



Sex-Abuse Scandals Give Rise to Distorted Attacks

NEW YORK, APRIL 20, 2002 (Zenit.org).- The steady stream of press reports about sexual misconduct by Catholic clergy has included more than a few articles extremely hostile toward the very existence of the Church in America.

The widespread consternation over stories of sexual abuse by priests is understandable, of course. Strong condemnation of this behavior on the part of men entrusted with the care of souls -- together with calls for a reform of Church practices governing such cases -- is a justifiable response.

The damage caused by the abuses "has been immeasurable," Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, acknowledged Feb. 19. In this and other messages, he asked forgiveness for the wrongs committed and expressed, along with the other bishops, his heartfelt sorrow to the victims.

Seizing the opportunity, some articles on the scandals have indulged in generalized and gratuitous attacks against bishops and Catholic doctrine, clearly revealing their desire to do away with, or at least change beyond recognition, the Church.

Such attacks have not gone unanswered. As Philip Jenkins, author of "Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis" (Oxford University Press, 1996), wrote in the Wall Street Journal on March 26: "Most observers have very little sense of what the actual issues are. Most are using the current cases to promote their pet agendas, which may or may not have any relationship to the abuse problem."

Carroll's cure

Take, for example, a Boston Globe article by James Carroll on Jan. 22. Championing such figures as Hans Küng, Carroll started off by alleging that even if offenders are punished and Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston was to resign, "an underlying culture of Catholic dishonesty will still be in place."

Carroll's cure is a wish list of doctrinal and disciplinary changes: overturning all Church teaching on sexual morality, divorce and contraception; allowing priestly ordination of women; and permitting marriage for priests.

Then there is New York Times editorial page writer Maureen Dowd. On March 20 she lumped together in one paragraph "the church subsidizing pedophilia" along with "Taliban obliteration of women; the brotherhood of Al Qaeda and Mohamed Atta's misogynistic funeral instructions; the implosion of the macho Enron Ponzi scheme."

Dowd returned to the subject four days later, this time to comment on the reference to the sexual abuses made by John Paul II in his Holy Thursday letter to priests. She gratuitously alleged that the Pope "did not write the letter."

Then on April 14 Dowd published a parody titled, "The text (and annotated subtext) from a letter sent on Friday by Cardinal Bernard Law to Boston priests." A couple of examples suffice to convey the tone.

After Cardinal Law's expression of condolence for the suffering of people, "Like many of you, I have had the ... painful experience of meetings with those who have been abused as children, as well as with their parents, spouses and other family members," Dowd added, "(Will they ever stop whining?)"

His following words of sympathy, "The unbelievable horror of these accounts can only dimly reflect the awful and often ongoing pain of the reality," received this flippant remark from Dowd: "(Thank heavens Rome cares more about the third world. Who needs Boston when you've got Lagos?)"

Newsweek magazine also joined in the attacks. In its April 1 issue, writer Anna Quindlen confidently affirmed "the teachings about ordination and celibacy and the evils of desire had as their subtext a misogyny." She added: "This is not simply about pedophilia. It is about a pathology deep and wide."



The newsweekly also published a “Web exclusive” article by Eleanor Clift on March 29. Readers could have been justifiably confused as to her grasp of Catholic matters. First she compared the Church to Congress: “Congress has made some changes, and maybe the church can, too.” Then the abuses were likened to the Enron scandals. A few lines later, Clift compares the Church to the Communist parties of old, and then decides, on second thought, that it is really “like the Taliban.”

For good measure, she quotes an anonymous member of Congress (the article is full of anonymous quotes) as saying, “Then I think about the pope -- and how sclerotic and calcified the church is.” Not content with this, Clift affirms, contrary to all recognized historical knowledge, that “The papacy as we know it is a 19th-century convention.” The article finishes with a gibe at the clergy: “The priesthood attracts sexually conflicted men.”

Too many myths

Anti-Church insults aside, many articles are also guilty of gross inaccuracies. For instance, commentaries often speak in general terms of all sex abuse as being examples of pedophile tendencies.

“It has become the shorthand label for a sex abuse scandal that now haunts dioceses around the nation: the pedophile priest crisis,” noted a March 17 article in the Boston Globe, to the newspaper’s credit. “The vast majority of priests who sexually abuse minors choose adolescent boys -- not young children -- as their targets, according to lawyers and academics who study clergy sexual abuse.” Cases involving pedophiles “are actually relatively uncommon,” the Globe added.

The portrayal of the clergy as being infested by sexual deviants, as some reports have done, is also erroneous. Father Stephen Rossetti, a psychologist, countered that myth in an April 11 interview with CNN. He explained: “The numbers we have right now suggest that about 1.6 to 2% of priests are sexually involved with minors sometime during their career. So what we see is this number is probably the same or maybe even less than in society. So it’s not really a ‘priests’ problem.”

Another charge is that the Catholic Church is more likely than other churches to have sexual abusers in its ranks, because of its celibacy requirement and its view of sexual morality. “But they have little hard data -- nationwide statistics or scientific studies -- to support their position,” observed a March 10 article in the Washington Post.

In fact, as the Christian Science Monitor wrote April 5, “Despite headlines focusing on the priest pedophile problem in the Roman Catholic Church, most American churches being hit with child sexual-abuse allegations are Protestant, and most of the alleged abusers are not clergy or staff, but church volunteers.” This information comes from national surveys conducted by Christian Ministry Resources, described as “a tax and legal-advice publisher serving more than 75,000 congregations and 1,000 denominational agencies nationwide.”

Another myth purveyed by some critics is that priestly celibacy, which they are eager to end, is a medieval invention introduced at the start of the second millennium. But Philip Jenkins, writing March 31 in the Washington Post, termed this “pseudo-history.”

Jenkins, an Episcopalian whose church allows married priests, noted: “Priestly celibacy was the usual expectation in the West by late Roman times, say the 4th century, and Medieval statements on the subject were just reasserting discipline that had collapsed temporarily in times of war and social chaos.”

The pain and scandal caused by the abuses are very real, and demand serious reforms. But a true cure is predicated on an honest assessment of the problems. Media reports that distort or grossly misstate the root causes of the scandals do little to help the victims, much to smear the ranks of dedicated and virtuous clergy, and little to enhance the reputation of the press itself.

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