

Pope Benedict and the Scandal Mongers

by Conrad Black

Behind the breathless predictions of the collapse of the Church is the incomprehension of its nature.

The Roman Catholic Church has so long been regarded by some as a satanic fraud emporium, and by many others as a shrieking anachronism of quaint, costumed celibates engaged in obscurantist hocus pocus, that many commentators have aggregated the dreadful outrages of the sex-abuse scandals into an existential crisis. For those who think Rome is a levitation and a trumpery anyway, the slightest ripple or turbulence will bring it down.

The history of the Roman Catholic Church is replete with grotesqueries of license and schism and the intermittent descent of the papacy and cardinalate into anthills of sodomy and corruption of every kind. The Orthodox Churches departed after about 500 years over doctrinal and jurisdictional problems; the Protestants apostacized nearly 1,000 years later, some from genuine moral outrage at Rome's profligacy; but others, such as Henry VIII, for motives not steeped in righteousness. The condition of the Church must putrefy before large numbers of people desert it, and even then, they are not lethal enfeeblements.

Nothing that follows here is intended to mitigate in the slightest the evil of anyone who sexually abused children or adolescents entrusted to him. There are 440,000 Roman Catholic priests in the world, and several million other Catholic religious personnel, and they have had authority over hundreds of millions of children in all parts of the world for longer than the lives of anyone now living. Every potential complainant has been subject to group incentivization to retrieve incidents of abuse from the mists of their own memory (or imagination). And in the United States, the most rapacious mutants of the contingent-fee bar have been in overdrive for years seeking litigants. The great majority of official complaints are frauds, as with the infamous denunciation of Chicago's late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, which was eventually exposed and admitted to be a blackmail attempt.

There are also gradations of abuse, from prurient curiosity, which is disgraceful but not criminal, to depraved and horrible episodes of aggressive coercion. It is rarely easy for a bishop to know at

first how much credence to attach to a complaint. Just handing over anyone suspected or denounced by a party in interest, especially in the U.S., is likely to lead to more injustice than justice. It is not so easy as the critics imply to distinguish a matter of repentance, discretion, reassignment, and therapy from an incident to be reported to the police. That does not in the slightest excuse many cases of concealment from higher-ups and civil authorities. This was undoubtedly widespread in the United States and Ireland, but apparently not in other largely Catholic countries seemingly served by higher-quality episcopates, including Italy, Poland, Canada, and most of Latin America. (The Church retains responsibility for the souls of all adherents, including those guilty of the most repulsive acts; no sinner “is left behind.”)

Nor are these problems confined to Roman Catholic institutions. Unfortunately, an endless deluge of such disgusting allegations pours down on all types of child-care and education organizations. The Roman Catholic bishop of Augsburg has just offered his resignation for beating boys decades ago in his role as an educator. Any man above the age of 50 who went through most U.S. school districts, especially southern ones, and British and British-imitative schools, including mine in Canada, remembers secular school faculty who took an inordinate pleasure in thrashing the rears of young men, and in less violent but more unambiguously deviant attentions.

But none of these other organizations possesses the size, claim of divine service or legitimacy — or, to its opponents, sinister nature — of the Roman Catholic Church. Even if all the allegations of Catholic institutional child abuse were accurate, it would involve less than one percent of the clergy and young people who have gone through the Catholic school and social-aid systems. But it is a terrible problem, not only in itself, but because of the extent to which it has smoked out both the world’s papophobic death squads and the impartially voracious, equal-opportunity jackals of the world’s media.

As far as I can determine, Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone was not stating much more than the obvious when he said that adult males who impose themselves sexually on young boys are likely to be homosexuals. But he did not realize that in this atmosphere this would be widely construed as imputing pederasty to all people of homosexual inclinations, though that is not what he said. Nor did a senior Roman Catholic churchman (quoted through an unnamed source by the *New York Times*) who compared anti-Catholic allegations and anti-Semitism mean to imply that pedophilic clergy were as innocent or as persecuted as Jewish Holocaust victims, nor that anti-Church accusations were led by Jews annoyed at the collapse of the spurious campaign that claimed Pius

XII was a Nazi dupe. There are similarities in all kinds of bigotry without an exact equivalence in vitriol or depth of persecution.

It has been disappointing and irritating (but not surprising) that the *New York Times* has tried to set this controversy up as another Watergate, and with po-faced sanctimony reports each new weekly, unsubstantiated allegation of deviant clerical abuse in Moldova, Fiji, Timbuktu, Patagonia, and assumedly, the Moon. It wished to make it a war of a thousand cuts, escalating steeply and swiftly, on the Watergate pattern, to the destruction of the pope himself: the drumfire of endless outrage confected and displayed with pseudo-grave neutrality, from which debouches the tribal move to execute the chief. “The king must die”; regicide as tokenism, as liberal group therapy.

We have seen it all before. The *Times*’s story on the Wisconsin priest who molested a large number of deaf boys between 1962 and 1974 claimed that the priest had suffered no disciplinary action and that the present pope had prevented an ecclesiastical trial in 1996. The Smoking Gun exuded a tiny plume of the wrong color overnight, as the Vatican replied with almost unprecedented promptness accusing the *Times* of what amounted to premeditated and defamatory falsehoods. The Wisconsin priest had immediately been stripped of the right to celebrate the sacraments, and prohibited from unsupervised contact with young people. The assistant to Cardinal Ratzinger (as the pope then was), when asked about an ecclesiastical trial of him, replied that it would be impractical more than 20 years after the offender was deprived of his priestly functions, throughout which time he had lived unexceptionably, and as he would die of inoperable cancer before the trial could get very far (as he did).

The *Times*’s lynching party showed no recognition that the pope is elected by cardinals and serves for life and that the Holy See is a dictatorship that all are free to opt out of, but that none, and especially not secular media, can overthrow. The *Times* began with a refusal to publish a letter from New York’s Archbishop Dolan, and was revved up by the poster-girl for angry, Irish, semi-lapsed Catholic contemporary spinsterhood, Maureen Dowd, calling for a nun for pope, and ended with involuntarily donned, unrepentant sackcloth and ashes.

Benedict XVI has declared the Church to be ashamed and penitent, has met with victims’ and their families, has expedited investigative and corrective procedures, has opened up access for complainants, and has imposed fail-safe strict controls, without delivering his clergy to the howling cannibals. He has handled it all like the great, scholarly, courageous, and profoundly

civilized man he is, with humility, dignity, and effectiveness. He should now decree a reasonable deadline for past complaints and start to lead the Church out of the fire, and close down the decades-long turning of the spit that the Church's enemies had been ghoulishly preparing.

As the pope tries to amputate what is bad, the Church's enemies are trying to take advantage of that process to destroy the entire institution. This too is a pattern. Pius XII's wartime performance was quite inadequate, but he did save 850,000 Jews, as is now coming to light. No one else did that. This child-abuse crisis is shameful and evil and disgusting. Only the Church can stop, punish, confess, repent, and prevent recurrence, all on the scale required. It is doing so, late and over-cautiously. But secular witch-hunts and lynchings are not part of the solution, and if they continue, it may be almost time for a few Counter-Reformationist measures. The scorching unction of the Church's more rabid enemies might become more bearable to them if the Church's adherents reconsidered their advertising budgets. In the case of the *Times*, its guardian angel, Señor Slim, would surely fly to its aid again with another infusion of 14 percent yield, usurers' junk bonds.

Behind the breathless predictions of the collapse of the Church is the incomprehension of its nature. Such comments were constant, though less stentorian, throughout the supposedly (and inevitably) "troubled and divisive" pontificate of John Paul II. Yet when he died, it had twice as many adherents as when he began. Over 2 million people came to Rome from all over the world for his funeral, including 74 chiefs of state or government (more than have attended all U.S. presidential funerals in history combined). Vocations and attendance at services are rising slowly, and are so far unaffected by these events, other than in Ireland (a country of 3.5 million people).

All Catholics know that those who stand between the terrestrial world that is familiar and that of the spirit that many dispute and that even believers can only darkly glimpse, are themselves just people, fallible and sinning. And the faithful depend and rely on the faith, not the other way round.

Almost all of the world's practicing Roman Catholics, approximately 750 million people, whether born into the faith or, like me, converted to it from non-belief after losing faith in the non-existence of God, believe the same basic premises. There are sometimes authentic miracles, which make it logically possible for any miracle to occur, and spiritual forces are abroad in the world that cannot be accommodated by atheism, and atheism is a perspective that inevitably

encourages excessive egotism and comparative ethical indifference. Thus does God exist. Jesus Christ, like a few others, was divinely inspired. He asked St. Peter to build a Church, and the Roman Catholic Church remains that church. We believe that the likeliest way, though not sure and not the only way, to be in the most direct contact possible with God is through the Roman Catholic liturgy and sacraments.

Roman Catholics do not think of our Church as a trend, a fad, or a high-quality brand, as of toothpaste or soft drinks, with a huge market share; it is the ark of eternal truth and man's very best effort to date to explain the human project, an intellectual enterprise fundamentally beyond our abilities, as atheists acknowledge, while affecting scientific worldliness. Within reason, the conduct of individual clergymen, even when hateful, disgusting, and criminal, does not alter our desire to attend our parish churches, say our prayers, worship God discreetly, confess our sins to and receive the sacraments from, our ordained pastors, and repent our failings as assigned. And we believe, though many would not say it in exactly these words (of Cardinal Newman's), that our consciences are God speaking within us, in a voice "powerful, peremptory, unargumentative, irrational, minatory and definitive."

The vast concourse of us, the believers, is horrified by crimes in the clergy, particularly those that wound the defenseless and the susceptible. But they have little more impact on our faith than any other tragedy or the habitual violation of ecclesiastical counsels of perfection that we have all often ignored, such as against conventional sex as mere pleasure. The Roman Catholic Church remains as it has been for nearly 20 centuries: drafty but impregnable at the intersection of the world and the spirit. Christopher Hitchens is my brother, whether he likes it or I like it (and I find it a promising *divertissement*).

"Dissolution does but give birth to new modes of organization, and every death is the parent of a hundred lives." The world and the Church "are like an image on the waters, ever the same though the waters ever flow" (the about-to-be sainted Newman). The personnel of the Roman Catholic Church is eminently fallible, but the Church is not impeachable, and certainly not by the dunciad of these unholy and unserious prosecutors.