

RAPING THE CHURCH

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It's time for some straight talk: the Catholic Church is being raped by some alleged abuse victims and their lawyers, and our side is capitulating. Moreover, the rights of the accused, namely priests, are being sacrificed on the altar of forgiveness.

Don't get me wrong. Any priest, plumber, pediatrician or painter who violates a young person should have the book thrown at him, without exceptions. Furthermore, anyone who knowingly allows the abuse to continue—when he is invested with the authority to intervene but chooses to do nothing—should similarly be punished. But the rights that the accused are entitled to, principally the right to due process, should never be jettisoned.

In other words, when zero tolerance for abuse becomes zero rights for priests, then there is nothing to cheer about. Is it too much to ask that the rights of the accused be given as much attention as the rights of victims? We know the ACLU will offer us no relief, so if we don't demand equal justice, who will?

We've been so beaten down by the scandal that many of us Catholics, clergy and laity alike, have adopted a posture that borders on masochism. "Beat us again," we seem to be saying. Count me out. I want justice. And justice means that the guilty pay and the innocent walk. As for the innocent, it is not a noble outcome if the accused has been so degraded and assaulted by the media, lawyers and victims' groups that he has been disabled in the process.

There's a lot of anger among the laity over the scandal. Rightly so. But anger, however justified, does not give anyone the license to "get even" by thrashing the rights of the

accused. Nor does it give Catholic lawmakers the right to “get even” by writing draconian legislation.

I have never met, nor corresponded with, Father Paul G. Seaman, but I like him. He’s got guts. Father Seaman, who is the pastor of St. Pascal Church in Dunning, Illinois, had a letter published in the *Chicago Sun-Times* on February 2 that was critical of Judge Anne Burke.

Judge Burke used to serve as the head of the National Review Board, the body appointed by the bishops to monitor the Church’s policy on sex abuse. She was so upset about an accused Chicago priest, who admittedly was not dealt with in the right way, that she called for the termination of rights for all priests. She tried to justify her assault on civil liberties as follows: “We understand that it is a violation of the priest’s due process—you’re innocent until proven guilty—but we’re talking about the most vulnerable people in our society and those are children.”

Notice that Judge Burke did not demand that all alleged child abusers have their rights stricken, just priests. No wonder Father Seaman said, “I would find Burke’s dismissive approach to individual rights frightening if I stood before her on a parking ticket, let alone such a serious matter.”

The “get even” mentality is nowhere more obvious than among state lawmakers, many of whom are Catholic. Our cover story provides the evidence. If lawmakers were truly interested in protecting kids from molesters, they would begin by going where the action is—the public schools and abortion clinics. But they never do.

Charol Shakeshaft, the nation’s leading student of sexual abuse of young people, estimates that the rate of molestation by public school employees is “approximately 100 times” the rate found among priests. Moreover, many astute observers of this subject have long maintained that the number of statutory

rape cases that abortion counselors have knowledge of—and do nothing about—is staggering. Yet the legislators in Colorado are considering bills that would only target private institutions like the Catholic Church.

To be plain, some state lawmakers are using the scandal in the Catholic Church as an opportunity to exploit it. They are using kids as a ruse—feigning interest in child welfare when their real goal is to “get the Church.” Indeed, many of these lawmakers are mad about matters wholly unrelated to child abuse: celibacy, women priests, gay rights, sexual expression—we all know what their laundry list is. These are the prime reasons for retaliation.

So why aren't more leaders in the Catholic Church speaking out? Because they've been intimidated. They don't want to be branded as insensitive to real victims of abuse. So they cave. Worse than that, some are so beleaguered that they are acting like hostages who come to identify with their captors: they are literally working against the best interests of the Church. Tragically, they even include a prominent bishop.

The scandal has given the bigots cover, and it's time we exposed them. It's also time we stopped being so defensive and started speaking the truth.