

POLLS, PERCEPTION, AND THE POPE

A poll by CBS of American Catholics reveals that Pope Francis is no longer receiving the high marks he once enjoyed, especially with regards to his handling of clergy sexual abuse. Three years ago, roughly half of Catholics thought he was doing a good job dealing with this issue, but now only 29% feel this way. It has even led about a quarter of Catholics to question whether they will remain in the Church.

These results are not good, but they are not as bad as they seem.

Current reports of past instances of sexual abuse have had no serious effect on 70% of Catholics (they are not contemplating leaving). The figure is even higher for those who regularly attend Mass; conversely, those who only occasionally attend Mass are the most prone to question whether they will remain in the Church.

Moreover, fully 10% of those polled say they never go to Church, yet their response to survey questions count as much as those who attend Mass more than once a week. Thus, these respondents skew the findings in a negative direction.

Perhaps the most revealing question and answer in the survey is the following: How serious a problem is sexual abuse of children by priests in the Catholic Church today?

Very serious	69%
Somewhat serious	21%
Not that serious	7%
Don't know/No answer	4%

If this question had been asked between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, the results would likely have been reverse: we

would expect that approximately 7% would say there is a “very serious” problem, and roughly 69% would say it is “not that serious.”

Here is the paradox: the timeline just cited is exactly the period when most of the sexual abuse of minors took place, but few were aware of it. It therefore had no real effect on Catholics. Today, there is almost no abuse taking place: in the last two years for which we have data, the average percent of the clergy found to have had a credible (not proven) accusation against them is .005%. Yet the alarms are going off now.

In 1928, sociologist W.I. Thomas provided insight into this phenomenon. “If men define situations as real,” he wrote, “they are real in their consequences.” Ergo, if Catholics perceive the issue of sexual abuse to be a big problem today—even though it is not—then it is.

The reason why Catholics believe there is a serious problem today has everything to do with media reports of sexual abuse. So as not to be misunderstood, the media are not to blame for reporting on the three most important reasons why so many Catholics (and obviously non-Catholics) have a false perception of reality: the McCarrick scandal, the Pennsylvania grand jury report on clergy abuse, and the resignation of Cardinal Donald Wuerl.

Most of Theodore McCarrick’s predatory behavior took place in the 1980s. The lion’s share of the predatory behavior reported in the Pennsylvania grand jury report took place in the last century. Cardinal Wuerl had a better record of handling this issue than most bishops and cardinals, but because he was the “big fish” cited in the report, he paid a price for a few bad judgments that he made in the last century.

As for the pope, his handling of the McCarrick scandal accounts for his low numbers.

Here is a question no one asks: Why did the media have something to report on in the first place?

Most Catholics, and most of the public as well, don't realize that the reason why we know about McCarrick is because of a reporting program instituted by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York. It was his program dealing with sexual abuse that inspired one of McCarrick's victims to come forward. Dolan acted on that accusation and the rest is history.

The Pennsylvania grand jury report was not launched because of a widespread problem of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church today. No, it was done because Pennsylvania Attorney General Kathleen Kane, awaiting jail time, decided to go after the Catholic Church and open a statewide investigation of past practices merely because of reports that one teacher at a Catholic high school in the northwestern part of the state had been an abuser.

This is why we contend that Catholics are being played.

Is there a single institution in the United States, religious or secular, that has conducted an internal review of sexual misconduct that comes even close to what the Catholic Church has done? Is there a prominent leader in any institution that has turned in one of his own leaders, the way Cardinal Dolan turned in McCarrick?

Why has Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro stood behind a grand jury report that is strewn with palpable lies and unsubstantiated accusations? Why did he single out the Catholic Church for a probe, destroying the reputation of innocent men (this, and other issues, is why the Catholic League filed a brief in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court)? Why has he shown no interest in pursuing the sexual abuse of minors that is going on right now in Pennsylvania public schools?

Why have the media shown little or no interest in pursuing sexual abuse of minors committed by anyone other than a priest? This is disgraceful.

Perception may function as reality, as W.I. Thomas instructed, but misperceptions are not analogous to truth. Truth does not turn on interpretation.