

Myth of a Catholic Crisis

The truth about “pedophile priests”

By Philip Jenkins

IS THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH a cover for the world's largest criminal sex ring? Over the past few months, a steady stream of news stories seems to have confirmed the bleakest possible vision of global conspiracy, the most extreme claims of anticlerical propaganda through the ages. Even moderate commentators are writing as if priests around the world have taken secret vows of conspiracy, perversion, and *omertà*. Worse, this deviance is allegedly built into the church's structures of command and control. According to the darkest visions, clergy are almost encouraged to pursue careers of abuse and pedophilia, secure in the knowledge that their crimes will be sheltered by fellow molesters in the hierarchy, all the way to the Vatican itself, with Pope Benedict as the boss of all bosses. Suddenly, even the rants of Maureen Dowd and Katha Pollitt appear almost plausible.

If all this seems far-fetched, it is. Sexual abuse by clergy is a reality, and a real problem demands a response. But the problem is vastly different from that described so enthusiastically by the media, and most of the critical measures have already been taken.

Although the alleged crisis is now being portrayed in global terms, I will focus on the U.S. experience because this is by far the most intensely studied aspect. The American abuse scandal, now a quarter-century old, has produced rock-solid quantitative evidence that allows us to make general statements about abuse by clergy and to dispel myths.

Most tellingly, we can say one thing quite confidently, however strongly it goes against prevailing wisdom: there is no credible evidence that Roman Catholic clergy abuse young people at a rate different from that of clergy of any other denomination or from members of secular professions who deal with children. If anyone believes that such evidence exists, the burden is upon him to present it.

By far the best quantitative evidence derives from the survey carried out by John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York in 2004, entitled “The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States.” Specifically, it examined all plausible complaints of sexual abuse by U.S. clergy between 1950 and 2002, a cohort of around 100,000 men. Although this study was sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the researchers were independent, and the final report was widely praised.

By social science standards, this was an impressively thorough study, and the sample size was immense. Obviously, the John Jay researchers failed to detect many cases, including those that had not come to light by 2004, and other acts that would never be reported. But they worked hard to compensate for such omissions by using a strikingly low standard of proof for the allegations that were known. Investigators counted all charges “not withdrawn or known to be false,” and total exoneration is a very high standard. The list thus includes allegations that would not have surfaced

except in the furor of 2002-03, following the dreadful scandals in the Boston Archdiocese.

A couple of points leap out about the allegations, particularly about the image of the “pedophile priest” pursuing his decades-long career of crime under the de facto protection of the Church. The John Jay study concluded that in this period, perhaps 4.5 percent of all U.S. priests had been plausibly accused of at least one act of sexual misconduct with a minor. But of the 4,392 accused priests, almost 56 percent faced only one misconduct allegation, and at least some of these would certainly vanish under detailed scrutiny.

Very few of the accused priests were pedophiles, in the sense of having abused a minor under the age of puberty, say 12 or 13 for a boy. In the U.S. at least, the great majority of cases of sexual misconduct by priests involve older boys, often aged between 15 and 17, or even older. This behavior is illegal, harmful, and sinful, but it is not pedophilia. The technical name for this kind of act is ephebophilia, but many would call it pederasty or even homosexuality. Drawing this distinction certainly does not excuse or minimize the behavior, but it is critically important for understanding the statistics. Pedophiles are compulsive offenders who are highly likely to repeat their acts, often claiming hundreds of victims. The fact that true pedophile priests formed such a minority of offenders meant that the overall number of victims was mercifully far smaller than it might have been.

Pedophile priests certainly did exist, but in tiny numbers. At the heart of the clergy abuse crisis was a core of highly persistent serial pedophiles, who massively “over-produced” criminal behavior, and some were the targets of hundreds of plausible complaints. Out of 100,000 priests active in the U.S. in this half-century, a cadre of just 149 individuals—one priest out of every 750—accounted for over a quarter of all the allegations of clergy abuse. These 149 super-predators also explain the surprisingly large number of very young victims that the study reported. The average age of offenders for the whole era has been gravely distorted by counting the sizable number of child victims assaulted by these reprehensible serial pedophiles.

Nor was clerical misconduct a persistent or steady-state phenomenon, as we would expect if abusive behavior resulted inevitably from the agonies of the celibate lifestyle. In the U.S. at least, recorded malfeasance was quite rare until an explosion of criminal activity in one short period, namely between 1975 and 1980. These six years accounted for an astonishing 40 percent of all the alleged acts of clerical abuse for the 52-year period under examination. Just why these years were so horrific is open to debate, but there seems to have been a sharp decline in the moral and disciplinary controls that higher authorities exercised over priests. Also, clergy in the 1970s were vulnerable to powerful social pressures encouraging sexual experimentation, the sense that old injunctions against adultery or pederasty were destined to perish in the new age of ethical relativism, and some priests succumbed to temptation. Of the priests ordained in the year 1970, a startling 10 percent would ultimately be the focus of abuse allegations. But the crisis was a byproduct of a specific historical era, not of some essential quality of the clerical status or of the Church’s structures.

Let’s put all this in context. In any given year between 1950 and 2002, the Catholic Church in the United States averaged around 50,000 priests, serving 45 to 55 million members. Assuming all the charges reported by the Jay study were true, then each year, an average of around 200 children were abused or molested by priests nationwide. Obviously, given what we know about the under-reporting of molestation, that figure must be a gross underestimate, and even if it was not, the problem would still be appalling: 200 instances of priestly victimization is 200 too many. But the documented evidence for clerical crime is far less extensive than is widely believed. Even in the overheated and litigious atmosphere following the Boston scandals, the Jay study reported no allegations against 24 priests out of every 25.

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To say that X percent of Catholic priests might have engaged in abuse or molestation might be troubling, but the figure is meaningless unless we can compare it with some other group. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that we could say confidently that priests abuse at a rate 10 or 100 times larger than Presbyterian ministers or Jewish rabbis or than the male population as a whole. Then we could begin to seek the roots of the Catholic problem, whether we located them in the fact of celibacy or in the secretive clerical subculture. Unfortunately, we have not the slightest point of comparison with any other group. As a result of the furious investigations of the past decades, and particularly the Jay study, the U.S. Catholic clergy are

now the only major group on the planet that has ever been subjected to such a detailed examination of abuse complaints, using internal evidence that could not have come to light in any other way. Nothing vaguely comparable exists for other groups, for Presbyterian pastors or Lutheran clergy or, indeed, journalists.

Actually, that is not entirely true. Before commenting on the priestly situation, any observer should read the writings of Professor Charol Shakeshaft of Virginia Commonwealth University, who for years has been studying sexual and physical abuse by America’s public-school teachers. The volume of misconduct she reports is staggering and far exceeds the rate of documented abuse by Catholic clergy. Hard to imagine, public schools sometimes deal with their problem faculty by quietly transfer-

ring them to other institutions without warning the new employers of the dangers they face. It sounds a lot like the worst charges against Catholic dioceses, doesn’t it? Thank heaven we don’t worry too much about the sexual dangers facing our children in the schools, or else we might have to think seriously about this issue.

So if Catholic priests are no worse than other professions in this regard—and maybe a lot better—why do we hear so much about them being abusers? Several reasons explain this focus, none of which necessarily reflect any anti-Catholic bias in courts or media. By far the most important factor involves the way in which cases come to light, which is through civil litigation. An individual

accuses a particular priest of abuse, and quite possibly, the charge is perfectly true. Lawyers then use that case as a means of forcing a diocese to disclose ever more information about past charges against other priests, which might date back into the 1940s or '50s and which can also lead into other jurisdictions. One case thus becomes the

years ago. Even today, Catholic churches are still trying desperately to defend their actions in the distant past, when social attitudes to child sexual abuse were radically different from what we today regard as normal. In those bygone years, molestation was trivialized in both expert and public opinion, and offenders were commonly treated with kid gloves.

refer to acts alleged to have occurred since 1990. Yet litigation resulting from earlier eras means that "pedophile priests" remain in the news almost daily, and that fact shapes (and mis-shapes) popular stereotypes.

Europe is not the U.S., and it is difficult to generalize across countries within Europe. Legal systems differ, as do social assumptions and sexual attitudes. Theoretically, it is possible to imagine that in some particular nation, the Catholic clergy became so vicious and corrupted that they preyed systematically on the young and conspired to hide their misdeeds. But any awareness of the American situation, and the florid mythology it has produced, must make us very careful about giving credence to any such nightmare interpretation. ■

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basis for a whole network of interlocking investigations, which proceed *ad infinitum*. The Catholic Church suffers acutely from its pack-rat character, of being a highly bureaucratic institution that prides itself on preserving records of institutional continuity.

In contrast, imagine a charge against a Baptist or Pentecostal minister, who has no such institutional framework and little institutional memory, whose church has no deep pockets, so that the case begins and ends with him. Not to pick on any particular denomination, but stories of abuse by clergy of all sorts surfaced regularly through the 1990s, until most groups became massively more proactive in preventing and detecting abuse threats. Partly the new vigilance reflected intensified consciousness of threats to children, but at least as significant were the demands of insurance companies: either you adopt stringent new policies to safeguard minors, or kiss your liability protection goodbye. That was an offer no church could reasonably refuse.

For Catholics, though, with their distinctive structural set-up, the new environment offered no protection from old allegations that continued to surface, often involving alleged acts from 40 or 50

Only the Catholic Church, however, is held to account for the decisions it took in this very different world of so long ago. Only the Catholic Church is subjected to the unforgiving standards of 20/20 hindsight.

Catholics, like other denominations, have made massive progress in preventing abuse by clergy. In the U.S. at least, very few of the cases that have come to public attention in the past few years

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Thailand Runs Red

Demonstrators claiming democracy's mantle threaten the centuries of stability monarchy has provided.

By Jim Pittaway

STANDING ON BANGKOK'S Sukhumvit Road last month, I watched the cavalcade of Red Shirt demonstrators on their way to dump hundreds of gallons of blood at the entrance to the prime minister's home. Aside from a few pedestrians who watched with transparent sadness and anxiety, everyone was at least pretending to have a great time. But it was clear, even at that point, that the Red Shirts were not there to make friends or negotiate; their list of demands would be met or they would have to be forcibly removed.

Any talk of organized political factions identifying themselves by the color of their shirts and hitting the streets in the name of an iconic, misunderstood, and persecuted leader should make Westerners—of a certain age and experience, at least—uneasy. In the case of Thailand's insurgent Red Shirts and their rivals, the pro-government Yellow Shirts, apprehension would not be misplaced. The behavior of the Red Shirt leader, exiled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, reeks of demagoguery. He and his rivals personify political immaturity and irresponsibility.

Perhaps because social ethics have always been the business of the monarch, Thailand's democratic institutions exist in a state of arrested development. Free and reasonably honest elections produce parliaments that pass laws and governments that administer them, giving the appearance of democratic process. But legitimacy—a matter

of identity and loyalty—resides elsewhere: in this case, with a 1,000-year-old, very Buddhist monarchical system that has somehow survived into the modern era.

We tend to think of monarchies in European terms. Are they absolute or constitutional? Does the monarch reign or rule? Although the Siamese kings had complete personal control of decisions until the 1920s, the most significant roles of the monarchy here have always been more subtle. Culturally, the monarch is the embodiment of national identity and custodian of the ritual purity necessary to sustain harmony in the complex universe of Theravada Buddhist cosmology. This is how the chaos that stalks neighboring Burma or Cambodia has been kept at bay here.

Thai people believe quite sincerely in all of this, and there's a substantial body of historical evidence that the system works. But now the monarchy is under domestic and international attack in unprecedented ways; it may indeed be failing.

Most Thai people I talked to believe that if the monarchy were functioning as it has in the past, Thailand would never have reached this level of social discord and political instability. The "shirts" are symptoms, not the cause, of this crisis. Sophisticated Thais fear that neither the West nor China understands their monarchical system or takes any interest in its preservation.

Throughout the turmoil that afflicted

the region in the decades after the end of World War II and European imperial rule, Thailand has managed to navigate treacherous waters with superb skill. One of the cognomens of Chairman Mao was "The Great Helmsman." In this part of the world, proven repeatedly over 60 turbulent years, the undisputed Great Helmsman is a quiet, gentle, wise, vastly experienced man named Bhumipol Aydulet, otherwise known as Rama IX, the ninth Chakri Dynasty King of Thailand. His personal virtues have undergirded one of the few remaining indigenously legitimate systems of state to survive the twin Western plagues of imperialist rapacity and communist vandalism.

An anecdote will perhaps illumine the depth of anxiety in the psyche of Thais who fear for the monarchy. In the late '80s, I watched the film "The Last Emperor" in a Bangkok theater. The movie depicts the compelling personal tragedy of Pu Yi, the last emperor of China, who was overthrown in 1911 and wound up as a Japanese puppet-prince in the doomed creation called Manchukuo. The story had a real meaning for Thais, who are well aware of the horrors that befell their Chinese cousins as the delusion-ridden Imperial court gave way to an unremitting sequence of disasters—war, economic collapse, famine, plagues, tyranny, and vicious repression of a scale and duration inconceivable to Western sensibilities. Thais know that their kings responded realistically, even proactively, to the rise of