

PAPAL WITCH-HUNT

Kenneth D. Whitehead

Sex abuse is a grave sin in Church teaching and a crime in civil law, and so it was a legitimate subject for media attention. What was unusual in the 2010 Easter season, however, was the way in which Pope Benedict XVI somehow got personally blamed for the new wave of charges. Allegedly, the pope had failed to deal properly with certain cases of sexual abuse while serving as archbishop of Munich and later as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome.

In two different stories in the *New York Times*, on March 25 and 26 the pope was faulted:

- For not taking action as Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith prefect to defrock a Wisconsin priest, Father Lawrence Murphy, who in the 1970s and earlier had molested as many as 200 boys in a Catholic school for the deaf.
- For allowing, while archbishop of Munich, the reassignment to ministry of a priest-abuser who then abused more children.

Both of these *New York Times* stories, but especially the Wisconsin one, were disseminated far and wide—to more than 100 other newspapers, news services, and on-line outlets. In fact, they became the subject of numerous radio and television commentaries and interviews. It quickly came to be established, as solidly as almost anything ever can be established in the popular mind, that the pope had failed in his duty, was complicit in the cover-up of clerical misdeeds, and perhaps was an evil man as well. But there remained only one small problem: neither story was true.

The Wisconsin case was not even reported to Rome until 1996, when the doctrinal Congregation ordered a canonical trial of

the accused Father Murphy (who could only have been defrocked after having been found guilty). The case was never handled by Cardinal Ratzinger, but by his assistant Archbishop (later Cardinal) Tarcisio Bertone. Nor was it in any way mishandled. At one point the Congregation suggested that the formal trial be suspended because of the advanced age and ill health of the accused; but primary jurisdiction always remained in the archdiocese of Milwaukee, and it was Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland who suspended the trial shortly before the death of the accused.

Thus, far from having failed to “defrock” a clerical malefactor, Cardinal Ratzinger never handled the case in the first place. These facts were quickly placed on the public record following the *Times* story, and were confirmed by the Milwaukee priest (now working in Anchorage, Alaska) who was the presiding judge in the canonical trial, and who noted that neither the *New York Times* nor any of the other media outlets ever contacted him.

Concerning the Munich case, it was brought out that although the name of the future pope was copied on a memo concerning the reassignment of the priest-abuser, it was again unlikely that he ever had any definite knowledge of or real involvement in the case.

Thus, the widely disseminated and sensationalized media accusations against Pope Benedict—upon which the whole gigantic media campaign against Church malfeasance and cover-ups was originally based—turned out to be without foundation. Bluntly, these accusations were false.

No matter, the new revelations of cases in Europe brought the jeering chorus of militant anti-Catholicism back into prominence with a vengeance. What was ironic was that in this resurgence Pope Benedict himself should have been personally singled out as a target. After all, both as cardinal and as pope, he had consistently proved himself to be one of the

Church's stronger and more determined leaders in combating immorality in the Church and in the clerical ranks.

He had dared, for example, to refer plainly to the earlier wave of clerical sex abuse as "filth" at a time when too many Church leaders were still given to euphemisms. When responsibility in Rome for judging cases of clerical sex abuse was transferred from the Roman Rota to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2001—years after the termination of the two cases in which the future pope was accused of failing in his duty—he moved quickly to put firm and effective procedures in place. He similarly facilitated the adoption of procedures making it possible for bishops to laicize priests-abusers more easily.

In another case, only after Joseph Ratzinger became pope was action finally taken on the long-rumored accusations against Father Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, who had apparently enjoyed protection in high places in Rome until Pope Benedict exposed and suspended him. Moreover, unlike many other prelates—who have been sharply criticized on this score—Pope Benedict has always been willing to talk with the victims of clerical sex abuse—movingly in the course of his visit to the United States in 2008.

Thus it was indeed ironic that Pope Benedict XVI should have been personally singled out as a target in the Easter attacks on the Church in 2010.

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