

Pedophiles and Popes: Doing the Vatican Shuffle

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Michael Parenti | May 10, 2010 Common Dreams

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Today in post-communist Poland, clerical abuse cases have been slowly surfacing, very slowly. Writing in the leading daily Gazeta Wyborcza, a middle-aged man reported having been sexually abused as a child by a priest. He acknowledged however that Poland was not prepared to deal with such transgressions. "It's still too early. . . . Can you imagine what life would look like if an inhabitant of a small town or village decided to talk? I can already see the committees of defense for the accused priests."

While church pedophiles may still enjoy a safe haven in Poland and other countries where the clergy are above challenge, things are breaking wide open elsewhere. Today we are awash in a sludge of revelations spanning whole countries and continents, going back decades---or as some historians say---going back centuries. Only in the last few weeks has the church shown signs of cooperating with civil authorities. Here is the story.

Protecting the Perpetrators

As everyone now knows, for decades church superiors repeatedly chose to ignore complaints about pedophile priests. In many instances, accused clerics were quietly bundled off to distant congregations where they could prey anew upon the children of unsuspecting parishioners. This practice of denial and concealment has been so consistently pursued in diocese after diocese, nation after nation, as to leave the impression of being a deliberate policy set by church authorities.

And indeed it has been. Instructions coming directly from Rome have required every bishop and cardinal to keep matters secret. These instructions were themselves kept secret; the cover-up was itself covered up. Then in 2002, John Paul put it in writing, specifically mandating that all charges against priests were to be reported secretly to the Vatican and hearings were to be held in camera, a procedure that directly defies state criminal codes.

Rather than being defrocked, many outed pedophile priests have been allowed to advance into well-positioned posts as administrators, vicars, and parochial school officials---repeatedly accused by their victims while repeatedly promoted by their superiors.

Church spokesmen employ a vocabulary of compassion and healing---not for the victims but for the victimizers. They treat the child rapist as a sinner who confesses his transgression and vows to mend his ways. Instead of incarceration, there is repentance and absolution.

While this forgiving approach might bring comfort to some malefactors, it proves to be of little therapeutic efficacy when dealing with the darker appetites of pedophiles. A far more effective deterrent is the danger of getting caught and sent to prison. Absent any threat of

punishment, the perpetrator is restrained only by the limits of his own appetite and the availability of opportunities.

Forgiving No One Else

The tender tolerance displayed by the church hierarchy toward child rapists does not extend to other controversial clergy. Think of those radical priests who have challenged the hierarchy in the politico-economic struggle for liberation theology, or who advocate lifting the prohibitions against birth control and abortion, or who propose that clergy be allowed to marry, or who preside over same-sex weddings, or who themselves are openly gay, or who believe women should be ordained, or who bravely call for investigations of the pedophilia problem itself.

Such clergy often have their careers shut down. Some are subjected to hostile investigations by church superiors.

A Law Unto Itself

Church leaders seem to forget that pedophilia is a felony crime and that, as citizens of a secular state, priests are subject to its laws just like the rest of us. Clerical authorities repeatedly have made themselves accessories to the crime, playing an active role in obstructing justice, arguing in court that criminal investigations of “church affairs” violated the free practice of religion guaranteed by the US Constitution--as if raping little children were a holy sacrament.

Church officials tell parishioners not to talk to state authorities. They offer no pastoral assistance to young victims and their shaken families. They do not investigate to see if other children have been victimized by the same priests. Some young plaintiffs have been threatened with excommunication or suspension from Catholic school. Church leaders impugn their credibility, even going after them with countersuits.

Responding to charges that one of his priests sexually assaulted a six-year-old boy, Cardinal Bernard Law asserted that “the boy and his parents contributed to the abuse by being negligent.” Law himself never

went to prison for the hundreds of cover-ups he conducted. In 2004, with things getting too hot for him in his Boston archdiocese, Law was rescued by Pope John Paul II to head one of Rome's major basilicas, where he now lives with diplomatic immunity in palatial luxury on a generous stipend, supervised by no one but a permissive pontiff.

A judge of the Holy Roman Rota, the church's highest court, wrote in a Vatican-approved article that bishops should not report sexual violations to civil authorities. And sure enough, for years bishops and cardinals have refrained from cooperating with law enforcement authorities, refusing to release abusers' records, claiming that the confidentiality of their files came under the same legal protection as privileged communications in the confessional---a notion that has no basis in canon or secular law.

Bishop James Quinn of Cleveland even urged church officials to send incriminating files to the Vatican Embassy in Washington, DC, where diplomatic immunity would prevent the documents from being subpoenaed.

Just a Few Bad Apples

Years ago the Catholic hierarchy would insist that clerical pedophilia involved only a few bad apples and was being blown completely out of proportion. For the longest time John Paul scornfully denounced the media for "sensationalizing" the issue. He and his cardinals (Ratzinger included) directed more fire at news outlets for publicizing the crimes than at their own clergy for committing them.

Reports released by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (one of the more honest organizations in the Catholic Church) documented the abuse committed in the United States by 4,392 priests against thousands of children between 1950 and 2002. One of every ten priests ordained in 1970 was charged as a pedophile by 2002. Another survey commissioned by the US bishops found that among 5,450 complaints of sexual abuse there were charges against at least sixteen bishops. So much for a few bad apples.

Still, even as reports were flooding in from Ireland and other countries, John Paul dismissed the pedophilic epidemic as "an American problem," as if American priests were not members of his clergy, or as

if this made it a matter of no great moment. John Paul went to his grave in 2005 still refusing to meet with victims and never voicing any apologies or regrets regarding sex crimes and cover-ups.

With Ratzinger's accession to the papal throne as Benedict XVI, the cover-ups continued. As recently as April 2010, at Easter Mass in St. Peter's Square, dean of the college of cardinals Angelo Sodano, assured Benedict that the faithful were unimpressed "by the gossip of the moment." One would not know that "the gossip of the moment" included thousands of investigations, prosecutions, and accumulated charges extending back over decades.

During that same Easter weekend, Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera, archbishop of Mexico City, declared that the public uproar was an "overreaction" incited by the doings of "a few dishonest and criminal priests." A few? An overreaction? Of course, the picture now becomes clear: a few bad apples were inciting overreaction by engaging in the gossip of the moment.

The church seems determined to learn nothing from its transgressions, preoccupied as it is with avoiding lawsuits and bad publicity.

Really Not All that Serious

There are two ways we can think of child rape as being not a serious problem, and the Catholic hierarchy seems to have embraced both these positions. First, pedophilia is not that serious if it involves only a few isolated and passing incidents. Second, an even more creepy way of downplaying the problem: child molestation is not all that damaging or that important. At worst, it is regrettable and unfortunate; it might greatly upset the child, but it certainly is not significant enough to cause unnecessary scandal and ruin the career of an otherwise splendid padre.

It is remarkable how thoroughly indifferent the church bigwigs have been toward the abused children. When one of the most persistent perpetrators, Rev. John Geoghan, was forced into retirement (not jail) after seventeen years and nearly 200 victims, Cardinal Law could still write him, "On behalf of those you have served well, in my own name, I would like to thank you. I understand yours is a painful situation." It

is evident that Law was more concerned about the “pain” endured by Geoghan than the misery he had inflicted upon minors.

In 2001, a French bishop was convicted in France for refusing to hand over to the police a priest who had raped children. It recently came to light that a former top Vatican cardinal, Dario Castrillon, had written to the bishop, “I congratulate you for not denouncing a priest to the civil authorities. You have acted well, and I am pleased to have a colleague in the episcopate who, in the eyes of history and of all the bishops in the world, preferred prison to denouncing his ‘son’ and priest.” (The bishop actually got off with a suspended sentence.) Castrillon claimed that Pope John Paul II had authorized the letter years ago and had told him to send it to bishops around the world. (New York Times, 4/22/2010.)

There are many more like Cardinal Law and Cardinal Castrillon in the hierarchy, aging men who have no life experience with children and show not the slightest regard or empathy for them. They claim it their duty to protect the “unborn child” but offer no protection to the children in their schools and parishes.

They themselves are called “Father” but they father no one. They do not reside in households or families. They live in an old-boys network, jockeying for power and position, dedicated to the Holy Mother Church that feeds, houses, and adorns them throughout their lives. From their heady heights, popes and bishops cannot hear the cries of children. In any case, the church belongs not to little children but to the bedecked oligarchs.

The damage done to sexual victims continues to go unnoticed: the ensuing years of depression, drug addiction, alcoholism, panic attacks, sexual dysfunction, and even mental breakdown and suicide-all these terrible aftereffects of child rape seem to leave popes and bishops more or less unruffled.

Circling the Wagons

The Catholic hierarchy managed to convince itself that the prime victim in this dismal saga is the church itself. In 2010 it came to light that, while operating as John Paul’s uber-hit man, Pope Benedict (then

Cardinal Ratzinger) had provided cover and protection to several of the worst predator priests. The scandal was now at the pope's door---exactly where it should have been many years earlier during John Paul's reign.

The Vatican's response was predictable. The hierarchy circled the wagons to defend pope and church from outside "enemies." The cardinals and bishops railed furiously at critics who "assault" the church and, in the words of the archbishop of Paris, subject it to "a smear campaign." Benedict himself blamed secularism and misguided applications of Vatican 2's aggiornamento as contributing to the "context" of sexual abuse. Reform-minded liberalism made us do it, he seemed to be saying.

But this bristling Easter counterattack by the hierarchy did not play well. Church authorities came off looking like insular, arrogant elites who were unwilling to own up to a horrid situation largely of their own making.

Meanwhile the revelations continued. A bishop in Ireland resigned admitting he had covered up child abuse cases. Bishops in Germany and Belgium stepped down after confessing to charges that they themselves had abused minors. And new allegations were arising in Chile, Norway, Brazil, Italy, France, and Mexico.

Then, a fortnight after Easter, the Vatican appeared to change course and for the first time issued a directive urging bishops to report abuse cases to civil authorities "if required by local law." At the same time, Pope Benedict held brief meetings with survivor groups and issued sympathetic statements about their plight.

For many of the victims, the pontiff's overtures and apologies were too little, too late. Their feeling was that if the Vatican really wanted to make amends, it should cooperate fully with law enforcement authorities and stop obstructing justice; it should ferret out abusive clergy and not wait until cases are publicized by others; and it should make public the church's many thousands of still secret reports on priests and bishops.

In the midst of all this, some courageous clergy do speak out. At a Sunday mass in a Catholic church outside Springfield, Massachusetts, the Rev. James Scahill delivered a telling sermon to his congregation (New York Times, 4/12/10): “We must personally and collectively declare that we very much doubt the veracity of the pope and those of church authority who are defending him. It is beginning to become evident that for decades, if not centuries, church leadership covered up the abuse of children and minors to protect its institutional image and the image of priesthood”

The abusive priests, Scahill went on, were “felons.” He had “severe doubt” about the Vatican’s claims of innocent ignorance. “If by any slimmest of chance the pope and all his bishops didn’t know--they all should resign on the basis of sheer and complete ignorance, incompetence, and irresponsibility.”

How did Father Scahill’s suburban Catholic parishioners receive his scorching remarks? One or two walked out. The rest gave him a standing ovation.