

# ROLLING STONE GETS UGLY: VILE HIT ON PHILLY ARCHDIOCESE

Special Report by *Bill Donohue*

The sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church provides grist for the mill to those who harbor an animus against it, so a certain amount of cheap shots are to be expected. But what was printed in the September 15 edition of *Rolling Stone* was not the typical below-the-belt attack: it represents a new low in yellow journalism.

The author of "The Catholic Church's Secret Sex-Crime Files," Sabrina Rubin Erdely, is not a religion reporter; she writes mostly about health issues. But she knows how to smear, and knows how to exploit stereotypes. As we will see, she is also dishonest.

Erdely's article focuses on the problems in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Three grand juries have yielded a great deal of material on alleged instances of clergy sexual abuse, and much of the attention has centered on Msgr. William Lynn. It is alleged that he played a key role in covering up crimes for his superiors, and it is Erdely's contention that the past three archbishops of Philadelphia, Justin Cardinal Rigali, Anthony Cardinal Bevilacqua and John Cardinal Krol, allowed priestly sexual abuse to continue with impunity. Lynn, along with two priests, one ex-priest, and one former lay schoolteacher, are scheduled to stand trial next year on these matters.

Before addressing Erdely's article, it is important to discuss several facts she does not mention. Beginning in 2003, 61 cases of priestly misconduct were examined by the archdiocese. Twenty four were dismissed because the accusations could not be substantiated. Of the 37 remaining cases, three priests

were suspended immediately following the grand jury report that was released earlier this year; 21 additional priests were subsequently suspended, leaving 13 unaccounted for. Of the 13, eight were found not to have a credible accusation against them; one has been on leave for some time; two are incapacitated and no longer in ministry; two more belong to religious orders outside the archdiocese.

This means that no credible accusation was made against the majority of the priests (the initial 24 plus the eight newly absolved, or 32 of 61). Moreover, none of the 24 who are currently suspended has been found guilty of anything. To top things off, the charges against them include such matters as “boundary issues” and “inappropriate behavior,” terms so elastic as to indict anyone. Erdely, of course, never mentions any of this, because to do so would get in the way of her “priests-are-rapists” theme.

As with any form of prejudice, there are staples that are commonly employed by bigoted writers. Anti-Catholics, for instance, like to play on the stereotype that the Catholic Church operates in secret, as a top-down organization, run by Rome. True to form, not including the title of Erdely’s piece, the term “secret” appears 16 times in her article. The Church is also branded a “rigid hierarchy” (as opposed to one that is “nimble”?); it also sports a “vertical framework” (never mind that is structurally impossible for any organization to have a “horizontal” one). This is the kind of melodramatic language that is important to Erdely’s agenda; it invites the reader to think the worst about the Catholic Church.

Msgr. Lynn’s alleged “conspiracy,” we are told, was “encouraged by his superiors—an unbroken chain of command stretching all the way to Rome.” Nowhere in her article does Erdely even attempt to demonstrate the veracity of this outlandish claim. She simply drops it at the beginning of her piece, planting the seed she wants to sow: the pope is the ultimate bad guy. One paragraph later, without a trace of

evidence, she says the problems in Ireland happened “with tacit approval from the Vatican.” Later, she quotes an ex-priest to the effect that the entire abuse issue will eventually be shown to “unravel all the way to Rome.”

This is vintage Catholic bashing. Every problem in the Catholic Church is traceable to the pope. According to this vision of reality, the Holy Father knows what the priests are doing from Boston to Bombay. More than that, they are merely carrying out his secretive and palpably devious commands.

Now if someone said that the president of the United States, as the Commander-in-Chief, knows what American troops are doing from Alaska to Afghanistan, and should be held responsible for their misconduct, we’d think he was mad. But it is considered acceptable, in certain circles, to play the pope-is-omnipresent card, and get away with it. When placed alongside his alleged omnipotence, what we have is a caricature of the pope that is suitable for science fiction. Or *Rolling Stone*.

One of Erdely’s goals is to get the reader to hate Msgr. Lynn. She does this sometimes by playing with words. Lynn didn’t just go to the seminary and become a priest. No, the seminary he attended is a “stately” campus (as opposed to the more pedestrian type), with “soaring” chapels (in contrast to ones with a flat roof?). It was there that this “friendly, overweight boy” with an “acne-scarred face” experienced “military-style indoctrination,” a form of “brainwashing.” Later, of course, the happy-fat-ugly kid who had been brainwashed would take his “solemn oath of obedience” and become a priest.

Erdely’s description of the priesthood is not a reflection of her Jewishness—Jews have written excellent works on the Catholic Church—it is a reflection of her stupidity. “The goal of the priesthood is a lofty one: a man placed on a pedestal for his community to revere, an *alter Christus*—‘another

Christ'—who can literally channel the power of Jesus and help create the perfect society intended by God.” There are so many flaws in this sentence that Erdely would find no relief in repairing to *Catholicism for Dummies*; it assumes an elementary understanding of the subject.

The article makes much of matters that are unexceptional. Erdely says Msgr. Lynn followed the “unspoken rule” when dealing with accusations of abuse, and this meant never calling the police.

Now anyone who knows anything about this issue knows that *no organization*, secular or religious, ever did anything different. From the teaching establishment to the mainline Protestant denominations, these matters were routinely dealt with through therapy and referral; internal sanctions existed, but calling the cops was not considered proper (many in the Orthodox Jewish community still insist on treating these issues internally).

Similarly, Erdely finds reason to hammer Msgr. Lynn for allowing an accused priest to resign for “health reasons,” when, as Erdely correctly says, Msgr. John Gillespie left because of more serious matters. She is right to criticize Lynn, but she leaves the impression that what he did was unconventional. Just recently, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg lied to the public about the reason why his Deputy Mayor Stephen Goldsmith resigned. The mayor not only drew little flak, he refused to apologize (Goldsmith did not resign because he did a lousy job policing the effects of a winter snow storm—he quit because he was arrested for beating his wife). While it is fair to say that this doesn't justify Lynn's behavior, it is not fair to act as if Lynn were some kind of freak.

Quoting studies that back up an author's position is commonplace, played by partisans on all sides, but Erdely doesn't do just that: she manages to distort the truth by

elevating the status of authors she approves of, and concealing the identity of authors whose work she dislikes. For example, she refers to a dated study from 1990 by Richard Sipe, an embittered ex-monk, on the subject of celibacy. She refers to Sipe as a psychologist who found that only half of all priests practice celibacy. While no one can say for certain what the real figure is, the truth of the matter is that Sipe does not hold a Ph.D. in psychology; he is a mental health counselor.

On the other hand, she refers to a study published this year on the subject of clergy sex abuse, saying it was funded by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. She never mentions who conducted the study, namely, professors from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Nor does she disclose that the professors have unequivocally said that the bishops had absolutely nothing to do with either its methodology or its findings.

Worse, Erdely implies that the bishops were up to something sinister. "To lower the number of clergy classified as 'pedophiles,' the report redefines 'puberty' as beginning at age 10—and then partially blames the rise in child molesting on the counterculture of the 1960s." She gets it all wrong.

Actually, the authors set the age of puberty at eleven, not ten, though they would not have been wrong had they done so: the American Academy of Pediatrics uses the age of ten, and many reputable health sources say the onset of puberty begins at the age of nine. Erdely wants us to believe that puberty begins much later, and that is because her goal—like that of so many of the Church's critics—is to deflect blame away from those who are, in fact, responsible for most of the molestation, namely homosexuals.

As for the role of the counterculture, the John Jay social scientists correctly cited the libertine culture in which the sexual revolution took place. Moreover, the timeline of the

abuse scandal, 1965-1985, is indeed a reflection—not a justification—of the collapse of standards. In this regard, New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan got it right when he said that the scandal is over. Indeed, it's been over for roughly a quarter century. In short, it is Erdely, not Dolan, who is wrong on this issue.

All through the article, Erdely uses unnamed sources to make her points, thus making it impossible to validate her work. Two alleged victims, "James" and "Billy," are worth a second look.

Fr. Edward Avery is implicated in both cases. Regarding "James," Avery admits to fondling him when he was 18; "James" says the fondling began when he was 15. Either way, Avery is a disgrace, but this case raises an issue that must be addressed: why did so many of the males who claim victim status allow themselves to be abused when they were teenagers, or even older? This is said not to exculpate guilty priests, but it is said to question the accounts of many "victims." Surely an 18-year-old is capable of rebuffing unwanted advances.

No matter, Cardinal Bevilacqua ordered an investigation of Avery in June 2003, and his successor, Cardinal Rigali, removed the priest from ministry that December. In 2005, Rigali asked the Vatican to remove him altogether, and in 2006 Pope Benedict XVI had him defrocked. None of this timeline is mentioned by Erdely; to do so would get in the way of her goal of smearing the cardinals.

Those who want to stick it to the Catholic Church like to offer a graphic depiction of the alleged sex acts that priests reportedly engaged in with their victims. Catholics like Maureen Dowd and Chris Matthews have played this card with precision, but they are no match for Erdely. She treats the *Rolling Stone* readers to some of the most salacious renderings imaginable, drawing from the grand jury testimony of "Billy,"

a man who claims he was worked over by two priests and one lay teacher, beginning when he was 10.

The grand jury testimony of "Billy" tells us about some key items not mentioned by Erdely. "Billy" called the Philadelphia Archdiocese on January 30, 2009, to say he was abused by the three men when he was 10 and 11. He spoke to a victims assistance coordinator, Louise Hagner, offering a basic description of what allegedly happened. He said he did not want to get into any of the details, saying pointedly that he planned to sue the archdiocese.

What happened next is what any good investigator would have done: Hagner followed up on "Billy's" terse complaint, seeking more information. (For this she was roundly criticized by the District Attorney's office!) When Hagner and another staff member went to "Billy's" house for more information, he initially balked, but then agreed to meet them outside by their car. At that point he got graphic. But was his account true? This question must be raised because "Billy" admitted that when he made these comments he was flying high on heroin.

A defense lawyer who learns that his client made a highly explicit accusation while higher than a kite will obviously ask him to repeat his story when sober. But should he be believed? A separate, but positively critical issue, is why Erdely never told her readers that "Billy" admitted to being on heroin when he made his sensational claims. This alone casts a pall over her work.

Erdely is similarly irresponsible in her discussion of Daniel Neill. She writes that he was abused by Fr. Joseph Gallagher, and that his account was found wanting by the archdiocesan review board that investigated his case. He killed himself in 2009. Sounds awful, until we get all the facts, that is.

In 1980, Neill (assigned the name "Ben" for the grand jury report) complained that Fr. Gallagher fondled him when he was

an altar boy at St. Mark's in Bristol, Pennsylvania. His accusation was deemed not credible by the principal of the school, and so the case was dismissed. Moreover, the boy's parents did not sue the school.

Fast forward to 2007. Neill, knowing that a grand jury had been impaneled to look into old cases, decided to report his alleged abuse to the Philadelphia Archdiocese. Not surprisingly, the investigators could not substantiate an uncorroborated accusation of an alleged act of abuse that occurred 27 years earlier, and so they dismissed the case. In July 2008, Neill was notified of the decision, and a year later, in June 2009, he killed himself. In April 2011, after hooking up with the most notorious Church-suing lawyer in the nation, Jeffrey Anderson, his family sued the archdiocese, blaming it for the suicide. None of this is mentioned by Erdely.

Here are some other unpleasant facts that she decided to omit. The grand jury report says that Neill's account was based on "the corroboration of other witnesses." Wrong. There was no corroboration by anyone. While the report says there were a few altar boys who said that they, like Neill, had discussed masturbation in the confessional, "none of them said they were molested by Fr. Gallagher."

More important, the report never said that even one of these friends was witness to—or even heard about—the alleged abuse. And indeed the only person Neill said he discussed his travails with at the time was the priest's sister. Why he chose only her is not known, but what is known is that the grand jury reported that she was mentally retarded. But don't expect to learn any of this by reading *Rolling Stone*.

Finally, there is the matter of the District Attorney who started the grand jury investigations in the first place, Lynne Abraham. Erdely mentions her role, but only in the most positive terms. Here is what the reader was not told.



Abraham launched her investigations into wrongdoing in the Philadelphia Archdiocese ten years ago. From the very beginning, she knew full well that she would come up empty: the matters she probed fell outside the statute of limitations. So why press the issue? Her goal was to indict in the court of public opinion, allowing uncontested grand jury testimonies to affect the reputation of the Catholic Church. Everything she did was fodder for a new round of hearings and condemnations.

What is not generally known is that it was absolutely unethical for Abraham to focus her exclusive attention on the Catholic Church, acting as if no other secular or religious organization had any track record of concealing the sexual abuse of minors. Why was it unethical? Because that was not her charge. On March 31, 2011, I sent a letter in the overnight mail to Abraham, the text of which appears below:

“In the Grand Jury report of September 26, 2001 (First Judicial District, Criminal Trial Division), it says that the Grand Jury was charged ‘to investigate the sexual abuse of minors by individuals associated with religious organizations and denominations.’ You were the District Attorney at that time.

“Could you identify which ‘religious organizations and denominations’ you pursued, other than the Roman Catholic Church? It is important to the process that we ascertain accurate information.”

Abraham never replied. Is there any wonder why?

There has been wrongdoing—too much wrongdoing—by members of the Catholic clergy. Reporting on it is not a problem; selectively reporting on it is. Worse still are malicious distortions of the kind found in Erdely’s diatribe.

*Rolling Stone* should stick to what it does best, reporting on music and the entertainment business, and leave issues like

religion to those who are better suited to address it. Serious journalism is the work of serious journalists. It should be clear by now that Sabrina Rubin Erdely is not among them.