



**THE MOST REVEREND**  
**Alexander J. Brunett**  
**ARCHBISHOP OF SEATTLE**

April 16, 2010

My dear friends in Christ,

In recent weeks, I have received inquiries about international media coverage of the clergy sexual abuse scandal and the Church's response. While I cannot address the issues that have arisen in Ireland, Germany and in other particular churches, these stories are disturbing to me, as I am sure they are to you. As the news reports unfold, I want you to have information about the Archdiocese of Seattle's response to sexual abuse that will help answer your questions and those of your family and acquaintances.

Sexual abuse of children is a heinous crime, and when committed by a member of the clergy it is a breach of sacred trust. While our response to this problem has not always been adequate, we cannot change what happened decades in the past. We must instead take responsibility for these crimes, apologize to victims, offer them compassionate pastoral care and take decisive steps to prevent future abuse. This has been the commitment by the Archdiocese of Seattle for more than 20 years and it remains our firm commitment today. Our ongoing efforts include:

- Immediate removal of any priest, employee or volunteer within the Archdiocese upon receipt of a credible allegation of abuse, regardless of when the abuse occurred;
- Immediate reporting to law enforcement authorities;
- Investigation of any credible allegation by a qualified professional investigator;
- Consultation with the Archdiocesan Review Board, comprised of professionals with extensive experience in the field of child sexual abuse;
- Permanent removal from ministry of any priest, employee or volunteer when an allegation is admitted or established;
- Comprehensive background checks for all priests, employees and those volunteers with ongoing, unsupervised contact with minors;
- Annual Safe Environment training for all priests, all employees and those volunteers who have ongoing, unsupervised contact with minors;
- Safe Environment education for elementary and secondary school children in our Catholic schools;
- Training for parents and any interested individuals.

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You will find Web links with additional information about our Archdiocese's response to sexual abuse and helpful news articles by visiting the archdiocesan homepage at [www.seattlearch.org](http://www.seattlearch.org). I hope this information is helpful in answering any questions you may have about recent media reports. More importantly, I hope it will assist you in understanding better the issue of clergy sexual abuse as our local Church strives to resolve past cases with justice and fairness and takes action to prevent abuse in the future.

As always, I ask anyone who has knowledge of sexual abuse or misconduct by a member of the clergy, an employee or volunteer of the Archdiocese of Seattle to call the archdiocesan hotline at 1-800-446-7762.

With warmest regards and Easter wishes, I remain

Your servant in Christ,

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Most Rev. Alex J. Brunett  
Archbishop of Seattle

# Keeping the record straight on Benedict and the crisis

By John L Allen Jr  
Created Mar 26, 2010

Intense scrutiny is being devoted these days to Pope Benedict XVI's history on the sex abuse crisis. Revelations from Germany have put his five years as a diocesan bishop under a spotlight, and a piece on Thursday in *The New York Times*, on the case of Fr. Lawrence Murphy of Milwaukee, also called into question his Vatican years as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Despite complaints in some quarters that all this is about wounding the pope and/or the church, raising these questions is entirely legitimate. Anyone involved in church leadership at the most senior levels for as long as Benedict XVI inevitably bears some responsibility for the present mess. My newspaper, the *National Catholic Reporter*, today called editorially for full disclosure [1] about the pope's record, and it now seems abundantly clear that only such transparency can resolve the hard questions facing Benedict.

Yet as always, the first casualty of any crisis is perspective. There are at least three aspects of Benedict's record on the sexual abuse crisis which are being misconstrued, or at least sloppily characterized, in today's discussion. Bringing clarity to these points is not a matter of excusing the pope, but rather of trying to understand accurately how we got where we are.

The following, therefore, are three footnotes to understanding Benedict's record on the sexual abuse crisis.

## 1. Not the 'Point Man'

First, some media reports have suggested that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger presided over the Vatican office with responsibility for the sex abuse crisis for almost a quarter-century, from 1981 until his election to the papacy in April 2005, and therefore that he's responsible for whatever the Vatican did or didn't do during that entire stretch of time. That's not correct.

In truth, Ratzinger did not have any direct responsibility for managing the overall Vatican response to the crisis until 2001, four years before he became pope.

Bishops were not required to send cases of priests accused of sexual abuse to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith until 2001, when they were directed to do so by Pope John Paul II's *motu proprio* titled *Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*. Prior to that, most cases involving sex abuse never got to Rome. In the rare instance when a bishop wanted to laicize an abuser priest against his will, the canonical process involved would be handled by one of the Vatican courts, not by Ratzinger's office.

Prior to 2001, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith got involved only in the exceedingly rare instances when the sex abuse occurred in the context of the confessional, since a canonical tribunal within the congregation handled cases involving abuse of the sacrament of penance. That, for example, is how the case of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, ended up in the congregation, and it's also why officials in the Milwaukee archdiocese directed the case of Fr. Lawrence Murphy there.

One certainly can question how Ratzinger's office handled those exceptional cases, and the record seems painfully slow and ambivalent in comparison with how similar accusations would be dealt with today. Moreover, Ratzinger was a senior Vatican official from 1981 forward, and therefore he shares in the corporate failure in Rome to appreciate the magnitude of the crisis until terribly late in the game.

To suggest, however, that Ratzinger was the Vatican's "point man" on sex abuse for almost twenty-five years, and to fault him for the mishandling of every case that arose between 1981 and 2001, is misleading. Prior to 2001, Ratzinger had nothing personally to do with the vast majority of sex abuse cases, even the small percentage which wound up in Rome.

## **2. The 2001 letter**

In some reporting and commentary, a May 2001 letter from Ratzinger to the bishops of the world, titled *De delictis gravioribus*, is being touted as a "smoking gun" proving that Ratzinger attempted to thwart reporting priestly sex abuse to the police or other civil authorities by ordering the bishops to keep it secret.

That letter indicates that certain grave crimes, including the sexual abuse of a minor, are to be referred to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and that they are "subject to the pontifical secret." The Vatican insists, however, that this secrecy applied only to the church's internal disciplinary procedures, and was not intended to prevent anyone from also reporting these cases to the police or other civil authorities. Technically they're correct, since nowhere in the 2001 letter is there any prohibition on reporting sex abuse to police or civil prosecutors.

In reality, few bishops needed a legal edict from Rome ordering them not to talk publicly about sexual abuse. That was simply the culture of the church at the time, which makes the hunt for a "smoking gun" something of a red herring right out of the gate. Fixing a culture -- one in which the Vatican, to be sure, was as complicit as anyone else, but one which was widespread and deeply rooted well beyond Rome -- is never as simple as abrogating one law and issuing another.

That aside, here's the key point about Ratzinger's 2001 letter: Far from being seen as part of the problem, at the time it was widely hailed as a watershed moment towards a solution. It marked recognition in Rome, really for the first time, of how serious the problem of sex abuse really is, and it committed the Vatican to getting directly involved. Prior to that 2001 *motu proprio* and Ratzinger's letter, it wasn't clear that anyone in Rome acknowledged responsibility for managing the crisis; from that moment forward, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would play the lead role.

Beginning in 2001, Ratzinger was forced to review all the files on every priest credibly accused of sexual abuse anywhere in the world, giving him a sense of the contours of the problem that virtually no one else in the Catholic church can claim. In a recent article, I outlined the "conversion experience" Ratzinger and his staff went through after 2001. Beforehand, he came off as just another Roman cardinal in denial; after his experience of reviewing the files, he began to talk openly about the "filth" in the church, and his staff became far more energetic about prosecuting abusers.

For those who have followed the church's response to the crisis, Ratzinger's 2001 letter is therefore seen as a long overdue assumption of responsibility by the Vatican, and the beginning of a far more aggressive response. Whether that response is sufficient is, of course, a matter for fair debate, but to construe Ratzinger's 2001 letter as no more than the last gasp of old attempts at denial and cover-up misreads the record.

## **3. Canonical Trials**

Ratzinger's top deputy at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on sex abuse cases, Maltese Monsignor Charles Scicluna, recently gave an interview to an Italian Catholic paper in which he said that of the more than 3,000 cases eventually referred to Rome, only 20 percent were subjected to a full canonical trial. In some reporting, including the Thursday piece in *The New York Times*, this figure has been cited as evidence of Vatican "inaction."

Once again, however, those who have followed the story closely have almost exactly the opposite impression.

Back in June 2002, when the American bishops first proposed a set of new canonical norms to Rome, the heart of which was the "one strike and you're out" policy, they initially wanted to avoid canonical trials altogether. Instead, they wanted to rely on a bishop's administrative power to permanently remove a priest from ministry. That's because their experience of Roman tribunals over the years was that they were often slow, cumbersome, and the outcome was rarely certain.

Most famously, bishops and experts would point to the case of Fr. Anthony Cipolla in Pittsburgh, during the time that Donald Wuerl, now the Archbishop of Washington, was the local bishop. Wuerl had removed Cipolla from ministry in 1988 following allegations of sexual abuse. Cipolla appealed to Rome, where the Apostolic Signatura, in effect the Vatican's supreme court, ordered him reinstated. Wuerl then took the case to Rome himself, and eventually prevailed. The experience left many American bishops, however, with the impression that lengthy canonical trials were not the way to handle these cases.

When the new American norms reached Rome, they ran into opposition precisely on the grounds that everyone deserves their day in court -- another instance, in the eyes of critics, of the Vatican being more concerned about the rights of abuser priests than victims. A special commission of American bishops and senior Vatican officials brokered a compromise, in which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would sort through the cases one-by-one and decide which ones would be sent back for full trials.

The fear at the time was that the congregation would insist on trials in almost every case, thereby dragging out the administration of justice, and closure for the victims, almost indefinitely. In the end, however, only 20 percent were sent back for trials, while for the bulk of the cases, 60 percent, bishops were authorized to take immediate administrative action, because the proof was held to be overwhelming.

The fact that only 20 percent of the cases were subjected to full canonical trial has been hailed as a belated grasp in Rome of the need for swift and sure justice, and a victory for the more aggressive American approach to the crisis. It should be noted, too, that bypassing trials has been roundly criticized by some canon lawyers and Vatican officials as a betrayal of the due process safeguards in church law.

Hence to describe that 20 percent figure as a sign of "inaction" cannot help but seem, to anyone who's been paying attention, rather ironic. In truth, handling 60 percent of the cases through the stroke of a bishop's pen has, up to now, more often been cited as evidence of exaggerated and draconian action by Ratzinger and his deputies.

Obviously, none of this is to suggest that Benedict's handling of the crisis -- in Munich, at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or as pope -- is somehow exemplary. An accounting needs to be offered if this pope, and the church he leads, hopes to move forward. For that analysis to be constructive, however, as opposed to fueling polarization and confusion, it's important to keep the record straight.

## *Shame on the Nytimes*

By Michael Sean Winters  
America Magazine  
March 26, 2010

[http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog\\_id=2&entry\\_id=2683](http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=2683)

Usually, we can all turn to the New York Times and the Washington Post with a reasonable degree of assurance that their writers and editors are top-notch journalists, who ferret out facts, put those facts in a proper context, and truly enlighten a reader's understanding of whatever event is being reported on in the pages of their newspapers. Yesterday, not so much.

The New York Times' article, by the usually reliable Laurie Goodstein, was not only unsupported by the documentation the paper cited, it seemed unrelated. From the documents the Times provided it seems abundantly clear that there was a monster priest, Father Murphy, in Milwaukee who abused dozens and dozens of deaf children, and that when this came to light in 1974, he was retired from ministry. Twenty years later, in 1996, a different charge was made against the priest, that he had granted absolution for sexual sins in which he was complicit. This was referred to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which was headed at the time by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. To be clear – and this is important because the Times' article seems to elide the charges – Cardinal Ratzinger and the CDF had no jurisdiction over abuse claims in 1996. Charges of sexual abuse only became the CDF's responsibility in 2001. To suggest that Cardinal Ratzinger was not taking the charge of sexual abuse seriously is not just interpretatively wrong in this case but factually wrong: The charge of sexual abuse was not in front of him.

Let's take an example from another story in yesterday's paper to illustrate what I can only deem a certain tendentiousness in the Times story. Yesterday – and the day before – we learned of threats and acts of vandalism against members of Congress. Those threats were referred to the Justice Department and, specifically to the FBI. It is hoped the FBI will catch those responsible. One such case involved the cutting of a gas line at the home of a congressman's brother. This, perhaps, necessitated calling the Environmental Protection Agency because the leaking gas might have caused some damage. But, if the people who cut the gas line, or threw a brick through a window, or called to threaten the life of a congressman and his children, if they are not caught, I am not going to blame the EPA, I am going to blame the FBI. In the Times' article, they are trying to blame the EPA.

The case from Milwaukee was sent to Ratzinger because the charge of violating the confessional is reserved to the Holy See. By 1996, however, the priest in question was dying and Ratzinger recommended that the authorities not take any steps; nature had already taken its course and ended the possibility of a future threat and Sister Death was about the claiming the perpetrator for herself.

I will grant that there is something to the argument that the victims' right to have their story told, to receive justice for the crimes against them, demanded a canonical trial of the priest no matter his physical condition. I will grant that there is a coldness in the correspondence that seems more focused on the reputation of the Church than on the rights of the victims. I will grant that it was the victims of this priest's abuse, not Cardinal Ratzinger, who had a right to decide when and how to show mercy to Father Murphy. It is not difficult to see that Cardinal Ratzinger might have made the wrong decision in this case, but I submit that there is nothing in the documents the Times presents that suggests Cardinal Ratzinger's moral culpability for the abuse itself or for any cover-up of that abuse. And the Times article certainly suggests moral culpability even though the documents do not support the charge.

While I am feeling defensive on behalf of my Church, let me point out one other sentence of the Times' article that jumped off the page at me: "Father Murphy not only was never tried or disciplined by the church's own justice system, but also got a pass from the police and prosecutors who ignored reports from his victims...." Yet, the headline of the article does not say "Police and Prosecutors Looked the Other Way" nor does it appear that anyone at the Times asked where those prosecutors have risen in the political firmament. Only the Church and its leaders are held to a different standard.

Of course, we Catholics should hold ourselves to a different and higher standard. It is not exculpatory for the Church that most psychiatrists will tell you that when sexual abuse is discovered in a family, more family members seek to protect the perp than the victim, that is, they react the way the hierarchs acted. It is undoubtedly the case that in seeking to protect the reputation of the Church, many hierarchs destroyed that reputation, rather the way President Nixon was harmed not by the people on his "enemies list" but by the people on his staff who were trying to protect him. It is not exculpatory for the Church that the civil authorities in Wisconsin were evidently as morally dull to the horror being committed as were the ecclesiastical authorities.

Neither is it exculpatory for the Church that we are called to believe that every soul is capable of conversion or that God's mercy extends even to those who perpetrate heinous acts of abuse against children. We could no more abandon these beliefs than we could abandon our belief in the empty tomb, indeed, I would suggest it is the same belief. This belief in God's infinite mercy cannot obfuscate, it must enlighten, our awareness of cold, hard facts, like the evidently perpetual threat of recidivism among pedophiles. Our belief in the ineffable forbearance of the Almighty is an invitation to gratitude; but it is up to the victims of abuse, not the hierarchy, to decide when and how to display God's forbearance to those who victimized them. Still, I hope every Catholic will admit that these noble sentiments, not just ecclesiastical self-protection and career advancement, were at work too. There is a lesson here in the complexity of the moral life, of how mixed our motives can be, of how a desire to forgive and to love can lead to tragedy when tough moral questions are not addressed.

I do not think any fair-minded commentator can doubt that the Church has changed the way it deals with charges of sexual abuse, achieved a better understanding of how to prevent it and what to do when those acts of prevention fail. I do not think any fair-minded reporter can fail to note the role Pope Benedict XVI has played in bringing these changes of attitude to the Vatican. As his recent letter to the Church in Ireland demonstrated, he has given notice to the bishops, priests and laity that the entire culture of the Church must change in response to what we have learned about ourselves in this crisis, and that the beginning of those changes must start with the hierarchs accepting responsibility for their actions in covering-up criminal wrong-doing in the past. The Holy Father does not need the support of a lowly blogger, but he and the Church he leads deserve fair treatment by journalists. Yesterday, neither the Pope nor the Church got a fair treatment in the Times.

# FIRST THINGS

## Scoundrel Time(s)

*George Weigel*  
*March 29, 2010*

The sexual and physical abuse of children and young people is a global plague; its manifestations run the gamut from fondling by teachers to rape by uncles to kidnapping-and-sex-trafficking. In the United States alone, there are reportedly some 39 million victims of childhood sexual abuse. Forty to sixty percent were abused by family members, including stepfathers and live-in boyfriends of a child's mother—thus suggesting that abused children are the principal victims of the sexual revolution, the breakdown of marriage, and the hook-up culture. Hofstra University professor Charol Shakeshaft reports that 6-10 percent of public school students have been molested in recent years—some 290,000 between 1991 and 2000. According to other recent studies, 2 percent of sex abuse offenders were Catholic priests—a phenomenon that spiked between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s but seems to have virtually disappeared (*six* credible cases of clerical sexual abuse in 2009 were reported in the U.S. bishops' annual audit, in a Church of some 65,000,000 members).

Yet in a pattern exemplifying the dog's behavior in Proverbs 26:11, the sexual abuse story in the global media is almost entirely a Catholic story, in which the Catholic Church is portrayed as the epicenter of the sexual abuse of the young, with hints of an ecclesiastical criminal conspiracy involving sexual predators whose predations continue today. That the vast majority of the abuse cases in the United States took place decades ago is of no consequence to this story line. For the narrative that has been constructed is often less about the protection of the young (for whom the Catholic Church is, by empirical measure, the safest environment for young people in America today) than it is about taking the Church down—and, eventually, out, both financially and as a credible voice in the public debate over public policy. For if the Church is a global criminal conspiracy of sexual abusers and their protectors, then the Catholic Church has no claim to a place at the table of public moral argument.

The Church itself is in some measure responsible for this. Reprehensible patterns of clerical sexual abuse and misgovernance by the Church's bishops came to glaring light in the U.S. in 2002; worse patterns of corruption have been recently revealed in Ireland.

Clericalism, cowardice, fideism about psychotherapy's ability to "fix" sexual predators—all played their roles in the recycling of abusers into ministry and in the failure of bishops to come to grips with a massive breakdown of conviction and discipline in the post-Vatican II years. For the Church's sexual abuse crisis has always been that: a crisis of fidelity. Priests who live the noble promises of their ordination are not sexual abusers; bishops who take their custody of the Lord's flock seriously, protect the young and recognize that a man's acts can so disfigure his priesthood that he must be removed from public ministry or from the clerical state. That the Catholic Church was slow to recognize the scandal of sexual abuse within the household of faith, and the failures of governance that led to the scandal being horribly mishandled, has been frankly admitted—by the bishops of the United States in 2002, and by Pope Benedict XVI in his recent letter to the Catholic Church in Ireland. In recent years, though, no other similarly situated institution has been so transparent about its failures, and none has done as much to clean house. It took too long to get there, to be sure; but we are there.

These facts have not sunk in, however, for either the attentive public or the mass public. They do not fit the conventional story line. Moreover, they impede the advance of the larger agenda that some are clearly pursuing in these controversies. For the crisis of sexual abuse and episcopal malfeasance has been seized upon by the Church's enemies to cripple it, morally and financially, and to cripple its leaders. That was the subtext in Boston in 2002 (where the effort was aided by Catholics who want to turn Catholicism into high-church Congregationalism, preferably with themselves in charge). And that is what has happened in recent weeks, as a global media attack has swirled around Pope Benedict XVI, following the revelation of odious abuse cases throughout Europe. In his native Germany, *Der Spiegel* has called for the pope's resignation; similar cries for papal blood have been raised in Ireland, a once-Catholic country now home to the most aggressively secularist press in Europe.

But it was the *New York Times'* front page of March 25 that demonstrated just how low those determined to bring the Church down were prepared to go.

Rembert Weakland is the emeritus archbishop of Milwaukee, notorious for having paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to satisfy the demands of his former male lover. Jeff Anderson is a Minnesota-based attorney who has made a substantial amount of money out of sex abuse "settlements," and who is party to ongoing litigation intended to bring the resources of the Vatican within the reach of contingency-fee lawyers in the United

States. Yet these two utterly implausible—and, in any serious journalistic sense, disqualified—sources were those the *Times* cited in a story claiming that, as cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF], Joseph Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, had prevented sanctions against Father Lawrence Murphy, a diabolical Milwaukee priest who, decades before, had abused some 200 deaf children in his pastoral care. This was simply not true, as the legal papers from the Murphy case the *Times* provided on its Web site demonstrated (see [here](#) for a demolition of the *Times*' case based on the documentary evidence it made available). The facts, alas, seem to be of little interest to those whose primary concern is to nail down the narrative of global Catholic criminality, centered in the Vatican.

The *Times*' descent into tabloid sourcing and innuendo was even more offensive because of recent hard news developments that underscore Pope Benedict's determination to root out what he once described as the "filth" in the Church. There was, for example, the pope's March 20 letter to the Catholic Church in Ireland, which was unsparing in its condemnation of clerical sexual offenders ("... you betrayed the trust that was placed in you by innocent young people and their parents and you must answer for it before Almighty God and before properly constituted tribunals") and unprecedented in its critique of malfeasant bishops ("grave errors of judgment were made and failures of leadership occurred . . . [which have] undermined your credibility and effectiveness"). Moreover, the pope mandated an Apostolic Visitation of Irish dioceses, seminaries, and religious congregations—a clear indication that dramatic leadership change in Ireland is coming. In framing his letter to Ireland so vigorously, Benedict XVI succeeded in overcoming the institutional Vatican preference for the subjunctive in dealing with situations like this, and the pleas of Irish bishops that he cut them some slack, given the intense pressures they were under at home. That the pope rejected both curial and Irish opposition to his lowering the boom ought to have made clear that Benedict XVI is determined to deal with the problem of sexual abuse and episcopal misgovernance in the strongest terms. But for those obsessing over whether a pope had finally "apologized" for something (as if John Paul II had not spent a decade and a half "cleansing the Church's historical conscience," as he put it), these unmistakable signals were lost.

Then there was the March 25 letter from the leadership of the Legionaries of Christ to Legionary priests and seminarians and the Legion-affiliated movement, Regnum Christi. The letter disavowed the Legion's founder, Father Marcial Maciel, as a model for

the future, in light of revelations that Maciel had deceived popes, bishops, laity, and his brother Legionaries by living a duplicitous double life that included fathering several children, sexually abusing seminarians, violating the sacrament of penance, and misappropriating funds. It was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger who, as prefect CDF, was determined to discover the truth about Maciel; it was Pope Benedict XVI who put Maciel under virtual ecclesiastical house arrest during his last years, and who then ordered an Apostolic Visitation of the Legion of Christ that is currently being concluded: hardly the acts of a man at the center of a conspiracy of silence and cover-up.

While the Vatican has been far quicker in its recent response to irresponsible media reports and attacks, it could still do better. A documented chronology how the archdiocese of Munich-Freising handled the case of an abusing priest who had been brought to Munich for therapy while Ratzinger was archbishop would help buttress the flat denials, by both the Vatican and the archdiocese, that Ratzinger knowingly reassigned a known abuser to pastoral work—another charge on which the *Times* and others have been chewing. More and clearer explanations of how the canonical procedures put into place at CDF several years ago have accelerated, not impeded, the Church's disciplining of abusive clergy would also be useful.

So, of course, would elementary fairness from the global media. That seems unlikely to come from those reporters and editors at the *New York Times* who have abandoned any pretence of maintaining journalistic standards. But it ought not be beyond the capacity of other media outlets to understand that much of the *Times'* recent reporting on the Church has been gravely distorted, and to treat it accordingly.

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# From The Tablet

## Feature Article

### Should I stay or should I go?

#### Clerical-abuse scandal

*Timothy Radcliffe*

**As the scandal of child sexual abuse and its cover-up swirls around the Church, some Catholics are considering their options as regards their very membership of the institution. Here a former Master of the Dominicans explains why the Church is stuck with him, whatever happens**

Fresh revelations of sexual abuse by priests in Germany and Italy have provoked a tide of anger and disgust. I have received emails from people all around Europe asking how can they possibly remain in the Church? I was even sent a form with which to renounce my membership of the Church. Why stay?

First of all, why go? Some people feel that they can no longer remain associated with an institution that is so corrupt and dangerous for children. The suffering of so many children is indeed horrific. They must be our first concern. Nothing that I will write is intended in any way to lessen our horror at the evil of sexual abuse. But the statistics for the US, from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 2004, suggest that Catholic clergy do not offend more than the married clergy of other Churches.

Some surveys even give a lower level of offence for Catholic priests. They are less likely to offend than lay school teachers, and perhaps half as likely as the general population. Celibacy does not push people to abuse children. It is simply untrue to imagine that leaving the Church for another denomination would make one's children safer. We must face the terrible fact that the abuse of children is widespread in every part of society. To make the Church the scapegoat would be a cover-up.

But what about the cover-up within the Church? Have not our bishops been shockingly irresponsible in moving offenders around, not reporting them to the police and so perpetuating the abuse? Yes, sometimes. But the great majority of these cases go back to the 1960s and 1970s, when bishops often regarded sexual abuse as a sin rather than also a pathological condition, and when lawyers and psychologists often reassured them that it was safe to reassign priests after treatment. It is unjust to project backwards an awareness of the nature and seriousness of sexual abuse which simply did not exist then. It was only the rise of feminism in the late 1970s which, by shedding light on the violence of some men against women, alerted us to the terrible damage done to vulnerable children.

But what about the Vatican? Pope Benedict has taken a strong line in tackling this issue as

prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and since becoming Pope. Now the finger is pointed at him. It appears that some cases reported to the CDF under his watch were not dealt with. Isn't the Pope's credibility undermined? There are demonstrators in front of St Peter's calling for his resignation. I am morally certain that he bears no blame here.

It is generally imagined that the Vatican is a vast and efficient organisation. In fact it is tiny. The CDF only employs 45 people, dealing with doctrinal and disciplinary issues for a Church which has 1.3 billion members, 17 per cent of the world's population, and some 400,000 priests. When I dealt with the CDF as Master of the Dominican Order, it was obvious that they were struggling to cope. Documents slipped through the cracks. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger lamented to me that the staff was simply too small for the job.

People are furious with the Vatican's failure to open up its files and offer a clear explanation of what happened. Why is it so secretive? Angry and hurt Catholics feel a right to transparent government. I agree. But we must, in justice, understand why the Vatican is so self-protective. There were more martyrs in the twentieth century than in all the previous centuries combined. Bishops and priests, Religious and laity were assassinated in Western Europe, in Soviet countries, in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Many Catholics still suffer imprisonment and death for their faith. Of course, the Vatican tends to stress confidentiality; this has been necessary to protect the Church from people who wish to destroy her. So it is understandable that the Vatican reacts aggressively to demands for transparency and will read legitimate requests for openness as a form of persecution. And some people in the media do, without any doubt, wish to damage the credibility of the Church.

But we owe a debt of gratitude to the press for its insistence that the Church face its failures. If it had not been for the media, then this shameful abuse might have remained unaddressed.

Confidentiality is also a consequence of the Church's insistence on the right of everyone accused to keep their good name until they are proved to be guilty. This is very hard for our society to understand, whose media destroy people's reputations without a thought.

Why go? If it is to find a safer haven, a less corrupt Church, then I think that you will be disappointed. I too long for more transparent government, more open debate, but the Church's secrecy is understandable, and sometimes necessary. To understand is not always to condone, but necessary if we are to act justly.

Why stay? I must lay my cards on the table; even if the Church were obviously worse than other Churches, I still would not go. I am not a Catholic because our Church is the best, or even because I like Catholicism. I do love much about my Church but there are aspects of it which I dislike. I am not a Catholic because of a consumer option for an ecclesiastical Waitrose rather than Tesco, but because I believe that it embodies something which is essential to the Christian witness to the Resurrection, visible unity.

When Jesus died, his community fell apart. He had been betrayed, denied, and most of his disciples fled. It was chiefly the women who accompanied him to the end. On Easter Day, he

appeared to the disciples. This was more than the physical resuscitation of a dead corpse.

In him God triumphed over all that destroys community: sin, cowardice, lies, misunderstanding, suffering and death. The Resurrection was made visible to the world in the astonishing sight of a community reborn. These cowards and deniers were gathered together again. They were not a reputable bunch, and shamefaced at what they had done, but once again they were one. The unity of the Church is a sign that all the forces that fragment and scatter are defeated in Christ.

All Christians are one in the Body of Christ. I have deepest respect and affection for Christians from other Churches who nurture and inspire me. But this unity in Christ needs some visible embodiment. Christianity is not a vague spirituality but a religion of incarnation, in which the deepest truths take the physical and sometimes institutional form. Historically this unity has found its focus in Peter, the Rock in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the shepherd of the flock in John's gospel.

From the beginning and throughout history, Peter has often been a wobbly rock, a source of scandal, corrupt, and yet this is the one – and his successors – whose task is to hold us together so that we may witness to Christ's defeat on Easter Day of sin's power to divide. And so the Church is stuck with me whatever happens. We may be embarrassed to admit that we are Catholics, but Jesus kept shameful company from the beginning.

OP-ED COLUMNIST

# Who Can Mock This Church?

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF  
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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

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**On the Ground**

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Maybe the Catholic Church should be turned upside down.

Jesus wasn't known for pontificating from palaces, covering up scandals, or issuing Paleolithic edicts on social issues. Does anyone think he would have protected clergymen who raped children?

Yet if the top of the church has strayed from its roots, much of its base is still deeply inspiring. I came here to impoverished southern Sudan to write about Sudanese problems, not the Catholic Church's. Yet once again, I am awed that so many of the selfless people serving the world's neediest are lowly nuns and priests — notable not for the grandeur of their vestments but for the grandness of their compassion.

As [I've noted before](#), there seem to be two Catholic Churches, the old boys' club of the Vatican and the grass-roots network of humble priests, nuns and laity in places like Sudan. The Vatican certainly supports many charitable efforts, and some bishops and cardinals are exemplary, but overwhelmingly it's at the grass roots that I find the great soul of the Catholic Church.

The Vatican believes that this newspaper and other news organizations have been unfair and overzealous in excavating the church's cover-ups of child rape. I see the opposite. No organization has done more to elevate the moral stature of the Catholic Church in the United States than The Boston Globe. Its groundbreaking 2002 coverage of abuse by priests led to reforms and by most accounts a significant reduction in abuse. Catholic kids are safer today not because of the cardinals' leadership, but because of The Boston Globe's.

Yet the church leaders are right about one thing: there is often a liberal and secular snobbishness toward the church as a whole — and that is unfair.

It may be easy at a New York cocktail party to sniff derisively at a church whose apex is male chauvinist, homophobic and so out of touch that it bars the use of condoms even to curb AIDS. But what about Father Michael Barton, a Catholic priest from Indianapolis? I met Father Michael in the remote village of Nyamllell, 150 miles from any paved road here in southern Sudan. He runs four schools for children who would otherwise go without an education, and his graduates score at the top of statewide examinations.

Father Michael came to southern Sudan in 1978 and chatters fluently in Dinka and other local languages. To keep his schools alive, he persevered through civil war, imprisonment and beatings, and a smorgasbord of disease. "It's very normal to have malaria," he said. "Intestinal parasites — that's just normal."

Father Michael may be the worst-dressed priest I've ever seen — and the noblest.

Anybody scorn him? Anybody think he's a self-righteous hypocrite?

On the contrary, he would make a great pope.

In the city of Juba, I met Cathy Arata, a nun from New Jersey who spent years working with battered women in Appalachia. Then she moved to El Salvador during the brutal civil war there, putting her life on the line to protect peasants. Two years ago, she came here on behalf of a terrific Catholic project called [Solidarity With Southern Sudan](#).

Sister Cathy and the others in the project have trained 600 schoolteachers. They are fighting hunger not with handouts but with help for villagers to improve agricultural techniques. They are also establishing a school for health workers, with a special focus on midwifery to reduce deaths in childbirth.

At the hospital attached to that school, the surgeon is a nun from Italy. The other doctor is a 72-year-old nun from Rhode Island. Nuns rock.

Sister Cathy would like to see more decentralization in the church, a greater role for women, and more emphasis on public service. She says she worries sometimes that if Jesus returned he would say, “Oh, they got it all wrong!”

She would make a great pope, too.

There are so many more like them. There’s Father [Mario Falconi](#), an Italian priest who refused to leave Rwanda during the genocide and bravely saved 3,000 people from being massacred. There’s Father [Mario Benedetti](#), a 72-year-old Italian priest based in Congo who fled with his congregation when their town was attacked by a brutal militia. Now Father Mario lives side by side with his Congolese congregants in the squalor of a refugee camp in southern Sudan, struggling to get schooling for their children.

It’s because of brave souls like these that I honor the Catholic Church. I understand why many Americans disdain a church whose leaders are linked to cover-ups and antediluvian stances on women, gays and condoms — but the Catholic Church is far larger than the Vatican.

And unless we're willing to endure beatings alongside Father Michael, unless we're willing to stand up to warlords with Sister Cathy, we have no right to disparage them or their true church.