



The Pieces of the Puzzle Are Falling into Place: Catholic Officials, a Global Web of Childhood Sexual Abuse, and the Judgment of History

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In 2002, the *Boston Globe* broke the story of Cardinal Bernard Law's cover-up of widespread childhood sexual abuse by serial pedophiles in the Boston Archdiocese. In the wake of the coverage, United States Senator Rick Santorum, himself a Catholic, declared what many assumed to be true -- that the problem was peculiar to Boston. According to Santorum, the child sexual abuse had been caused by the lax morals of a very liberal city.

Santorum's particular theory was laughable, but his core assumption that the problem was geographically limited needs to be examined carefully – for although this claim of exceptionalism has proved completely false, it has continued to be repeated, in other contexts, all over the country and the world. And as long as the problem of Catholic clergy child sex abuse is seen as local, ending it will be elusive – because strings are being pulled from high up in the hierarchy.

Pretending Each City's – and Diocese's – Problems Were Specific to It Alone

Yet, in 2002 and after, the media still covered the Boston story as if it were distinctive to Boston. And, after the Boston scandal broke, the Bishops held an emergency meeting in Dallas and declared that the issue was behind them. Of course, today we know that was hardly the case.

After the Boston situation received publicity, victims of child sex abuse by Catholic priests started coming forward in many other American cities, with the pattern of abuse and cover-up repeating itself again and again. There is no room here to list them all, but they have included Bridgeport (Conn.), Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Portland, San Diego, and Spokane. There were recycling bins for the abusers in New Mexico, Maryland, and Canada. A priest could abuse several children in just about any state, take a break in New Mexico (where more children could be abused), and then be sent back to either the original diocese for re-posting, or another city. A handful of honorable prosecutors made the issue a priority, documenting the problem through grand jury reports -- but only a handful. The assumption continued to be that this must be a localized problem in certain dioceses, not one that was endemic to the organization – that is, entrenched throughout the entire Catholic hierarchy and system.

The media in each city focused on the abuse in that city, and the bishops in each city said, after some abuse was finally brought to light, that it was all history now.

The Growing Realization that the Problem Was – and Is -- Greater and More General

Then the list of dioceses with sexual abuse allegations grew longer and longer -- to the point that no state was untouched. Priests started to complain that the "scandal" had started to taint all priests unfairly. Many lifelong – and especially, older -- Catholics rejected out of hand the notion that the problem was deep-seated, or that it might involve the entirety of the Church. For them, this was a short-term bump in the long history of the Catholic Church. Some, though, saw the pattern and formed the Voice of the Faithful -- a collection of devoted Catholics who see the child sex abuse scandal as having revealed an unfortunately built-in problem, not just an isolated set of criminal and tortious acts.

Editors began to treat the stories of abuse, though, as simply redundant, and often caved to the pressure from bishops not to engage in alleged "anti-Catholic bias" by covering one story after another about abuse by priests. The bishops hired public relations firms to spread the word that legislative reform in response to the knowledge of priest abuse was nothing but anti-Catholicism, and to repeat the false claim that all of the abuse had been publicly reported and was safely in the past.

However, lawsuits were filed in numerous jurisdictions, and discovery was demanded, with concomitant news coverage of the lengthening list of abuse allegations. The ambitious American bishops then began to vie among themselves as to who would be the most successful in turning back lawsuits and related legislative reform. Once again, there was an apparent pattern of behavior in response to the public revelations and the lawsuits. The very same arguments against the victims, their attorneys, and legislative reform in this area were floated in far-flung states -- from California, to Delaware, to Wisconsin, and more.

A Problem that Crossed Not Just State, But National Boundaries

Still, the media treated the cases as location-specific. Editors were driven by the need for a contemporary and local "news hook" and did not invest in investigative reporting to cover the (much) larger story. National coverage of the Holy See's 1962 document, *Crimens Solicitationes*, which threatens excommunication for bringing "scandal" to the Church by telling outsiders about the sexual abuse of children was – and remains -- sparse. Yet that document provides an embarrassingly obvious hint that the problem was – and is -- endemic and entrenched, and that the cover-up has been constructed from the top down. Was the media in denial over child sex abuse (which is common in our society) or over heinous behavior by the largest church in the United States -- or both? Who knows? Either way, the denial was deep-rooted and pernicious, and unless one has been watching closely, the larger story has escaped the attention of most Americans.

The stories then started to float across the Atlantic from Ireland that many priests there had sexually abused Irish children. Lots and lots of children. Irish prosecutors dug deep and produced two reports. One report detailed how the Irish Church had victimized numerous children in church-run residential schools. Horrifying in itself, the report also served as a reminder of the many stories from Australia – stories that were never widely

circulated in the United States -- of the omnipresent sexual and physical abuse of children in church-run residential schools there. The second report, which was 700 pages long and dubbed the "Murphy Report," and focused on the Dublin Archdiocese, painstakingly established that the hierarchy and the police had covered up persistent patterns of abuse. It also pointed to the Holy See as responsible in part for the perpetuation of abuse.

In the end, some Irish bishops were held accountable, with four even resigning after being shamed out of their offices. Then, the current Irish bishops demanded a meeting with the Pope, because they placed significant blame for the pattern of behavior on the Holy See. That meeting took place this week at the Holy See.

The Murphy Report also confirmed that Irish abusers were being shipped to the United States, where they abused American children. Some were sent back and some were permanently dumped here.

Meanwhile, at the same time that the Irish bishops were demanding accountability from the Holy See, discovery in a Wisconsin case -- as I discussed in my [last column](#) -- showed that the Holy See and in particular, then-Cardinal Ratzinger (who, of course, is now the Pope) were the official handlers for abusing priests in the United States. The exchanges that litigation unearthed show that there is little question that bishops operated under orders from the highest levels of the Roman Catholic hierarchy on the issue of clergy who had been caught sexually abusing children.

Thus, we have come to know with a certainty that at a minimum, Ireland, the United States, and the Holy See have been linked. And only the Holy See has transnational powers within the group.

Even while all of this information was developing, moreover, there was still a pervasive belief that certain clerical orders were beyond reproach on the issue, especially the widely-respected Jesuits. The lawsuits against the Jesuits for abuse in Alaska were not covered nationally in the media. Then, Germany erupted with stories of pervasive abuse in Jesuit-run schools. The sex-abuse victims are still coming forward, but one rector was recently quoted as saying that he expected that, in the end, they would identify over 100 victims of a single Jesuit perpetrator. And abuse is not limited to this one perpetrator; once again, it is pervasive. In other words, the situation in Germany is a mirror image of that depicted in the first Irish report and of the Australian experience with church-run residential schools. There is an undeniable pattern and web of connections, even for those who would do all that they can to deny child sex abuse and deny wrongdoing by the Roman Catholic Church. That pattern has led to suffering that is beyond human imagination.

Let's face it: there are only two options here: Either the repeated pattern of abuse and cover-up around the world constitutes a giant set of uncanny coincidences, or there is a single source of power directly responsible for the global pattern. The answer is obvious and that is why there are lawsuits currently pending against the Holy See in the United States. History will judge all of us if we do not bring this institution to account for the

suffering of children. The Church officials' current behavior makes the selling of indulgences in the fifteenth century almost look quaint.

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