
31. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962), 22.
32. Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist*, 122.
33. See Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Richard Hope (Lincoln, NE, 1961), and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. John H. McMahon (Mineola, NY, 2007).
34. Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist*, 195.
35. Émile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Mineola, NY, 2008 [1915]), 218, and Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY, 1974), 183.
36. *Graduale Romanum* (Vatican City, 1973).
37. *Ibid.*, 831–37.
38. Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist*, 122.
39. Matthew 18:21–22, New International Version.
40. A. R. Williams, "Seven," *Folklore* 56, no. 2 (Summer 1945): 257–59.
41. Eco, *The Infinity of Lists*, 117.
42. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, trans. Julio Cortázar (Madrid, 2015); Robert Louis Stevenson, *El extraño caso del doctor Jekyll y el señor Hyde*, trans. Catalina Martínez Muñoz (Barcelona, 2015); and Sigmund Freud, *La interpretación de los sueños*, trans. Luis López-Ballesteros de Torres (Madrid, 2011).
43. For an anthropological approach to dreams, see Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley, 2011).
44. Sigmund Freud, "Lecture XXXV: The Question of a Weltanschauung," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933 [1932]), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey et al., ed. James Strachey (London, 1953–74), 22:158–82. Freud defines *Weltanschauung* as "an intellectual construction, which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place" (158).
45. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1955), 262.
46. *Ibid.*, 263.
47. *Ibid.*, 262.
48. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis, 1992).
49. Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1994), 181.
50. *Ibid.*, 181. See also Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Philip Levine (Cambridge, 1988), 318, 384.

51. Ernesto Bonaiuti, "The Genesis of St. Augustine's Idea of Original Sin," trans. Giorgio La Piana, *Harvard Theological Review* 10, no. 2 (April 1917): 168.
52. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Levine, 181.
53. "Lists of Accused Priests Released by Dioceses and Religious Institutes," BishopAccountability.org, www.bishop-accountability.org/AtAGlance/diocesan_and_order_lists.htm.
54. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1978); Augustine, *Confessions*; and Foucault, "An Introduction," in *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978), 1:61.
55. Foucault, "An Introduction," 59.
56. *Ibid.*, 61.
57. Nicolaus Copernicus, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, trans. A. M. Duncan (New York, 1976); Galileo Galilei, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*, trans. Stillman Drake (Berkeley, 1962).
58. See Jane K. Wickersham, *Rituals of Prosecution: The Roman Inquisition and the Prosecution of Philo-Protestants in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Toronto, 2012).
59. Pope Francis, "Audience of the Holy Father with the Roman Curia for the Exchange of Christmas Wishes," Holy See Press Office, 21 December 2018, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/12/21/181221c.html>.
60. The biblical story of Judas Iscariot and his betrayal of Jesus appears in each of the four gospels: Matthew 26:47–56; Mark 14:10–21; Luke 22:47–53; John 13:18–30.
61. Pope Francis, "Audience of the Holy Father."
62. *Ibid.*
63. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (London, 1973), 294–304.
64. *Ibid.*, 296.
65. *Ibid.*