

OP-ED: The Church Falls to Earth

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As the weeks and months of the Roman Catholic Church pedophile scandal wear on, with bishops falling by the wayside and ever more damning documents coming to light, I think of the words, "The gates of Hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) Then I recall the poet Shelley's "Ozymandias," whose monument lies in ruins and whose inscription boasting of his greatness is surrounded by endless desert sands.

In the past, Church leaders were regarded as living apart from the profane world, upholding timeless moral standards. The exposure of the Church's systematic cover-up of child sexual abuse by priests has caused a fall to earth that cannot be undone by pretending that it hasn't happened. A scandal resulting from institutional denial on the subject of human sexuality cannot be overcome by more such denial. It is time for the Church to face the fact that repressing sex only chases it underground and turns healthy desires into pathologies.

Unfortunately, Church leaders have shown that they are interested neither in real contrition nor in reexamining their policies, but in defending their privileged position at all costs. Archdiocesan lawyers in Boston accuse a 6-year-old boy and his parents of negligence for trusting the priest accused of molesting him. Bernard Cardinal Law suffers a convenient memory lapse. Priests in Connecticut are described as self-employed contractors. Investigators are hired to find dirt on alleged victims. The Church insists on sealing court records, and cites statutes of limitations after concealing crimes for decades. The papal nuncio invokes diplomatic immunity. Legal force replaces moral force. ^[1]

While their lawyers pursue a scorched-earth strategy, the princes of the Church offer up scapegoats. In early March, Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls told *The New York Times* that "people with [homosexual] inclinations just cannot be ordained." In late April, after the Pope's meeting with American cardinals, Bishop Wilton Gregory, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said, "It is an ongoing struggle to make sure the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men." He also worried about gay cabals in seminaries: "One of the difficulties we do face in seminary life or recruitment is made possible when there does exist a homosexual atmosphere or dynamic that makes heterosexual men think twice." In other words, the problem is not the bishops' obstruction of justice, but gay priests.

There are certainly plenty of gay priests. Donald Cozzens, a Cleveland seminary rector and author of *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, cites studies suggesting that 30 to 50 percent of priests are gay. ^[2] Yet only a small percentage of priests have been accused of any wrongdoing. Why have officials not made similar generalizations about heterosexual priests when the alleged victims were girls? The answer, of course, is that heterosexuality is taken for granted. No one would dream of blaming a heterosexual rape on anyone but the perpetrator. ^[3] Making false generalizations about gays is easier.

It is not surprising that the priesthood should be disproportionately gay, considering how many heterosexual priests have traded their clerical collars for wedding bands. At my alma mater, Villanova University, both the Dean of Arts and Sciences and the Vicar Provincial of the Order of Saint Augustine left the priesthood to marry. Given this trend, it would make more sense to revisit the celibacy rule than to attack the priests who stayed. As Cozzens says, "If they were to eliminate all those who were homosexually oriented, the number would be so staggering that it would be like an atomic bomb." Garry Wills writes in *The New York Review of Books*, "Other Christian denominations have openly debated the ministry of gays, and some have gone on to admit them as pastors. That kind of open discussion has been aborted for Catholics by the Vatican's blanket condemnation of all homosexual activity, making gay priests live furtive lives, participating in the cover-up of other things by the hierarchy."^[4] The real scandal, as Wills observes, is one of dishonesty.

The Eternal and Unchanging Magisterium

Church leaders are unwilling to discuss changing the celibacy requirement. They talk as if their every rule were carved on golden tablets by Christ Himself, but in fact mandatory celibacy for priests goes back only to the Second Lateran Council in 1139.^[5] This had as much to do with money and power as it did with the teachings of Christ. In its early days, the Church had popes who were the sons of popes. The Fifth Century saw Pope Innocent I, son of Pope Anastasius I. The Sixth Century saw Pope St. Silverius,^[6] son of Pope St. Hormisdas.^[7]

Even during the Renaissance, the siring of illegitimate Borgias and Medicis did not harm the careers of Popes Alexander VI and Clement VII. Church policies and practices have changed substantially over the centuries, and popes have not always held themselves to the same standards as their underlings.

Clinging to their myth of an eternal and unchanging Magisterium, Church leaders have avoided a serious reexamination of sex-related doctrine. Instead, they have talked about a zero tolerance policy on sexual abuse. This has a nice ring, despite the heavy-handedness of such a one-size-fits-all approach and the unlikelihood that it will do any more for the Church's community relations than it did for the New York Police Department. (People can grow attached to their pastors, and may bitterly resent knee-jerk punishments that deny them due process.) A draft policy formulated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, while not referring to "zero tolerance," resembles the truth-in-sentencing laws that have been imposed on criminal courts in recent years, yet fails to propose any investigation or punishment of Church officials who covered up decades of abuse.^[8] Church handling of the matter has already caused the scandal to metastasize from cases involving children and adolescents to any lapse in priestly vows, as demonstrated by the recent expedited retirement of Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee.

Weakland, long a liberal thorn in the Vatican's side over issues ranging from the murder of Jesuit missionaries in El Salvador to abortion and the role of women, was quickly jettisoned over an implausible date-rape charge by a blackmailing freeloader who was in his early thirties at the time of their relationship. The situation was made worse by the fact that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee had made a \$450,000 settlement payment to avoid the cost of litigation.^[9]

To see that the Church is more interested in preserving its authority than in ending

abuse, one need only contrast the case of the liberal Weakland with that of eight former members of the Legion of Christ, ^[10] a conservative international congregation that strongly defends papal authority. They have struggled for a quarter century to get Rome to take seriously their accusations that the Legion's founder, the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, had sexually abused them as seminarians. Unluckily for them, Maciel is a close ally of the Pope's doctrinal enforcer, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Even after the charges were made against Maciel, the Pope honored him and made him his special representative to a Latin American synod. When ABC News' Brian Ross asked Ratzinger about Maciel recently, Ratzinger literally slapped Ross' hand. He is not used to being questioned.

Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of the Catholic journal *First Things*, calls the charges against Maciel "false and malicious." ^[11] It is curious that there is such solicitude for a man credibly accused of serial sexual abuse, while bishops talk of purging thousands of gay priests who have been accused of nothing. Neuhaus told the *Times*, "The overwhelming majority of the sexual abuse cases include adult men having sex with teenage boys and young men, and by ordinary English usage we call that a homosexual relationship." Given the history of the organization he is defending, it is not surprising that Neuhaus calls something a relationship which is so one-sided and coercive.

The persistent attempt to equate pedophilia with homosexuality deliberately ignores not only the clinical evidence, but the gay community's repeated rejection of pedophilia. I myself wrote a commentary in 1994 condemning the North American Man/Boy Love Association. ^[12] That same year, while Cardinal Law was covering up the crimes of outspoken pedophile Rev. Paul Shanley, the World Conference of the International Lesbian and Gay Association, at which I was a delegate, voted by 89 percent to expel pedophile groups.

When an international congress of gay organizations votes overwhelmingly against pedophile groups; when gay pride organizations throughout the country routinely exclude NAMBLA; and when gay communities in many cities have established service organizations to help protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth rather than exploit them, we have nothing to apologize for.

It is laughable for the leaders of the Church to blame their crimes on the advent of sexual freedom, women's rights, and gay rights, given how much better we have dealt with sex outside the rectory walls than they have done inside.

There is not a pedophile scandal in the gay community. The pedophile scandal is in the authoritarian, virulently anti-gay, and exclusively male hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge

The Church does much of its business in secret, but its views on homosexuality are well known. In a declaration on sexual ethics entitled "Persona Humana" in 1975, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of." ^[13] It cited Romans 1:24-27, I Corinthians 6:10, and I Timothy 1:10. Deciding this was insufficient, in 1986 the Congregation -- now led by Cardinal Ratzinger -- issued the notorious "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual

Persons," stating that "the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder."
[\[14, 15, 16\]](#)

After deploring anti-gay violence, Ratzinger justified it: "[W]hen civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase." His sympathy for violent reactions recalls the phrase in Leviticus 20:13, "their blood shall be on their own heads." Ratzinger also called gay-rights advocacy a threat to the family. Pardon me, but with such a guardian, families hardly need an enemy.

I long ago gave up arguing my way around troublesome Biblical passages. For one thing, Leviticus is filled with harsh punishments for crimes that today would hardly raise an eyebrow. For example, a man who uses magicians must be exiled. If a man lies with a woman during her monthly periods, both of them must be outlawed. A man who curses either of his parents must be put to death. I don't approve of cursing one's parents, but the death penalty is a bit extreme. These passages are ignored because those who quote the Bible at us are using it not as a spiritual guide but as a weapon, and are picking and choosing the verses they care about. Two can play that game.

Furthermore, in addition to the Bible I have the book of Nature. Galileo read Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork," and concluded that God's handiwork would reveal itself through investigation. When his results contradicted Scripture, he argued that the Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go. He was accused of heresy and told to shut up. His immortal whisper, "But it moves," referring to his evidence that the earth was not immovable at the center of the universe, applies as well to the stirrings of our hearts and loins. This is how God made us. Self-respecting people cannot be expected to submit to fine parsing of ancient and largely irrelevant texts for permission to live their lives.

Every so often, divine grace overcomes the worst instincts of Church officials. In 1997, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children," [\[17\]](#) which, while breaking no new theological ground, showed true pastoral concern. The bishops urged troubled parents to accept their gay children.

Alas, the Church's pastoral care does not extend to dissident clergy. As Michael Sean Winters writes in *The New Republic*, "It is one of the ironies of John Paul II's pontificate that while the Church has opened dialogues with Protestants, Jews, and Muslims to a degree unthinkable 50 years ago, discussion within the Church has been quashed." [\[18\]](#) This includes the Vatican order in 1999 silencing Rev. Robert Nugent and Sister Jeannine Gramick, co-founders of the gay-affirming New Ways Ministry, and the firing in 2000 of Sister Jeanette Normandin from the Jesuit Urban Center in Boston for performing a baptism. It is remarkable how harshly these ministering Christians have been treated in comparison to the protection offered pederast priests.

Rev. Neuhaus said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that the answer is "Fidelity and fidelity and fidelity." [\[19\]](#) His overt message is that none of this would have happened if the offending priests had obeyed the rules. This begs the question of whether rules like celibacy and the ban on women priests make sense. His subtext is that God does not

expect you to think for yourself -- that would lead to anarchy and chaos. For Neuhaus, the truth is in the sole possession of the Church; the Magisterium is never wrong; and the shepherd is not interested in a dialogue with his flock. Unfortunately for the shepherd, the flock has other ideas. Most Catholics simply ignore what they don't agree with. Whether the disagreeable parts are becoming too big to ignore is something they will have to decide for themselves. Eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a risky business; but then we are human, after all, not sheep.

Polls suggest that a majority of the faithful recognizes that the greater problem is not the crimes themselves, but an organization that covered them up, transferred offenders to other parishes where they could repeat their crimes, showed all concern for themselves and none for the victims, and resists any accountability, openness, criticism, or change.

The cardinals' stonewalling and scapegoating is only making their problem worse. The trouble is, they are so insular and arrogant and convinced of their own righteousness that they will not open a window to let in fresh air. Their intransigence is reinforced by the fact that the ailing Pope has spent nearly a quarter century populating the College of Cardinals to his liking.

When they next gather, the bishops ought to remember that the people are the Church, or there is no Church. They should overcome their authoritarian mindset, and put service ahead of power as Christ himself did. They should heed Sister Theresa Kane, who at Washington's Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1979 welcomed the Pope with a call to include women in all the ministries of the Church. ^[20] Finally, the bishops should move their sexual policy from the Twelfth Century into the Twenty-First, including by offering gay people an option other than lifelong sexual abstinence. How can these obdurate old men possibly be moved to make such radical changes? I am afraid that the only solution is a miraculous appearance by the Blessed Virgin. We'd better start praying.

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Notes

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3. This bias is also reflected in Biblical exegesis. The account of a gang rape of a woman in Chapter 19 of Judges closely parallels the Sodom story in Chapter 19 of Genesis. Yet the Judges passage is never cited to condemn heterosexuality in the manner that the Church takes the story of threatened rape of men in Sodom to be a condemnation of homosexuality.

4. Garry Wills, "Priests and Boys," *The New York Review of Books*, June 13, 2002
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15462>
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<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13793a.htm>
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<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07470a.htm>
8. "Draft: Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 4, 2002 [Note: final version will be dated as of its adoption]
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<http://www.startribune.com/stories/1697/2857128.html>
See also Archdiocese of Milwaukee at <http://www.archmil.org>
10. Legion of Christ, official website
<http://www.legionofchrist.org/>
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13. Franjo Cardinal Seper, "Persona Humana," Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, December 29, 1975
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html
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15. "Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons," Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, July 22, 1992
<http://www.dignityusa.org/1992pastoral.html>
16. Bishop Thomas Daily of Brooklyn, "Pastoral Letter on Homosexuality," August 22, 1993
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17. "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children,"
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<http://www.thenewrepublic.com/doc.mhtml?i=20020506&s=winters050602>

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1979
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