

FIRST THINGS

Scoundrel Time(s)

George Weigel
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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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