

## *Shame on the Nytimes*

By Michael Sean Winters  
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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.

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