

# "Who Can Mock This Church?"



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## **Maybe the Catholic Church should be turned upside down**

Jesus wasn't known for pontificating from palaces, covering up scandals, or issuing Paleolithic edicts on social issues. Does anyone think he would have protected clergymen who raped children?

Yet if the top of the church has strayed from its roots, much of its base is still deeply inspiring. I came here to impoverished southern Sudan to write about Sudanese problems, not the Catholic Church's. Yet once again, I am awed that so many of the selfless people serving the world's neediest are lowly nuns and priests — notable not for the grandeur of their vestments but for the grandness of their compassion.

As [I've noted before](#), there seem to be two Catholic Churches, the old boys' club of the Vatican and the grass-roots network of humble priests, nuns and laity in places like Sudan. The Vatican certainly supports many charitable efforts, and some bishops and cardinals are exemplary, but overwhelmingly it's at the grass roots that I find the great soul of the Catholic Church.

The Vatican believes that this newspaper and other news organizations have been unfair and overzealous in excavating the church's cover-ups of child rape. I see the opposite. No organization has done more to elevate the moral stature of the Catholic Church in the United States than The Boston Globe. Its groundbreaking 2002 coverage of abuse by priests led to reforms and by most accounts a significant reduction in abuse. Catholic

kids are safer today not because of the cardinals' leadership, but because of The Boston Globe's.

Yet the church leaders are right about one thing: there is often a liberal and secular snobbishness toward the church as a whole — and that is unfair.

It may be easy at a New York cocktail party to sniff derisively at a church whose apex is male chauvinist, homophobic and so out of touch that it bars the use of condoms even to curb AIDS. But what about Father Michael Barton, a Catholic priest from Indianapolis? I met Father Michael in the remote village of Nyamlell, 150 miles from any paved road here in southern Sudan. He runs four schools for children who would otherwise go without an education, and his graduates score at the top of statewide examinations.

Father Michael came to southern Sudan in 1978 and chatters fluently in Dinka and other local languages. To keep his schools alive, he persevered through civil war, imprisonment and beatings, and a smorgasbord of disease. "It's very normal to have malaria," he said. "Intestinal parasites — that's just normal."

Father Michael may be the worst-dressed priest I've ever seen — and the noblest. Anybody scorn him? Anybody think he's a self-righteous hypocrite? On the contrary, he would make a great pope.

In the city of Juba, I met Cathy Arata, a nun from New Jersey who spent years working with battered women in Appalachia. Then she moved to El Salvador during the brutal civil war there, putting her life on the line to protect peasants. Two years ago, she came here on behalf of a terrific Catholic project called [Solidarity With Southern Sudan](#).

Sister Cathy and the others in the project have trained 600 schoolteachers. They are fighting hunger not with handouts but with help for villagers to improve agricultural techniques. They are also establishing a school for health workers, with a special focus on midwifery to reduce deaths in childbirth.

At the hospital attached to that school, the surgeon is a nun from Italy. The other doctor is a 72-year-old nun from Rhode Island. Nuns rock.

Sister Cathy would like to see more decentralization in the church, a greater role for women, and more emphasis on public service. She says she worries sometimes that if

Jesus returned he would say, “Oh, they got it all wrong!” She would make a great pope, too.

There are so many more like them. There’s Father [Mario Falconi](#), an Italian priest who refused to leave Rwanda during the genocide and bravely saved 3,000 people from being massacred. There’s Father [Mario Benedetti](#), a 72-year-old Italian priest based in Congo who fled with his congregation when their town was attacked by a brutal militia. Now Father Mario lives side by side with his Congolese congregants in the squalor of a refugee camp in southern Sudan, struggling to get schooling for their children.

It’s because of brave souls like these that I honor the Catholic Church. I understand why many Americans disdain a church whose leaders are linked to cover-ups and antediluvian stances on women, gays and condoms — but the Catholic Church is far larger than the Vatican.

And unless we’re willing to endure beatings alongside Father Michael, unless we’re willing to stand up to warlords with Sister Cathy, we have no right to disparage them or their true church.

### **\*About Nicholas D. Kristof:**

Nicholas D. Kristof, a columnist for The Times since 2001, is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who writes op-ed columns that appear twice a week.

After joining The New York Times in 1984, initially covering economics, he served as a Times correspondent in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Beijing and Tokyo. He later was Associate Managing Editor of the Times, responsible for Sunday editions.

Mr. Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm near Yamhill, Oregon. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard College and then studied law at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship, graduating with first class honors. He later studied Arabic in Cairo and Chinese in Taipei.

While working in France after high school, he caught the travel bug and began backpacking around Africa and Asia during his student years, writing articles to cover his expenses. Mr. Kristof has lived on four continents, reported on six, and traveled to more than 140 countries, plus all 50 states, every Chinese province and every main Japanese island. He's also one of the very few Americans to be at least a two-time visitor to every member of the Axis of Evil. During his travels, he has had unpleasant experiences with malaria, mobs and an African airplane crash.