

Priests and Pedophiles

The Attack on the Catholic Church

by Philip Jenkins



Anna Myreck-Wodecki

“Catholic priests claim to be celibate, but we know what they’re really up to. Most of them seduce women, the rest like little boys. Priests trap them in the confessional, and when the priests are found out, the bishops let them off with a slap on the wrist. Celibacy, hierarchy, secrecy, the confessional—those are the things that make the Catholic Church the sink of iniquity it is.” Put in various ways, sentiments like these have been the common currency of anticlerical and anti-Catholic rhetoric for almost as long as there has been a Catholic Church. We might think that these ideas would by now have gone the way of the other myths and stereotypes that once adhered to (say) Jews or blacks; but in fact, the attack on Roman Catholic clergy as sexual monsters is at this very moment reaching a crescendo in North America.

The panic over “clergy sex abuse,” or “priestly pedophilia,” has reached far beyond the trashy television talk shows and now threatens to become a devastatingly effective vehicle for anti-Catholic activism and legislation. This manufactured and manipulated crisis is being used as a justification for the wholesale evisceration of Catholic tradition, with liberal and feminist groups the chief beneficiaries. This is a classic example of the artificial generation of a social panic for partisan ends; and as yet, few of those under attack seem to understand what is happening, still fewer are able to organize a defense.

Since colonial days, fear and hatred of the Catholic Church have been among the most powerful political forces in Amer-

ican history; anti-Catholic sentiment has ignited riots, spawned political parties, and determined elections. And while other forms of prejudice have increasingly been condemned in public discourse, this specific type of bigotry remains remarkably acceptable, particularly in liberal circles. Apart from the traditional stereotypes—lascivious priests, tyrannical bishops, the cynical exploitation of a superstitious laity—we now have a new battery of myths, suggesting that the Catholic Church is the most prominent obstacle to the rights and interests of women and homosexuals. Issues like abortion, contraception, gay rights, AIDS education, and the ordination of women have made the Church the primary protagonist of “wrong” (*i.e.*, traditional) views in American society.

A price has had to be paid for this stubborn refusal to conform, especially in the distortions and vicious attacks regularly presented by the media. Any doubts about the fundamental anti-Catholicism of liberal society should have been put to rest by the 1989 assault by AIDS activists on a mass in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City, during which a series of outrages culminated in the desecration of the Host. Hate crimes are nothing new in this country, but this was one of the rare instances in which the media took the side of the “protesters” and all but unanimously depicted the victim group as having merited this just anger. We observe the same attitude when gay rights parades feature grotesque caricatures of priests and nuns, whose closest precedents are the portraits of Jews in the Nazi paper *Der Stürmer*. It is inconceivable that any other ethnic or religious group would receive such treatment; but then again, hatred of Catholicism has rightly been described as “the thinking man’s anti-Semitism.”

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For all the media attacks, the Church has remained remarkably resilient and has even won political successes, for example through its leadership of the pro-life movement. Its opponents had therefore to be even more resourceful in seeking effective weapons for sabotage. One problem they faced was that many of the traditional rhetorical devices of prejudice no longer worked, because of changing religious attitudes. With the Bible playing so little role in mainstream society, it was scarcely effective to argue that Catholicism was “unscriptural” or that the Pope could somehow be identified with the Scarlet Woman or the Whore of Babylon. However, there were other things that had replaced religion as the most cherished social value and that could be used to denigrate the Church. The ideal solution would have been to identify the Church with racism; but that was wholly implausible in view of the consistent liberal activism of clergy in this area. That left the two other modern shibboleths, namely sexuality and children, here combined in the late 20th-century nightmare of the sexual abuse of children. Might it be possible to revive the ancient stereotype of the priest as sexual predator?

The solution to the anti-Catholic dilemma emerged in the mid-1980's, with the first of several cases involving the repeated sexual abuse of children by priests and members of religious orders. One of the most celebrated was that of Father Gilbert Gauthe in Louisiana, who was first identified as a molester in the early 1970's but was moved to several other parishes before his crimes came to public awareness. In other words, the local hierarchy seemed to connive with his horrific crimes by failing to intervene at a sufficiently early stage and in fact by placing at risk the children to whose parishes he was subsequently sent. This tragic case involved (at best) serious misjudgments and organizational failings on the part of the Church, and there was a widespread scandal when the affair came to court in 1985.

Over the next three years, there were dozens of notorious cases following broadly similar lines, sometimes involving the manufacture and distribution of child pornography. In response, there emerged literature suggesting that there was more to the problem than the existence of a few individuals with serious moral failings. Clergy sex abuse was a social epidemic on a vast scale, and it was permitted, even encouraged, by the structure and institutions of the Church. The lack of full investigation and disclosure permitted “pedophile priests” to carry on their sinister careers for years. Another recurrent theme concerned the reluctance of secular law enforcement authorities to arrest and prosecute these legions of delinquent clergy. This appears to revive the archaic charge of “dual loyalty,” the suggestion that Catholics holding secular office obey the demands of their church before their public duties.

By the late 1980's, the materials for a panic were in place, in terms of cohorts of self-styled “experts” like Jason Berry and Marie Fortune and of a literature applying to clerical problems the wisdom of secular child abuse experts. This literature broadly accepted an essentially feminist analysis, that child abuse was a manifestation of patriarchal tyranny, an all but ubiquitous atrocity that had appalling and lifelong effects on its millions of victims. As Father Andrew Greeley has written, abusers are far worse than alcoholics or drunk drivers: “alcoholics are dangerous only to themselves, their families, and the people they smash with their cars, but each pedophile is a threat to the future lives of hundreds of children.”

These beliefs supported the view that clerical abuse was both pervasive and destructive, which came as music to the ears of a growing profession of lawyers who now won huge liability lawsuits against Catholic dioceses. It is estimated that by the mid-1990's, the cumulative total of damages from this type of case will exceed a billion dollars. The ensuing scandals have had a snowball effect, encouraging past victims, real or imaginary, to come forward and register their complaints—all of which gives real social momentum to the panic. Lawyers have been among the greatest beneficiaries, but also significant were the profits to be made in organizing and teaching the countless seminars, workshops, training programs, and “encounter groups” on abuse-related issues that now litter the advertisement pages of every religious newspaper and journal. Of course, Catholic clergy were not the only targets of the panic, and we found lawsuits against most of the major Christian denominations, as well as Jewish groups; but the image of the celibate priest naturally attracted particular suspicion and hostility.

There were sizable vested interests at stake (both financial and ideological) in generating a “clerical abuse” problem, and these efforts reached fruition in the early years of the present decade. Following new Catholic-focused scandals, especially in the diocese of Chicago and in the Canadian province of Newfoundland, reports of “priestly pedophiles” became an almost daily occurrence in the media—though in some cases, investigations were reaching back to alleged misdeeds committed many years before. Recently, there has been great scandal about a case of this sort where a priest in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, was said to have been involved in hundreds of incidents as long ago as the 1960's. The literature on the topic mushroomed, with major investigative reports in most leading newspapers, as well as in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and journals like *Ms.* and *Vanity Fair*.

In this atmosphere, both secular and ecclesiastical authorities struggled to respond, with proposed solutions potentially draconian. The diocese of Chicago has now suggested a lay-dominated board that would hear and investigate charges against priests, even when such accusations were received over an anonymous hotline. Accused clergy would be suspended at an early stage of the process.

For no one was permitted to doubt that this was a crisis. The language employed by the media repeatedly suggested both the vast scale of the problem and the role played by official cover-ups and wrongdoing in high places. This was the “S&L disaster of the Catholic Church,” an “ecclesiastical Watergate,” a “meltdown.” Andrew Greeley drew comparisons with the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill farrago, which in contemporary liberal martyrology represents the ultimate manifestation of a patriarchal cover-up of male wrongdoing. According to Catholic writer Thomas Doyle, pedophilia represents “the most serious problem that we in the Church have faced in centuries”: quite a claim when the issue is considered alongside the Enlightenment, Darwinism, wholesale secularization, Communism, and Nazism. When the problem was quantified, it appeared to be immense. Several accounts indicated that five or six percent of American priests might be “pedophiles” or molesters, suggesting a total of nearly three thousand troubled and dangerous individuals.

In a full-scale panic, it is often difficult to pause and ask whether the concern is entirely justified or whether there is any substance whatever to the issue; but this “crisis,” more than

most, presents a number of quite significant difficulties. For example, it cannot be denied that some priests, being human, commit serious crimes, while large institutions tend sometimes to favor self-interest and self-protection over the public good. But we knew this already. What is more contentious, and indeed wildly speculative, is the estimate of the scale of the problem. Who has the slightest idea whether the number of priests who molest children is twenty percent of the total or whether it is a fraction of one percent? And contrary to the impression derived from “experts,” we do *not* know much about the impact of noncoercive molestation on children or adolescents: in the late 1970’s, most therapists thought the effects were relatively trivial; in the early 1990’s, we think they are devastating. Who is to know?

Problems are defined by language, and the issue of “clergy abuse” is no exception. The term builds on an existing fund of socially available knowledge and imagery. Since we know what “abuse” is (or think we know) and what clergy are, we therefore can work out what the terms mean in combination. “Clergy abuse” means exploitative molestation of children by priests or religious; or so it should. But looking into the somewhat bizarre literature on the topic, it swiftly becomes apparent that “clerical abuse” means no such thing. In effect, the term relates to any sexual contact between a clergyman and any of his parishioners, male or female, no matter how adult or consenting. A recent article in *Ms.* defined “clergy abuse” with incredible breadth as “inappropriate sexual behavior or sexual contact with parishioners, clients or employees.” In 1991, the journal *Episcopal Life* published an irate and deeply felt series on “clergy sexual abuse,” which it presented as one of the gravest crises facing that church; yet most of the case studies offered involved heterosexual relationships between consenting adults. We can imagine that a woman in her 30’s might feel “abused” or exploited in such a relationship, but this is hardly on a moral par with the actions of a schoolyard molester.

Priestly pedophilia has become a superb weapon to be used against the Church, because it presents a stereotype that appears gravely threatening to the most loyal Catholic parishioners themselves. Pedophilia also seems so unquestionably evil that it becomes impossible to challenge the critics: to question the panic is to attack the pathetic victims or—still worse—to exhibit the grave pathology known as ‘denial.’

In the Catholic Church, we hear much about “pedophilia,” an attractive term because of the alliterative quality of “priestly pedophilia.” Like “molestation” or “abuse,” this word suggests involvement with children, ranging in age from toddlers to pubescent youngsters, and further suggests forced acts that partake to some extent of the nature of rape. These acts have

certainly occurred, indeed in some of the more notorious cases. However, by no means did all of the scandals involve “molestation,” and many did not include victims we can accurately characterize as “children.” When considered in detail, perhaps eighty or ninety percent of the cases involved sexual liaisons between priests and boys or young men in their teens or early 20’s.

This behavior may be reprehensible in terms of ecclesiastical and moral codes of sexual conduct, specifically in violating vows of celibacy; and it might well be that the power relationship between priest and young parishioner renders it difficult to speak of it as fully consensual. However, the nature of the act would seem to be better characterized as “homosexuality” than “pedophilia” or molestation. In the words of a Nova Scotia bishop, following the scandal at the Mount Cashel home in Newfoundland, “we are not dealing with classic pedophilia. I do not want to argue that homosexual activity between a priest and an adolescent is therefore moral. Rather it does not have the horrific character of pedophilia.”

This is neither to defend nor to justify the conduct, but it is necessary to stress that conventional language may exaggerate both the degree of force used on and the nature of harm done to the supposed victim. Failure to discriminate between homosexuality and pedophilia was long a feature of antihomosexual polemic; it is surprising to find such a confusion of terminology in contemporary liberal circles.

But there are many oddities in this controversy, many areas in which our normal expectations about partisan attitudes are confounded. For instance, the Catholic Church has for years recognized the problem of abusers in its ranks and has attempted to deal with the problem in a humane and therapeutic way, refusing to invoke the criminal justice system. Offending clerics have been treated both as sinners capable of reform and as sick individuals deserving treatment rather than punishment. This would seem to be a model example of penological liberalism, yet it is this very humanity that has earned the wrath of liberals and feminists who demand that offenders be subject to the rigorous penalties of law for their sexual misdeeds.

Can this be correct? Liberals denouncing homosexuality? Liberals calling for the police and courts to enforce moral laws? This would all be very surprising if we did not recognize the deeper anti-Catholic agenda at work here. Priestly pedophilia has become a superb weapon to be used against the Church, because it presents a stereotype that appears gravely threatening to the most loyal Catholic parishioners themselves. Pedophilia also seems so unquestionably evil that it becomes impossible to challenge the critics: to question the panic is to attack the pathetic victims or—still worse—to exhibit the grave pathology known as “denial.” It is simply not acceptable to believe or to state that some, even a handful, of the alleged victims might be less than impeccable in their stories. In child abuse, as in Catholic doctrine, there is a firm but selective belief in infallibility.

Moreover, if in fact the problem is as bad as has been described, then desperate measures are required to deal with it; and by a remarkable coincidence, the best solutions appear to be found in the traditional liberal and anti-Catholic agenda—measures that strike at the heart of Catholic belief, teaching, and practice. If this statement seems hyperbolic, consider several specific practices that have long been attacked by

liberal critics of the Church—celibacy, confession, the male priesthood. All have been denounced in the aftermath of the sex scandals, and the Church has had to struggle to defend its traditions—needless to say, with the critics receiving the wholehearted support of the media. As a rhetorical device, the association is brilliant: to oppose the “reform” of celibacy or women’s ordination is to defend child abuse and even to attract suspicion to oneself as a friend and accomplice of abusers.

There are many illustrations of this assault. For example, there is a detailed if partisan study of the Newfoundland affair in Michael Harris’s 1990 book *Unholy Orders*, which describes the many protest meetings of parishioners and other citizen groups. A typical statement in these meetings was that “the only way to purge the Church was to allow priests to marry and to open the seminary doors to women.” “Other radical means were proposed,” continues Harris, “including the abolition of confession so that fallen priests wouldn’t have an easy means of homing in on their victims.” During 1989, moreover, the Canadian hierarchy found itself under intense popular pressure to consider permitting married priests.

The crisis has not yet reached national proportions in the United States, but all the same indignant voices have been heard. In the early 1980’s, the panic over child abuse led virtually all states to pass mandatory reporting statutes, providing harsh criminal penalties for “any person” failing to report known or suspected abuse. The sweeping legislation failed to provide exemption for groups like doctors and therapists, who had traditionally enjoyed a privileged confidential relationship with their clients, and even demanded compliance by clergy. Only a handful of states provided clergy exemption, which technically means that a Catholic priest is breaking the law if he fails to expose an offense he has discovered (or *suspected*) through the confessional. One law review article terms this “the pending gauntlet to free exercise (of religion).” It is difficult to imagine any jurisdiction foolhardy enough to risk such a dramatic church-state confrontation, but the possibility is much less unthinkable than it would have been five years ago. We may yet see bishops and priests in prison for respecting the sanctity of the confessional.

Abuse—whatever this means—has also provided an excuse for a frontal assault on celibacy. The last few years have witnessed a spate of books on the unpopularity of clerical celibacy, and it has been alleged that priests and religious respond to their inner conflicts in one of two ways: either they ignore the discipline by forming relationships with women or they become pedophiles. Recent books—quoted with glowing approval in the major newspapers—have suggested that anywhere up to half of all priests effectively ignore celibacy regulations. Such studies cannot fail to have an impact, and recent opinion polls suggest that the number of Catholics favoring married priests rose from 58 percent in 1983 to 70 percent in 1992. Those supporting the ordination of women priests grew in the same period from 40 percent to nearly 70 percent. These changes cannot be entirely attributed to the panic over child abuse, but the coincidence in timing is striking.

The question of child abuse has done much to subvert a series of fundamental Catholic institutions that had remained largely unchallenged since the Reformation. It is quite possible to imagine a Catholic Church with married clergy, with women priests, and without auricular confession, though many would question how far such a body could claim an authentic

link to Catholic tradition. But such changes appear mild when compared with the intellectual and cultural revolution that is now threatened in the name of feminist theology, in which the theme of child abuse plays a fundamental role. Christian feminists have often been criticized for their ambition to create new systems oriented toward the worship of a nurturing goddess rather than a traditional Judeo-Christian deity. In the process, they have shown a disturbing willingness to synthesize practices and beliefs from other female-oriented religions (including New Age groups and “Wicca” witches). Creeping neopaganism has often used the issue of abuse as a means of self-justification, leading many activists to challenge virtually all of the basic concepts not merely of Catholicism, but of Christianity as such.

Christian churches have differed over many aspects of their faith, but the great majority have held fast to certain key notions: human sinfulness, the atonement, the sacrificial death of Christ, redemptive suffering, and the forgiveness of sins as the highest virtue. All of these ideas have been denounced by leading feminists like Mary Daly, Alice Miller, Matthew Fox, and Joanne Carlson Brown, precisely because these mainstream Christian notions represent what they term a “theology of abuse.” In this view, guilt and a sense of sin represent the psychic scars of the primal rape and abuse suffered by the believer, while God becomes the ultimate abuser. *Episcopal Life* quoted a theorist who challenged the theology of the crucifixion: “To me, it is an abusive act of a father toward a child. The theology of sin in the church is all about human worthlessness.” Absurd as it may seem, the Trinity becomes the celestial archetype of the dysfunctional family.

The essays in one of feminism’s major texts—*Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*—repeatedly challenge Christian beliefs in this same vein. For example, “We do not need to be saved by Jesus’ death from some original sin. We need to be liberated from the oppression of racism, classism and sexism, that is, from patriarchy. . . . Peace was not made by the Cross . . . suffering is never redemptive, and suffering cannot be redeemed.” Furthermore, “As an aspect of trinitarian thought, Christology is often based on implicit elements of child abuse.” Even forgiveness is prohibited in some instances, because the offense of child abuse is so immeasurably severe and because forgiving gets in the way of the “healing” of the alleged victim. Perhaps, after all these centuries, we have finally identified the mysterious “sin against the Holy Spirit,” which cannot be forgiven? The Christian and specifically Catholic condemnation of sexual immorality is dismissed in these same pages as “theological pornography.”

It is less than two decades since a “child abuse problem” was defined in this country. In that brief time, however, the problem—and the ideology based upon it—has gained such support that it has revolutionized our justice system and undermined our churches. The panic is in a sense a perfect weapon, because so few are prepared to question this orthodoxy and hence to challenge its practical consequences. Realizing this, liberals and feminists have used the abuse ideology as a Trojan Horse to enter and to subvert many traditional institutions. In religion, the panic threatens to overthrow not merely the Catholic Church but much of the essence of Christianity itself. Child abuse might indeed be the greatest threat the Church has faced in centuries, but the danger comes less from the handful of pedophile clergy than from the cynical activists who are exploiting their misdeeds.

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The Pilgrimage of Malcolm Muggeridge

by Sally S. Wright



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

In the second segment of the several-part BBC documentary on his life, Malcolm Muggeridge smoothed his white feathery hair away from his cherubic face, smiled cryptically, and said in his deep, rolling, gentle English voice, “There’s nothing in this world more instinctively abhorrent to me than finding myself in agreement with my fellow humans.” And certainly, for 65 years, he prodded, provoked, amused, and altered British consciousness as a journalist, author, and television commentator who mocked the posturings of modern life. From the time he was a little child, he wanted to work with words, and he was best known for his wit and satire, for lines like, “If Hitler had treated dogs the way he treated the Jews, the British people would have clamored for war two years earlier.” Yet he was more than a social critic and irreverent humorist who pinpointed the pitfalls of human institutions. By the time he died in November 1990, Malcolm Muggeridge had become the most widely read Christian apologist since C. S. Lewis—much to the disgust of his peers in the press, who had been irritated with him since he first rejected his family faith.

For Malcolm had been raised to be a Socialist activist by a quixotic father he dearly loved. And as a fourteen-year-old boy, in 1917, Malcolm was so taken with the Russian Revolution he decided he would one day move to Russia. In 1932, he was sent there as a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, and there he and his wife, Kitty, planned to renounce their British citizenship and to take up residence in the “peoples’ paradise.”

What he saw of censorship and oppression in Stalin’s regime, however, depressed him. And he grew to hate the Soviet system, especially after slipping Moscow security (unlike

any other Western correspondent at the time) and traveling by train through the Ukraine and the Caucasus. There, while American and British journalists in and out of Russia wrote about the startling agricultural success of Soviet communism, Muggeridge saw the barren land, the deserted villages, the peasants with hollow eyes and emaciated bodies, “their hands tied behind their backs, being driven into cattle trucks at gun point,” as forced collectivization (using the Red Army backed by air cover) slaughtered ten million Ukrainians and destroyed the breadbasket of Russia. There Muggeridge also saw religious persecution (orders disbanded, their possessions stolen, many of their priests shot). He wrote about such things in three articles on the Ukraine and the Caucasus, which he smuggled out in diplomatic pouches. The leftist *Guardian* reluctantly printed them, though they censored the articles and criticized Muggeridge, prompting him to resign. When he returned to England, he found himself attacked in one periodical after another for “lying” about Stalinist Russia. In the next few years, he could hardly find a publisher for his work.

Adversity is usually the way spiritual lessons are taught, and Muggeridge was paying attention. He had learned in the Soviet Union that heaven will never be built on earth, that no human system can provide justice and peace and plenty, and that mankind will not grow better and finer on its own. Muggeridge saw that it is our *values*, not our production processes and social arrangements, that make life bearable or worth living. For he had watched his wife on the verge of death by typhoid in the Soviet Union, and he had seen starving peasants in a church in Kiev worshiping with faces “transformed by suffering,” which spoke to him of something greater than bread or starvation. He had also seen, by 1936, the in-

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