

NEW YORK TIMES OVERREACHES

Most Catholics, as well as many non-Catholics, were no doubt taken aback when they learned on March 25 that a priest in Wisconsin had molested as many as 200 deaf boys. Not only that, but there were reasons to believe that apparently the pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the time, may have known about it and did nothing to secure justice. But it quickly became apparent that what Laurie Goodstein of the *New York Times* was doing was a story all by itself.

The molesting priest, Father Lawrence Murphy, did not recently engage in sexual misconduct—the incidents extended back to the 1950s. Moreover, the civil authorities were never contacted until the mid-1970s, and after their investigation, they dropped the case. Furthermore, the Vatican was never notified until 1996. To top things off, while it is true that the office which the pope ran at the time was notified, there is no evidence that he personally knew anything about it.

The one person who was in a strategic position to know whether the pope was aware of the Murphy case was Father Thomas Brundage.

Fr. Brundage was the judicial vicar for the Milwaukee Archdiocese who presided over the trial of Fr. Murphy from 1996-1998. Never once did the *Times* contact him, but had they done so they would have learned the following. “At no time in the case, at meetings that I had at the Vatican, in Washington, D.C. and in Milwaukee,” said Brundage, “was Cardinal Ratzinger’s name ever mentioned.”

Brundage added that he was “shocked” when the media tried to connect Ratzinger’s name to the Murphy case. When Murphy died he was still a defendant in a church criminal trial.

The *New York Times* article leaves the impression that perhaps Cardinal Ratzinger was aware of the Murphy case, but a close

read of what Goodstein actually said reveals no evidence to support this idea. Moreover, the investigation did not even have to be launched given that the statute of limitations had expired.

It was clear to us what was going on. There were those who are wholly unimpressed by the evidence—they just wanted to get the pope.

There is no doubt there was wrongdoing in the Murphy case, but it is morally outrageous to lay it at the foot of the pope. Indeed, the pope's critics look rather enfeebled given what Fr. Brundage and the *Times* say about his complicity.

Finally, after over a week of weathering the storm of media criticism and abuse, the Vatican went on the offensive. Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, directly took on the *New York Times* for its coverage of the Fr. Murphy case.

Commenting on the news story by Goodstein, Levada wrote, "The point of Goodstein's article, however, is to attribute the failure to accomplish this dismissal [of Fr. Murphy] to Pope Benedict, instead of to diocesan decisions at the time."

Cardinal Levada had it just right. The wrongdoing in this case rests in Wisconsin.

Why did the victims' families wait as long as 15 years to report the abuse? Why were the civil authorities unconvinced by what was uncovered? Why did the Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland wait almost two decades before he contacted the Vatican?

Weakland's record in handling sex abuse cases is a matter of record. In 1984, he branded as "libelous" those who reported cases of priestly sexual abuse (he was rebuked by the courts for doing so). Ten years later he accused those who reported such cases of "squealing." And, of course, he had to resign

when his lover, a 53 year-old man, revealed that Weakland paid him \$450,000 to settle a sexual assault lawsuit (Weakland took the money from archdiocesan funds).

It's a sure bet that if Weakland were a theological conservative—and not a champion of liberal causes—the media (including the *National Catholic Reporter* and *Commonweal*) would be all over him.

We were left with a couple of questions: Why did Goodstein wait five days after her initial story on Fr. Murphy ran to interview Fr. Brundage and why didn't Weakland ever give Brundage a letter he wrote asking him to call off the trial?

There is no doubt that there is dirt in the Murphy case, but it sits in the United States—not in the Vatican.