

# IT'S MORAL PANIC TIME

In the wake of the Pennsylvania grand jury's exclusive focus on sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, people are coming out of the woodwork with outlandish tales of long-ago horrific abuses at Catholic institutions, and Internet sites such as BuzzFeed are enthusiastically blaring every wild-eyed accusation.

The Catholic Church has never had a monopoly on the mistreatment of some young people, yet that is what is being promoted today. Why? To feed an anti-Catholic moral panic.

"A moral panic," as sociologist Ashley Crossman explains, "is a widespread fear, most often an irrational one, that someone or something is a threat to the values, safety, and interests of a community or society at large. Typically, a moral panic is perpetuated by news media, fueled by politicians, and often results in the passage of new laws or policies that target the source of the panic."

Can there be a better explanation for what is going on right now with regard to the Catholic Church?

The media, by focusing exclusively on abuse of minors in Catholic institutions—and stubbornly refusing to credit the Church for reforms that have made Catholic settings today among the *safest* places for children—perpetuate an irrational fear that the Catholic Church poses a unique threat to the safety of children.

Politicians fuel this irrational fear with investigations and grand jury probes that exclusively target the Church—ignoring widespread abuse in other faith communities, in youth sports and recreational programs, and *especially* in the public schools.

Then media and politicians team up to try to pass new laws—primarily to suspend the statute of limitations— that,

again, exclusively target the Catholic Church, giving the public schools a pass.

And then of course the anti-Catholic bigots gleefully pile on, like the Freedom From Religion Foundation calling for Catholics to leave the Church. Of course this has nothing to do with their professed purpose of promoting separation of church and state. But it has everything to do with their real purpose: promoting hostility to religion, especially Catholicism.

This is a textbook case of moral panic—one that even too many Catholics are allowing themselves to get caught up in.