

Two fine articles that appear in today's papers.

**Five myths about the Catholic sexual abuse scandal
by David Gibson, for *The Washington Post***

VATICAN CITY -- As Benedict XVI prepares to mark the fifth anniversary of his election as pope here on Monday, he is beset by devastating reports about the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests -- and about his own role in the crisis. The reports have prompted sharp condemnations of the pontiff as well as a backlash of media criticism from papal defenders in the Vatican and around the world. Amid the firestorm, myths have emerged that only complicate the search for truth, healing and accountability.

1. Pope Benedict is the primary culprit in the coverup of the abuse scandal.

Between 1981 and 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future pope, headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's office for doctrinal orthodoxy. A few abuse cases (some from the United States) came before him, and the evidence shows that he did not move with any urgency to defrock priests. In 2001, as the number of cases coming to light worldwide increased, Ratzinger convinced Pope John Paul II to let his office have jurisdiction over all of them. Though the Vatican says church confidentiality did not preclude bishops from reporting crimes to civil authorities, some see Ratzinger's move as an attempt to keep the cases secret.

Nonetheless, there is just one case so far that can be traced directly to Ratzinger's tenure as a bishop, when he was head of the archdiocese of Munich in his native Germany. In that 1980 case, Ratzinger allowed a child abuser into his diocese for psychiatric treatment, and the priest was reassigned to a parish where he went on to abuse more children. It's unclear whether Ratzinger personally signed off on the assignment, but he seems to have acted more or less like most bishops at the time -- giving little oversight to the abuser and doing nothing to remove him from the priesthood. Alas, there is plenty of blame to go around for the church's passivity.

As pope, Benedict has blamed the media for exaggerating the scandals, yet he has moved more aggressively against abusers than John Paul II, his predecessor, who tried to stop defrocking priests altogether and who ignored evidence of the terrible abuses by the late Marcial Maciel Degollado, a well-known Mexican priest who founded the Legionaries of Christ, a secretive order that is under Vatican investigation.

During the 2000s, as Ratzinger came to realize the scope of the abuse, he expedited the defrocking of abusive priests and reopened the Maciel case, which had been closed under John Paul. "We realize that it's necessary to repent," Benedict said in a homily on Thursday. He has still has not punished bishops, however, with the same rigor with which he has targeted abusers.

2. Gay priests are to blame.

Some defenders of the Catholic Church's response to the abuse crisis say that homosexual priests are responsible for the majority of abuses, in part because more than 80 percent of the victims are male. They argue that true pedophiles -- adults who are pathologically attracted to pre-pubescent children -- constitute a small minority of

offenders. Vatican Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone repeated this gay-pedophile link on Wednesday, and such reasoning was partially behind a 2005 Vatican policy barring gays from seminaries.

Such assertions have numerous flaws. For one thing, research shows that gay men are no more likely to molest children than straight men. (And celibacy doesn't seem to be a determining factor, either.) Yes, 80 percent of the victims were male, but many offenders assaulted children of both sexes. Maciel abused boys and fathered children with several women. Moreover, the abusers had access to boys; an adult male couldn't go on overnight trips with girls or take them away unchaperoned.

Finally, while critics of gay clerics fret that homosexuals dominate the priesthood and endanger children, in fact the ostensible increase in gay priests in recent years has coincided with a sharp decrease in reports of child abuse by clergy.

3. Sexual abuse is more pervasive in the Catholic Church than in other institutions.

Sexual abuse of minors is not the province of the Catholic Church alone. About 4 percent of priests committed an act of sexual abuse on a minor between 1950 and 2002, according to a study being conducted by John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. That is roughly consistent with data on many similar professions.

An extensive 2007 investigation by the Associated Press showed that sexual abuse of children in U.S. schools was "widespread," and most of it was never reported or punished. And in Portland, Ore., last week, a jury reached a \$1.4 million verdict against the Boy Scouts of America in a trial that showed that since the 1920s, Scouts officials kept "perversion files" on suspected abusers but kept them secret.

"We don't see the Catholic Church as a hotbed of this or a place that has a bigger problem than anyone else," Ernie Allen, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, told Newsweek. "I can tell you without hesitation that we have seen cases in many religious settings, from traveling evangelists to mainstream ministers to rabbis and others."

Part of the issue is that the Catholic Church is so tightly organized and keeps such meticulous records -- many of which have come to light voluntarily or through court orders -- that it can yield a fairly reliable portrait of its personnel and abuse over the decades. Other institutions, and most other religions, are more decentralized and harder to analyze or prosecute.

Still, it is hardly good news that the church appears to be no different from most other institutions in its incidence of abuse. Shouldn't the Catholic Church and other religious institutions hold to a higher standard?

4. Media outlets are biased against the Catholic Church.

While the Vatican and the pope's champions argue -- often in conspiratorial tones -- that the media is biased against the church, the truth is quite the opposite.

The church and the pope do receive major media attention, and with reason. The pope is a world leader as well as the temporal head of one of the world's most storied religious traditions. There are more than 1.1 billion Catholics on the planet, and the Catholic Church is the largest denomination in the United States, with more than 65 million baptized members. In the media, holidays such as Christmas and Easter tend to be dominated by Catholic images.

The pope also makes news with his pronouncements on a range of topics, and his travels are media events. Pope John Paul II's death and funeral in April 2005 produced wall-to-wall coverage for weeks, generating some of the most favorable press the church has ever had.

The annual survey of religion in the news conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life showed that in 2008 -- the year Benedict traveled to Washington and New York -- coverage of the pope and of the Catholic Church accounted for more than half of all news stories about religion, and the majority were positive or explanatory. You don't hear the church complaining about this kind of attention.

5. The crisis will compel U.S. Catholics to leave the church.

When the initial revelations of widespread sexual abuse by clergy emerged in 2002, many believed that Catholics would abandon the church en masse, or at least send the institution toward insolvency by withholding donations. But then, as now, American Catholics turned out to be an unpredictable lot. Though critical of the bishops and the Vatican, Catholics tend to love their local parishes and priests. And even if they don't heed all church mandates, they don't easily shed all the cultural and sacramental markers of their faith.

A 2007 Pew survey of the religious landscape in America found that among Catholics who had left the church, the abuse crisis ranked low on the list of reasons -- well behind church teachings on homosexuality, the role of women, abortion and contraception. And a 2008 poll by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate showed that even the bishops had enjoyed a rebound in approval, with satisfaction with the hierarchy growing from 58 percent in 2004 to 72 percent in 2008.

Still, Catholic leaders can't be complacent. Some 10 percent of all Americans are former Catholics, and without immigrants, the number of American Catholics would be falling, not growing slightly. In a competitive marketplace, it's not smart to put your customers' loyalty to such a test.

A Church Mary Can Love

By *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof

I heard a joke the other day about a pious soul who dies, goes to heaven, and gains an audience with the Virgin Mary. The visitor asks Mary why, for all her blessings, she always appears in paintings as a bit sad, a bit wistful: Is everything O.K.?

Mary reassures her visitor: "Oh, everything's great. No problems. It's just ... it's just that we had always wanted a daughter."

That story comes to mind as the Vatican wrestles with the consequences of a patriarchal premodern mind-set: scandal, cover-up and the clumsiest self-defense since Watergate. That's what happens with old boys' clubs.

It wasn't inevitable that the Catholic Church would grow so addicted to male domination, celibacy and rigid hierarchies. Jesus himself focused on the needy rather than dogma, and went out of his way to engage women and treat them with respect.

The first-century church was inclusive and democratic, even including a proto-feminist wing and texts. The Gospel of Philip, a Gnostic text from the third century, declares of Mary Magdalene: "She is the one the Savior loved more than all the disciples." Likewise, the Gospel of Mary (from the early second century) suggests that Jesus entrusted Mary Magdalene to instruct the disciples on his religious teachings.

St. Paul refers in Romans 16 to a first-century woman named Junia as prominent among the early apostles, and to a woman named Phoebe who served as a deacon. The Apostle Junia became a Christian before St. Paul did (chauvinist translators have sometimes rendered her name masculine, with no scholarly basis).

Yet over the ensuing centuries, the church reverted to strong patriarchal attitudes, while also becoming increasingly uncomfortable with sexuality. The shift may have come with the move from house churches, where women were naturally accepted, to more public gatherings.

The upshot is that proto-feminist texts were not included when the Bible was compiled (and were mostly lost until modern times). Tertullian, an early Christian leader, denounced women as "the gateway to the devil," while a contemporary account reports that the great Origen of Alexandria took his piety a step further and castrated himself.

The Catholic Church still seems stuck today in that patriarchal rut. The same faith that was so pioneering that it had Junia as a female apostle way back in the first century can't even have a woman as the lowliest parish priest. Female deacons, permitted for centuries, are banned today.

That old boys' club in the Vatican became as self-absorbed as other old boys' clubs, like Lehman Brothers, with similar results. And that is the reason the Vatican is floundering today.

But there's more to the picture than that. In my travels around the world, I encounter two Catholic Churches. One is the rigid all-male Vatican hierarchy that seems out of touch when it bans condoms even among married couples where one partner is H.I.V.-positive. To me at least, this church — obsessed with dogma and rules and distracted from social justice — is a modern echo of the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized.

Yet there's another Catholic Church as well, one I admire intensely. This is the grass-roots Catholic Church that does far more good in the world than it ever gets credit for. This is the church that supports extraordinary aid organizations like Catholic Relief

Services and Caritas, saving lives every day, and that operates superb schools that provide needy children an escalator out of poverty.

This is the church of the nuns and priests in Congo, toiling in obscurity to feed and educate children. This is the church of the Brazilian priest fighting AIDS who told me that if he were pope, he would build a condom factory in the Vatican to save lives.

This is the church of the Maryknoll Sisters in Central America and the Cabrini Sisters in Africa. There's a stereotype of nuns as stodgy Victorian traditionalists. I learned otherwise while hanging on for my life in a passenger seat as an American nun with a lead foot drove her jeep over ruts and through a creek in Swaziland to visit AIDS orphans. After a number of encounters like that, I've come to believe that the very coolest people in the world today may be nuns.

So when you read about the scandals, remember that the Vatican is not the same as the Catholic Church. Ordinary lepers, prostitutes and slum-dwellers may never see a cardinal, but they daily encounter a truly noble Catholic Church in the form of priests, nuns and lay workers toiling to make a difference.

It's high time for the Vatican to take inspiration from that sublime — even divine — side of the Catholic Church, from those church workers whose magnificence lies not in their vestments, but in their selflessness. They're enough to make the Virgin Mary smile.

Go to *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* for the links to corroborating facts for each of these articles as well as for ways to respond to the authors.

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