

# The Catholic Church: Declining Or Reviving?

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The world at large became uncomfortably aware of the Roman Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal in the mid-1990s, when news of priestly pederasty sparked a public outcry against both the occurrence of such perversion and the Church's lackluster response to it. However, the problem is far older. As early as the 1950s, bishops were routinely sending abusive priests to various "facilities" operated by the Church for therapy—either spiritual or psychological—but clearly, the Church, which mandates a celibate clergy, had been dealing privately with such deviants for a very long time.

A series of criminal cases have made national and international headlines. In a 1981 case widely covered by the media, a priest from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Father Donald Roemer, pled guilty to felonious sexual abuse of a minor. Four years later, Gilbert Gauthe, a priest from Louisiana, pled guilty to 11 counts of molestation of boys. Even so, it took a Pulitzer Prize-winning exposé by *The Boston Globe* in 2002 to bring the scandal to real prominence, encouraging many victims to come forward with their stories of abuse, as well as lawsuits against the offending priests and the Church.

Coincidentally, a 1980 abusive priest case in Munich, Germany, came to the attention of the Archbishop there at the time, Joseph Ratzinger, who is now Pope Benedict XVI. He has recently been accused of covering up the abuse—just as many bishops and archbishops all over the world seem to have done routinely—by reassigning the offender to another parish or other duties, rather than defrocking him and remanding the case to civilian justice.

Later, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Catholic Church's enforcer of orthodoxy, Cardinal Ratzinger had oversight of these cases under Pope John Paul II. Yet, during that time, the Church continued to handle the bulk of them internally and with great secrecy. For instance, in response to one case, Ratzinger wrote:

This court, although it regards the arguments presented in favor of removal [from the priesthood] in this case to be of grave significance, nevertheless deems it necessary to consider the good of the universal church together with that of the petitioner, and it is also unable to make light of the detriment that granting the dispensation can provoke with the community of Christ's faithful, particularly regarding the young age of the petitioner [a pederast priest who was 38 years old at the time].<sup>1</sup>

Because of such statements seeming to give greater weight to the Church's needs than the victims', radical atheists Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have gone so far as to demand that the Pope be prosecuted for crimes against humanity for his role in covering up abuse by priests. However, in this instance, Hitchens and Dawkins have misrepresented the facts. When Ratzinger wrote this, the offender had long before been removed from all pastoral duties and contact with parishioners, and what is more, had already been convicted and sentenced for his crimes!<sup>2</sup> Evidently, the Church hierarchy desired the priest to leave the priesthood on his own (which he did after completing his prison sentence) to avoid provoking a crisis of confidence among church members. It got the crisis anyway.

This ongoing scandal, along with rampant secularism and humanism in the Western world, has made many wonder if we are witnessing the slow demise of the Roman Catholic Church—and by extension, of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> The political power of the Pope and the Church's various institutions has waned considerably in recent years—certainly since John Paul II's triumph over Communism in Eastern Europe. Its moral authority has similarly declined as leaks of abusive priests, vicious intra-Curia feuds, and even Vatican ties to Nazi Germany have made headlines around the world.

Nevertheless, we should not be so quick to toss the Catholic Church into the dustbin of history. It is a nearly 2,000-year-old institution with deep ties to Europe's most powerful elites and multiple billions of dollars in assets around the world, including universities, nonprofit organizations, and think-tanks. While the sexual abuse scandal is certainly embarrassing and annoying, it does not have the power to bring down the world's largest Christian denomination. On the contrary, the scandal is showing signs of actually *strengthening* the Church.

Some Vatican watchers wonder aloud if the 83-year-old Benedict XVI can use the scandal to force a scouring, whether selective or wholesale, of the Curia, the central governing body of the Church. Most, however, do not believe that he can accomplish this at this point in his papacy. He may have the clout to force out a few of the older cardinals, particularly those who have championed the traditional cover-up policy, replacing them with younger cardinals loyal to him and his conservative theology. But a more sweeping housecleaning may be too long-term a project for the aging pontiff.

More likely, the Pope will use the scandals as a catalyst for reformation within the Church. Conservative cardinals and bishops consider this crisis to be an opportunity to emphasize the traditional, orthodox doctrines of Catholicism—particularly its teachings on sexual matters, including priestly celibacy—and they are willing to go so far as to reject and even excommunicate Catholics who will not toe the line. Benedict XVI may utter profound apologies where these abuse cases are prevalent, and he may go so far as to repeat the Day of Pardon (enacted by John Paul II in March 12, 2000, to confess the Church's historical sins) to atone for the hierarchy's errors during this crisis. As his nicknames, the "Panzer Cardinal" and "God's Rottweiler," suggest, this Pope's tendency is to go on the offensive to encourage and enforce greater orthodoxy among the faithful.

While the Catholic Church may take a momentary drubbing in the court of public opinion, it is old and strong enough to endure the beating and come out swinging in the next round. As it has done several times during its history—through the fall of Rome, barbarian invasions, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the onslaught of modern and post-modern ideas—it will adapt to the vicissitudes of societal change and maintain its dominant place among the professing Christian churches of this world.

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## Endnotes

1 Dawkins, Richard, "The Pope Should Stand Trial," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2010 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/apr/13/pope-prosecution-dawkins>).

2 Mees, Paul, "Here's a Crazy Idea: What If the Pope Is Innocent?" *Crikey.com.au*, April 23, 2010 (<http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/04/23/here%E2%80%99s-a-crazy-idea-what-if-the-pope-is-innocent/>).

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3 Israely, Jeff, & Chua-Eoan, Howard, "The Trial of Pope Benedict XVI," *Time*, May 27, 2010 (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1992171,00.html>).