

The Abuse of Children in the Catholic Church

Is it a problem? Yes.
Is it being dealt with? Yes.
Is it endemic? No.



'While no one denies the wrongdoing and the harm caused by a small minority of priests, their misconduct has been used to undermine the reputations of the over-whelming majority of clergy who live holy quiet lives in their parishes, tending to their flocks. These good men have been smeared with the same poisonous ink'. Elizabeth Lev *In Defense of the Catholic Clergy* www.politicsdaily.com 21st March 2010.

Setting the record straight

I would prefer not to be writing on this subject, I find it distasteful. But I do so to correct the erroneous impression given in the media worldwide in recent weeks, that the crime of the sexual abuse of children is exclusive to the Catholic Church and endemic among its clergy and religious. Both are untrue. So far to my knowledge no voice in the Church in Australia has been raised to challenge this deliberate media bias.

We have all been shamed and demoralized by the recent sensationalized coverage of serious but very old cases of abuse, including two remotely involving the Pope - one while he was an Archbishop in Germany 33 years ago, and the other as a Cardinal in Rome 9 years ago concerning a case in the U.S. 36 years ago. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, and surprising to me, *The Australian* printed without question material from the *New York Times* with unsubstantiated claims and innuendoes. Gutter journalism indeed.

It goes without saying that the sexual abuse of minors is a horrible crime. Sadly, it is common. Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York City noted on his website last week: 'The sexual abuse of our young people is an international, cultural, societal horror. It affects every religion, country, family, job, profession, vocation, and ethnic group'.

Elizabeth Lev in the online article quoted above wrote: 'The brutal reality is that there are an estimated 39 million victims of childhood sexual abuse in the United States today. Of these, between 40 and 60 percent were abused by a family member (for the most part uncles, cousins, stepfathers and live-in boyfriends). Carol Shakeshaft and Audrey Cohan have produced a study showing that 5 percent were molested by school teachers, while the *New York Times* published a survey showing that *fewer than 2% of the offenders were Catholic priests. But to read the papers, it would seem that Catholic clergy hold a monopoly in child molestation*' (Emphasis mine).

Massimo Introvigne, Italian Sociologist of Religion, wrote in an online article '*Moral Panic flares again*' on *MercatorNet* on 3rd April 2010: 'According to studies by Philip Jenkins, if one compares the Catholic Church in the United States to the major Protestant denominations, one discovers that the presence of paedophiles – depending on the denominations – is from two to ten times higher for the major Protestant denominations compared to Catholic priests. The question is important because it demonstrates that the problem is not celibacy. Most of the Protestant pastors are married'. Yet this is rarely if ever reported.

'In the same period in which about 100 American priests were convicted for sexually abusing minors, the number of gym teachers and coaches of junior sporting teams – also mainly married – who were convicted of the same crimes in the US reached about 6,000. The examples could continue, not only in the US. And above all, according to regular US government reports, two-thirds of sexual abuse against minors does not come from strangers or educators – including priests and Protestant pastors – but from family members: stepfathers, uncles, cousins, brothers and, unfortunately, even parents. Similar facts exist for numerous other countries'. Again rare mention of this in the media.

Tom Hoopes in an article on the *National Review Online* August 2006 quoted the Hofstra University researcher Charol Shakeshaft who has studied the problem in the U.S. Education system. She wrote: 'Think the Catholic Church has a problem? The physical sexual abuse of students in schools is likely more than 100 times the abuse by priests'. Her study was not reported in the press, little has been done to face the incidence of abuse in schools in the U.S. since.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York is in no doubt of why there is such bias in media reporting of child abuse. I quote him because I think the situation is similar in Australia: 'It is not hyperbole to call prejudice against the Catholic Church a national pastime ... If you want recent evidence of this unfairness against the Catholic Church, look no further than a few of these following examples of occurrences over the last couple of weeks. On October 14 2009, in the pages of the *New York Times*, reporter Paul Vitello exposed the sad extent of child sexual abuse in Brooklyn's Orthodox Jewish community. According to the article, there were forty cases of such abuse in this tiny community last year alone. Yet the *Times* did not demand what it has called for incessantly when addressing the same kind of abuse by a tiny minority of priests: release of names of abusers, rollback of statute of limitations, external investigations, release of all records, and total transparency ... I criticise this kind of 'selective outrage'. Other examples are cited by the Archbishop.

'Finally, the most combustible example of all came Sunday with an intemperate and scurrilous piece by Maureen Dowd on the opinion pages of the *New York Times*. In a diatribe that rightly never would have passed muster with the editors had it so criticized an Islamic, Jewish, or African-American religious issue, she digs deep into the nativist handbook to use every anti-Catholic caricature possible, from the Inquisition to the Holocaust, condoms, obsession with sex, pedophile priests, and oppression of women, all the while slashing Pope Benedict XVI for his shoes, his forced conscription - along with every other German teenage boy - into the German army, his outreach to former Catholics, and his recent welcome to Anglicans'.

'The Catholic Church is not above criticism. We Catholics do a fair amount of it ourselves. We welcome and expect it. All we ask is that such critique be *fair, rational, and accurate*, what we would expect for anybody' (Emphasis mine).

A postscript from Archbishop Dolan: 'We Catholics have for a decade apologized, cried, reached out, shouted mea culpa, and engaged in a comprehensive reform that has met with widespread acclaim. We've got a long way to go, and the reform still has to continue. But it is fair to say ... as the *National Review Online* observes, 'the Church's efforts to come to grips with this problem within the household of faith - more far reaching than in any other institution or sector of society - have led others to look to the Catholic Church for guidance on how to address what is, in fact, *a global plague*'. Again, the media never mentions this.

I have lost all trust in the veracity and objectivity of the media and no longer refer to it for information of any kind. I will not allow its anti-Catholic bias to be the cause of a weakening of my faith in, or respect for, our Lord's '*one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church*' (Nicene Creed).

Fr Ronan Kilgannon Erem. Dio.