

MEDIA MAKE UP DIRT THEY CANNOT FIND

A recent NBC poll of Catholics who work for the Church found that 64 percent do not believe the media have been fair in their coverage of the clergy sexual abuse scandal. If you want to know why, just read this issue of *Catalyst*.

There are still good reporters and editors, but unfortunately there are too many who are not to be trusted. I was recently interviewed by NBC for a national story on the Church—it was rolled out in print and on TV in various towns and cities across the nation over several weeks. I was also interviewed by the Associated Press (AP). In both cases, I was treated fairly and quoted fairly. So I am not saying that everyone who works in the media is guilty of being unfair to Catholics.

At the end of 2019, beginning in October, there was one story after another printed in newspapers and posted online that were uniformly negative about the Catholic Church. Why the onslaught? It is always hard to establish motive, but let me take a shot. It is the lack of contemporary dirt on the Church that is driving these stories.

As I have said repeatedly, of the over 50,000 members of the clergy (priests and deacons), there was a whopping total of *three* substantiated charges made against them in the last year that we have data for. That translates into .006 percent. In other words, the scandal, at least in the United States, is largely behind us.

The media read these reports and know that what I have said is true. The Catholic media do as well, and so do those Catholics who prepare the annual audits for the bishops. But in all three instances, there is silence. They are reluctant to admit the great progress that has been made.

Why? The Catholic media and those who issue the reports don't want to seem triumphant. That's part of it. The other part—the most important reason—is they are afraid that if they raise the flag acknowledging progress they will be branded as being insensitive to victims. So they zip it. That's understandable, but regrettable: we are called to tell the truth, not shade it.

The secular media have a different motive. They want to keep the scandal alive. Why? To discredit the Church's moral voice. For what purpose? Secularists don't want to be told they are acting immorally, particularly when it comes to sex. If they can shame the Church by reporting on new dirt, they will do it. But given that there is almost nothing to report, they switch gears and start *making up* dirt.

Here's how the game is played. They start by reporting on old cases of abuse. Of course, this could be done to any institution where adults and minors interact, but there is no interest on the part of the media to explore old cases of sexual abuse that have taken place in other religions, never mind in the public schools. Indeed, there is little interest in reporting on fresh dirt in the public schools, never mind revisiting news stories from the late 1940s.

Another game is to blame the Church for not monitoring priests who have been kicked out for sexual abuse. So what? No one does this. Does anyone think that the media keep tabs on its molesters? And by the way, the Church is always blamed when it keeps accused priests on in some capacity. Now it is being blamed for not tracking them when they are released. That's a Catch-22: the Church cannot win.

Did you know that some who represent the Church by serving on diocesan review boards are known to vigorously question alleged victims? Is not that their job? If a reporter were accused of sexual misconduct, and he claimed innocence, would he not want the accuser to be vigorously grilled by lawyers?

Or would he expect them to act like altar boys?

I said at the outset that NBC and AP treated me fairly. What both reporters told me (I spent an hour with the NBC reporter and at least 20 minutes with the AP journalist) is disturbing. They said they called all over the country asking bishops and their communications directors to comment—beginning with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops—and none would.

I understand their reticence. Too many bishops, priests, and lay persons have been burnt by unfair reporters, sometimes seriously so. But if our side doesn't speak at all, how can we plausibly claim that the media are one-sided?

A few years ago, one of those do-nothing lay Catholic "organizations"—it employs "senior fellows" who conveniently work from home—was conducting training seminars for Catholics wishing to speak to the media. So what ever happened to that initiative? It died on the vine, just like so many of their projects.

We need to fight back and let our voice be heard. Loudly. This is not a time to speak softly. That's been tried and it's a loser.