

Hendrik Hertzberg writes for *The New Yorker* April 19, 2010

On October 31, 1517, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian, Dr. Martin Luther, put the finishing touches on a series of bullet points and, legend has it, nailed the result to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany—the equivalent, for the time and place, of uploading a particularly explosive blog post. Luther's was a protest against the sale of chits that were claimed to entitle buyers or their designees to shorter stays in Purgatory. Such chits, known as indulgences, were being hawked as part of Pope Leo X's fund-raising drive for the renovation of St. Peter's Basilica. The "Ninety-five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" touched off a high-stakes flame war that rapidly devolved into the real thing, with actual wars, actual flames, and actual stakes. The theological clash that sundered Christendom didn't just change the face of Western religion; it birthed the modern world.

Half a millennium later, the present agony of Catholicism is very far from being in the same league, even though the *National Catholic Reporter* has called it "the largest institutional crisis in centuries, possibly in Church history." The crisis is not about doctrine, at least not directly. It's about administration; it's about the structure of power within the Catholic Church; it's about the Church's insular, self-protective clerical culture. And, of course, like nearly every one of the controversies that preoccupy and bedevil the Church—abortion, stem-cell research, contraception, celibacy, marriage and divorce and affectional orientation—it's about sex.

It's also about indulgence—the institutional indulgence, fitful but systemic, of the sexual exploitation of children by priests. The pattern broke into public consciousness in the United States a quarter of a century ago, when a Louisiana priest pleaded guilty to thirty-three counts of crimes against children and was sentenced to prison. Since then, there have been thousands of such cases, civil and criminal, involving many thousands of children and leading to legal settlements that have amounted to more than two billion dollars and have driven several dioceses into bankruptcy. In 1992, Richard Sipe, a Catholic psychotherapist and researcher who served for eighteen years as a priest and Benedictine monk, told a conference of victims that "the current revelations of abuse are the tip of an iceberg, and if the problem is traced to its foundations the path will lead to the highest halls of the Vatican."

America's liberal system of tort law, along with the enterprising reporting of journalists at newspapers like the Boston *Globe*, brought the problem to light earlier here than elsewhere. But it can no longer be dismissed as an epiphenomenon of America's sexual libertinism and religious indiscipline. In Ireland, for example, where Church-run orphanages and other institutions for children are supported by the state, a government commission reported last year that the Dublin Archdiocese's preoccupations in dealing with cases of child sexual abuse, at least until the mid 1990s, were the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the Church, and the preservation of its assets. All other considerations, including the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities.

The past few years have seen a cascade of revelations from many countries, including, most recently, Germany, and in the past month the cascade has become a flood. Sipe's prediction has come true. As Cardinal Archbishop of Munich, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and now as Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph

Ratzinger appears to have been at best neglectful, at worst complicit, in minimizing and covering up specific cases of abuse that came under his supervision.

The response of the ecclesiastical powers that be, once outright denial became untenable, has all along been an unsatisfactory mixture of contrition and irritation. From Benedict on down, Church fathers have made statements of apology and shame. Awareness programs have been launched, studies have been conducted, bishops have been obliged to resign. The Pope met personally with victims of abuse during his visit to the United States, in 2008, and even his critics agree that he has taken the problem more seriously, both before and since his elevation to the throne of St. Peter, than did his predecessor, the soon-to-be-sainted John Paul II.

On the other hand, that's not setting the bar very high. When serious discipline has been imposed, it has generally been in the wake of bad publicity, usually from outside the Church and always from outside the hierarchy. There has been a lot of bad publicity of late, and some of the reaction has been tinged with resentful paranoia. In an editorial, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, accused "the media" of having the "rather obvious and ignoble intention of attacking Benedict XVI and his closest collaborators at all costs." This was echoed, nearer home, by the Archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan, who, in his blog (yes, he has one), accused the *Times* of "being part of a well-oiled campaign against Pope Benedict." Back in Rome, on Palm Sunday, the Pope himself spoke darkly of "the petty gossip of dominant opinion."

The Catholic Church is an authoritarian institution, modelled on the political structures of the Roman Empire and medieval Europe. It is better at transmitting instructions downward than at facilitating accountability upward. It is monolithic. It claims the unique legitimacy of a line of succession going back to the apostolic circle of Jesus Christ. Its leaders are protected by a nimbus of mystery, pomp, holiness, and, in the case of the Pope, infallibility—to be sure, only in certain doctrinal matters, not administrative ones, but the aura is not so selective. The hierarchy of such an institution naturally resists admitting to moral turpitude and sees squalid scandal as a mortal threat. Equally important, the government of the Church is entirely male.

It is not "anti-Catholic" to hypothesize that these things may have something to do with the Church's extraordinary difficulty in coming to terms with clerical sexual abuse. The iniquities now roiling the Catholic Church are more shocking than the ones that so outraged Martin Luther. But the broader society in which the Church is embedded has grown incomparably freer. To the extent that the Church manages to purge itself of its shame—its sins, its crimes—it will owe a debt of gratitude to the lawyers, the journalists, and, above all, the victims and families who have had the courage to persevere, against formidable resistance, in holding it to account. Without their efforts, the suffering of tens of thousands of children would still be a secret. Our largely democratic, secularist, liberal, pluralist modern world, against which the Church has so often set its face, turns out to be its best teacher—and the savior, you might say, of its most vulnerable, most trusting communicants.

Nuns banned from promoting vocations

[Yes, but that's not all, as explained by Tom Roberts for NCR.](#)

Two stories currently on the web site illustrate the sorry state of episcopal leadership of the Catholic Church in the United States. The first, by Jerry Filteau, is a fact check of the bishops' claim about the recently passed health care reform bill. What becomes clear in his sober analysis is that the bishops' objections, based on the claims that the reform bill would somehow increase access to abortion, were groundless. The bishops would have sacrificed a once-in-half-a-century opportunity to move closer to universal health care for what turns out to be a phantom of the imagination of the most extreme elements in the anti-abortion lobby.

The second is Judy Gross's account of Greensburg, Pa., Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt's position prohibiting a women's religious order from advertising its upcoming vocation recruitment events in the diocesan newspaper because the order signed on to support the health care reform bill. We have published other accounts of episcopal tantrums provoked by women religious who supported the reform, but Brandt's action is especially remarkable.

Msgr. Lawrence T. Persico, vicar general of the Greensburg diocese, wrote a letter to priests in the diocese, stating that no diocesan office, The Catholic Accent (the diocesan newspaper), nor any parish "would promote a vocation awareness program of any religious community that has taken a stance against the United States bishops by being a signatory of the Network document."

What is interesting, of course, is that a position on a political question would be raised to the level of doctrine. Are the bishops now claiming some manner of authoritative, infallible teaching when it comes to political judgments?

It is especially ironic that bishops should move so quickly against a political decision – essentially finding an idea so dangerous that it requires some form of discipline – when we continue to read documents that have been released detailing the hierarchy's tolerance for and patience with ordained men who were serial molesters of children.

We are fortunate that religious women had the courage to rise above ideologically driven talking points and to articulate an intelligent and pragmatic position based on the deep tradition of Catholic social teaching as well as their experience as front-line providers of care for the sick and the marginalized. An issue as significant as health care deserved such prudence and thoughtfulness.

The following submission appeared on [The Gawker](#). The links in this article will take you to other sites, so exercise some caution.

The Pope Took Days to Remove Archbishop Who Defied Celibacy, But Years for Pedophiles

A lawyer for the Vatican claimed, in a statement earlier today, that the two years it took the current pope to **defrock a convicted pedophile was quick**. But in 2006 he excommunicated an Archbishop who defied the celibacy doctrine 'automatically'. On September 24th 2006 Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, of Zambia, **defied the Vatican by**

ordaining four married priests. On September 26th the Vatican issued a press release announcing that he had been excommunicated for "ordaining bishops without the approval of the Holy See."

On December 11th 2006, in defiance of that excommunication, Milingo ordained a further four married priests in Washington. On December the 17th, six days later, the Vatican issued a press release announcing that he had been dismissed "from the clerical state" — apparently an extraordinary measure that made the participation of Catholics in any ceremonies led by him unlawful (in the eyes of the church). "The commission of these grave crimes, which has recently been established," said the press release, "is to be considered as proof of the persistent contumacy of Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo. The Holy See has therefore been obliged to impose upon him the further penalty of dismissal from the clerical state." All the clergy he ordained were excommunicated automatically too.

Milingo had been defying the church for many years. But when he finally committed what the Vatican thought was a 'grave crime', there was no delay. Flagrantly breaking with the doctrine of celibacy was met with swift, decisive condemnation. The men he ordained were removed immediately too.

In 1978 the Reverend Stephen Kiesle, of Oakland, California, pleaded no contest to charges of tying up and molesting two young boys in a rectory. He was not removed from the church until 1987, despite requesting it himself in 1981. A portion of that delay meant that Kiesle was still dealing with children. The *Associated Press* have a letter from the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, about removing Kiesle — a process that took days in the case of Milingo in 2006. He said that "the arguments for removing Kiesle were of "grave significance" but such actions required very careful review and more time."

It was not the only occasion that such "careful review", was required. In two other cases that we know of, in Germany and in Wisconsin, he failed to act decisively to remove known pedophiles from the church. The German priest, the Reverend Peter Hullermann was, according to the *New York Times*, "later convicted of molesting boys in another parish."

Church abuse scandal: Who should confess, and who absolve?

The author, Peter Manseau, is a doctoral student in theology at Georgetown University and the author of several books, including *Vows: The Story of a Priest, a Nun, and their Son*.

Seven years ago, while Boston shook with the early tremors of the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal, my mother shared news that made my family part of what now seems a global seismic event. Like thousands of others in more than 20 countries, she had been abused by a priest in her youth.

Forty-five years earlier, she had been a pious girl, so much so that she joined a religious order after high school and remained a nun for 10 years. A newspaper photo shows a priest blessing my mother's kneeling family on the eve of her departure for the convent. The caption read in part, "Dedicates Life to the Glory of God."

The priest in the picture had steered her toward religious life, my mother told me. He also abused her for a year. One of those notorious priests moved from parish to parish despite numerous warnings and complaints, he had a church personnel file -- which was made public through a lawsuit -- that included the descriptions "sick," "intolerable" and "extremely dangerous." "Will probably kill someone," said one memo sent up the chain of ecclesiastical command.

Perhaps most heinous: After many incidents of abuse, he drove my mother to a neighboring parish to do penance -- to ask forgiveness for what she had done.

I couldn't help thinking of this when I heard that Pope Benedict XVI finally used the word "penance" to describe how he and others implicated in the abuse scandal might make amends.

"We Christians, even in recent times, have often avoided the word 'penance,' " he said in a homily Thursday. But now, he added, "We see how it is necessary to perform penance, that is, to recognize what is wrong in our life."

At the risk of nitpicking the closest thing to an apology we have heard from the Vatican, might we ask who the pope thinks "we Christians" are? Far too many of the faithful -- the victims themselves -- have already been made to feel sinful, unworthy and generally penitent through the decades of this scandal. So when Benedict XVI speaks of penance, he might be more precise: Who exactly should visit the confessional over this, and who will absolve them?

Here is a suggestion based on family experience:

A year after sharing her revelation, my mother learned that the priest who abused her had died. I still do not entirely understand the pull the man's death had on us, yet we both felt it strongly enough that we made the 90-minute drive from my parents' house in the Boston suburbs to a funeral home on Cape Cod. Inside, my mother signed the guest book and together we approached the open casket.

What I saw there was not evil incarnate; it was just a withered little man. The gray makeup covering his skin blended into the silver of his hair so that it seemed his head had been dipped in paint. Full priestly regalia draped from his Roman collar to his ankles, where two canvas sneakers poked out from the hem of his vestments.

Before we left the priest's wake, I knelt beside the casket with my mother. I have no doubt she prayed for the man's eternal soul, for the healing of the church, for the well-being of the pope and the bishops. I did not pray so much as sigh with relief: Finally, forgiveness was not hers to ask for; it was hers to give.

If the Vatican truly wants to do penance, absolution should not be sought in the secrecy of the confessional but in the open air of the pews. And instead of "we Christians," the pope would do well to begin his act of contrition as I'm sure my mother began hers long ago: "My God, I am sorry."

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