

This article is by Ross Douthat, an Op Ed columnist for the *New York Times*. It appeared on March 29.

A Time for Contrition

During a frustrating argument with a Roman Catholic cardinal, Napoleon Bonaparte supposedly burst out: “Your eminence, are you not aware that I have the power to destroy the Catholic Church?” The cardinal, the anecdote goes, responded ruefully: “Your majesty, we, the Catholic clergy, have done our best to destroy the church for the last 1,800 years. We have not succeeded, and neither will you.”

Two centuries later, the clergy has taken another shot at it. What the American and Irish churches have endured in the last decade and what German Catholics find themselves enduring today is all part of the same grim story: the exposure, years after the fact, of an appalling period in which the Catholic hierarchy responded to an explosion of priestly sex abuse with cover-ups, evasions and criminal negligence. Now the scandal has touched the pope himself. There are two charges against Benedict XVI: first, that he allowed a pedophile priest to return to ministry while archbishop of Munich in 1980; and second, that as head of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the 1990s, he failed to defrock a Wisconsin priest who had abused deaf children 30 years before.

The second charge seems unfair. The case was finally forwarded to the Vatican by the archbishop of Milwaukee, Rembert Weakland, more than 20 years after the last allegation of abuse. With the approval of then-Cardinal Ratzinger’s deputy, the statute of limitations was waived and a canonical trial ordered. It was only suspended because the priest was terminally ill; indeed, pretrial proceedings were halted just before he died.

But the first charge is more serious. The Vatican insists that the crucial decision was made without the future pope’s knowledge, but the paper trail suggests that he could have been in the loop. At best, then-Archbishop Ratzinger was negligent. At worst, he enabled further abuse.

For those of us who admire the pope, either possibility is distressing, but neither should come as a great surprise. The lesson of the American experience, now exhaustively documented, is that almost everyone was complicit in the scandal. From diocese to diocese, the same cover-ups and gross errors of judgment repeated themselves regardless of who found themselves in charge. Neither theology nor geography mattered: the worst offenders were Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston and Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles — a conservative and a liberal, on opposite ends of the country.

This hasn’t prevented both sides in the Catholic culture war from claiming that the scandal vindicates their respective vision of the church. Liberal Catholics, echoed by the secular press, insist that the whole problem can be traced to clerical celibacy. Conservatives blame the moral relativism that swept the church in the upheavals of the 1970s, when the worst abuses and cover-ups took place.

In reality, the scandal implicates left and right alike. The permissive sexual culture that prevailed everywhere, seminaries included, during the silly season of the '70s deserves a share of the blame, as does that era's overemphasis on therapy. (Again and again, bishops relied on psychiatrists rather than common sense in deciding how to handle abusive clerics.) But it was the church's conservative instincts — the insistence on institutional loyalty, obedience and the absolute authority of clerics — that allowed the abuse to spread unpunished.

What's more, it was a conservative hierarchy's bunker mentality that prevented the Vatican from reckoning with the scandal. In a characteristic moment in 2002, a prominent cardinal told a Spanish audience that "I am personally convinced that the constant presence in the press of the sins of Catholic priests, especially in the United States, is a planned campaign ... to discredit the church."

That cardinal was Joseph Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI. Since then, he's come to grips with the crisis in ways that his predecessor did not: after years of drift and denial under John Paul II, the Vatican has taken vigorous steps to promote zero tolerance, expedite the dismissal of abusive priests and organize investigations that should have happened long ago. Because of Benedict's recent efforts, and the efforts of clerics and laypeople dating back to the first wave of revelations in the 1980s, Catholics can reasonably hope that the crisis of abuse is a thing of the past. But the crisis of authority endures. There has been some accountability for the abusers, but not nearly enough for the bishops who enabled them. And now the shadow of past sins threatens to engulf this papacy.

Popes do not resign. But a pope can clean house. And a pope can show contrition, on his own behalf and on behalf of an entire generation of bishops, for what was done and left undone in one of Catholicism's darkest eras.

This is Holy Week, when the first pope, Peter, broke faith with Christ and wept for shame. There is no better time for repentance.

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