

MEDIA TAKE AIM AT THE POPE; BIGOTRY EXPLODES

Beginning in March, and extending well into April, the *New York Times* ran a series of articles seeking to tie Pope Benedict XVI to the priestly sexual abuse scandal. It was quickly joined by other media outlets, the most prominent of which was the Associated Press. The net result was an absolute explosion of anti-Catholic bigotry, the most vicious of which took direct aim at the pope.

The Catholic League was proud to respond with a full-page ad on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* that quickly rebutted the most serious accusations. The response it garnered, from the Vatican to American cardinals, was profoundly gratifying. Even those who are not normally on our side weighed in with praise, as did many non-Catholics.

On the other hand, the Catholic League came under fire from many quarters, and from many parts of the world. Much of the criticism was simply boilerplate: bloggers, in particular, painted us as defenders of sexual molestation, using the most vulgar language imaginable. In fact, we could fill this entire issue of *Catalyst* with all the invective used to smear us. Fortunately, we could also fill this edition with all the media hits we had—we were simply all over the news.

We are convinced that some of the attempts to finger the pope—none of which had any real sticking power—were designed to unseat him. Quite frankly, the pope is hated because he heads the most powerful countercultural institution in the western world. His enemies want to weaken his moral authority, and some have even called for his arrest the next time he steps foot on foreign soil. Yet as Bill Donohue told the *Washington Post*, “there is not a shred of evidence he did anything wrong.”

Our most common complaint against the media was its exclusive concentration on sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church that extended back to the mid-20th century. No other religious or secular institution was targeted by the media—they were all given a pass. What made this resemble a modern-day witch-hunt—about events which occurred a long time ago—was precisely its cherry-picking nature.

The good news is that the more we made plain our case, the more receptive an audience we found. To wit: our good friend in the Jewish community, former New York City Mayor Ed Koch, branded the attacks as “manifestations of anti-Catholicism.” We are pleased to note, as well, the support that the pope received from Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz.

JOHNSEN QUILS

From the time we learned that Dawn Johnsen was chosen to head the Office of Legal Counsel, we have been on a relentless PR campaign alerting the public, and U.S. senators, to her anti-Catholic record. On April 9, our wish came true: she withdrew her name from nomination.

“The Catholic League is delighted that Catholics will not have to contend with Dawn Johnsen running an influential office in the Obama administration,” Bill Donohue told the press. “As we said many times,” he continued, “in the late 1980s, Johnsen worked on a case that sought to strip the Church of its tax-exempt status, simply because the Church is opposed to abortion.”

There is no end to the number of religions that support abortion rights, though no one in the pro-life community has ever sought to deny these religions their tax-exempt status.

That ignoble prize goes to the pro-abortion crowd.

What makes this victory so sweet is that President Obama renominated her this year after her nomination failed to reach the senate last year. It does not speak well for the president that he was so determined to put an anti-Catholic in his administration. We simply can't imagine him appointing a racist, so why the exception for us?

On March 4, Donohue wrote to every member of the senate, asking just one question: "Are you aware that Dawn Johnsen, who will soon be voted upon by the full Senate, sought to strip the Roman Catholic Church of its tax-exempt status in 1988?" Looks like the letter was not in vain.

WHAT INSPIRES FATHER RICK

In last month's edition of *Catalyst*, I discussed the heroics of Father Richard Frechette, the priest/physician who has labored among the dispossessed in Haiti for over two decades. Now I want to explain what inspires this extraordinary priest (my comments are gleaned from his book, *Haiti: The God of Tough Places, the Lord of Burnt Men*, published by Transaction). It comes at the right time: like so many Catholics, I am fed up with the media obsession on the Catholic Church's shortcomings, both real and contrived.

Father Rick does what he does for the sake of Christ. There is no other reason. He is, at heart, an optimist, but there is nothing Pollyannaish about him. He knows what suffering is, having experienced it himself and having serviced those who make our own sufferings seem so trivial. But he never gives up. Here is how he puts it. "We are encouraged to offer our works, our trials, our sufferings to God in union with those

of Christ so that they might be redemptive.”

It is clear that Father Rick’s efforts have touched many. How else can we account for the blessed determination of those who risk their lives, tragic as they are, for others? Surely self-interest would not propel a desperate people to go into gang-infested villages looking for the body of a loved one. “In the face of the arrogant and horrible display of hell,” he writes, “there appears a powerful force of good capable of defying it, and often this goodness is in a seemingly very feeble form. That force of goodness has made its home in you and I.”

As the apostles demonstrated, it is not just us plain folk who are weak without Christ. Father Rick hits home when he says that the apostles were stronger after Christ died. “These timid, ordinary men,” he instructs, “who were afraid of their own skins, suddenly were guided by a force that carried them valiantly into the future and into the world. They became fully servants of the gospel of life: articulate, fearless, leading by example, traveling far and wide to spread the Word, even at great danger to themselves.”

There can be no doubting that Father Rick’s apostolate gives further evidence of the Spirit of Christ. “The vast slums of Port-au-Prince are pretty rough places,” he observes. “Yet they are home to hundreds of thousands of people. Most of these are children. If people are there, God is fully there too.” It strains credulity to see how any atheist could make sense of this truism. It is a pity that they are denied the capacity to appreciate such a statement, though it is they who have elected to trim their own horizons.

But if God is good, how do believers make sense of evil? God, Father Rick informs, is all about setting boundaries. “Boundaries between light and darkness, between land and water, between good and evil. Unbelievable horrors, like tsunami and Shoah, show us what is at stake when boundaries disappear. Hell is in the business of trying to destroy all

boundaries. And resisting hell is about fighting to restore them.”

At bottom, there is hope for the human condition. “Most sin is the perversion of something good,” the Haitian hero says. For example, “Hatred is a perversion of sin.” Here’s the optimism: “That is why there is hope for us sinners. The basic stuff for something very right is still there and can be reworked with God’s grace.”

Father Rick does not brag about himself, but he does not hold back in giving due praise to the nuns who service the Haitian poor. He quotes the advice of a Canadian Sister of St. Joseph. “If it’s old and ugly, paint it a bright color. If it’s barren, plant a flower.” Most important, “If they are sick, sit with them on the bed. If they are hungry, make soup.”

Mother Teresa opened a mission in Haiti some three decades ago. Father Rick tells the tale of Sister Abha, one of the sisters who opened the first mission with Mother Teresa, and how she endured. One night she was shot. Worse, it was one of the men whom she had taken off the streets, and raised from the time he was a child, who ordered and paid for the hit. She survived because she was able to push the hand of the man away, deflecting the shot. How she interpreted what happened is Catholicism at its best. “We will all die one day anyway,” she said. “It does not matter how or when or where we die. It only matters how we have lived.”

No one can improve on how Father Rick ends his book: “We are destined for greatness. We have a triple dignity: God made us, redeemed us and prepares us for life eternally....Though we suffer humiliations and indignities through desperate situations, or through violence, Christianity proposes that we are made in the Divine image, held by God’s hand, considered the apple of God’s eye, with every hair of our head counted, and our names engraved in God’s heart. These propositions can be hard to hold onto in the crucible, but Christianity has

persistently and bravely held them up as banners and standards of truth throughout the ages.”

Now you know why Father Rick is able to do what he does.

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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THE POPE AND MEDIA BIAS

One of the hallmarks of bigotry is the collectivization of guilt. By that measure, much of the criticism against the pope has been nothing if not Catholic bashing. From militant atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins indicting the Catholic Church as a “child-raping institution,” to newspaper cartoons branding all Catholic clergy as molesters, the evidence is clear that anti-Catholicism is alive and well.

When an MSNBC employee posts on its website that the pope was guilty of “touching boys” (an apology was quickly granted, and I accepted it), then there is something sick going on. Indeed, the vitriol has been unrelenting. Moreover, a bishop was attacked during Easter Mass in Muenster, Germany and anti-Catholic graffiti were splashed on the walls of a church near Rome. And let’s not forget about the calls to storm the offices of the Catholic League that were placed on the Internet, as well as the non-stop hate speech that we’ve fielded via phone calls, e-mails and letters.

As I said in a *New York Times* op-ed page ad recently, the issues of abortion, gay marriage and women’s ordination are driving the hatred. Now it is no secret that the vast majority of those working in the mainstream media—especially the most influential outlets—are decidedly liberal. It is not surprising, then, that a portion of this segment is inimical to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on matters sexual, and that some are fueled with hatred. To deny this exists is to be in denial.

It is, of course, nonsense to pretend that the media make up stories of priestly sexual abuse. The fault lies squarely with the Catholic Church. But when one institution is targeted among many, and when the window extends back a half-century, those who belong to it may rightly wonder what is going on. To wit: if there were a monistic fixation on sexual abuse in the Jewish community, or in the public schools, Jews and teachers could be excused if they thought they were being put upon.

Many are drawing a parallel between what happened in 2002 in Boston, and today's news stories. But there is a huge difference: the newspapers which fingered the Boston Archdiocese had the goods on the known culprits. Today it is a different story.

In the Catholic League's *2002 Annual Report on Anti-Catholicism*, I wrote the following: "It was a rare event in 2002 to read a newspaper account of the scandal that was patently unfair, much less anti-Catholic. The *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald* and the *New York Times* covered the story with professionalism." Not so today.

What makes matters different today is the total lack of evidence that Pope Benedict XVI did anything wrong. Laurie Goodstein of the *New York Times* has absolutely no proof that the pope knew anything about the infamous Father Lawrence Murphy case (the Wisconsin priest who molested deaf boys). Indeed, this case didn't even reach his Vatican office until 1996 (almost a half-century after the alleged offenses, and fully two decades after Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland knew about it).

Furthermore, Fr. Thomas Brundage, the judge in the Murphy trial, said that the pope's name (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) never came up during discussions in Milwaukee, Washington, D.C. (home to the headquarters of the bishops) or Rome. Indeed, he said he was "shocked" when he learned some were trying to tie him to the Murphy case. On a related note,

Goodstein never bothered to interview Brundage until after her big story ran.

It soon became evident that the Associated Press (AP) was joining the *Times* in the hunt to get the pope. Unlike the *Times*, which is usually right on the facts (it's the omissions I have a problem with), AP is too often factually wrong. For example, it gave credence to a totally false story alleging that a 1962 Vatican document ordered the bishops not to report cases of abuse to the authorities. The document said nothing of the kind. What it said was that there would be severe penalties for any priest who solicited sexual favors in the confessional (even a nod of the head was considered too suggestive).

The AP also proved relentless in tracking down abusive priests who were moved around. I have no problem with that, provided that it shows the same determination in tracking down the "mobile molesters" in the public schools, i.e., molesting teachers who are shuffled from one school district to another. And as with the *Times*, AP made news out of incidents that occurred a half-century ago. If this is going to count as news when it applies to the Catholic Church in 2010, then readers should learn of similar incidents that occurred 50-60 years ago in other religions. But it will never happen.

In other words, many of the same media outlets that acted responsibly in 2002 acted irresponsibly in 2010. They reached for the big gold ring in the sky this time around, trying to tag-if not unseat-the pope, and they lost. Shame on them for trying.

(A slightly shorter version of this article appeared on the blog site of the Washington Post in April.)

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.

“CORPUS CHRISTI” NIXED

We are pleased to note that after we launched a vigorous protest, Tarleton State University in Texas canceled the gay-Jesus play “Corpus Christi”; it was scheduled to be shown on March 27, on the eve of Palm Sunday.

On March 24, we blasted Tarleton State for hosting hate speech against Christians on the eve of Holy Week. Though the play was a class production, and not a University-sponsored performance, the nature of the play, and the timing, were still offensive. We called it hate speech directed at Christians.

“Safety and security concerns” were cited as the reason for its cancellation. No matter, we were pleased to read that the president of Tarleton State, F. Dominic Dottavio, branded the

play “crude and irreverent.”

HYSTERIA MARKS POPE’S CRITICS

Seldom have we seen such delirium over an innocent man, namely Pope Benedict XVI. Christopher Hitchens, the rabid atheist, wanted to know why the European Union was allowing the pope to travel freely. Perhaps he wanted the pope handcuffed at the Vatican and brought to the guillotine.

Margery Eagan of the *Boston Herald*, another big fan of the Catholic Church, said, “The Pope should resign.” To look for a single sentence that implicated the pope’s guilt in anything would have been in vain.

Then we had the *Washington Post* indict priests by painting all of them as child abusers in a cartoon. The cartoon showed two priests trying to lure a child into a booby-trap.

These are only a few examples of the hysteria that marked the critics of the Holy Father.

As indicated in our March 30 *New York Times* op-ed page ad, the pope is innocent. Indeed, he was being framed. No one has any evidence that he even knew of the case of Father Lawrence Murphy. Indeed, his office didn’t find out about the case until 1996 and then did the right thing by summoning an investigation (it could have simply dropped the case given that the statute of limitations had run out).

No matter, the pope’s harshest critics blamed him for not defrocking a man whom he may have never heard of, and in any event was entitled to a presumption of innocence. Or was he? There are not just a few who would deny civil liberties

protections to priests.

It is a sad day when al-Qaeda suspects are afforded more rights than priests. That this kind of intellectual thuggery should emanate from those who fancy themselves tolerant and fair-minded makes the sham all the more despicable.

MSNBC APOLOGIZES FOR HIT ON POPE

On March 30, MSNBC libeled Pope Benedict XVI on its website, MSNBC.com.

As part of "Related Content" to an article entitled, "Losing Their Religion? Catholicism in Turmoil," readers were invited to click on a story entitled, "Pope Describes Touching Boys: I Went Too Far." After clicking on the link, the reader was taken to an article about a homosexual German priest who had sex with males in the 1980s.

It said absolutely nothing about the pope. Yet MSNBC painted Pope Benedict XVI as a child molester in the tease to the article.

We called for an immediate retraction and apology and for the media giant to investigate as to how this happened.

Soon after we called for the apology, NBC called the offices of the Catholic League and extended a sincere apology. It said that the attributed quote was erroneous and immediately corrected the error.

We hope that whoever was responsible for this outrageous post is questioned about it and appropriate measures are taken. We

look forward to hearing the outcome.

APOLOGY ACCEPTED

On the blog site of a recent edition of the *Orange County Register* was a series of questions and answers on the subject of sexual abuse. At the top, under the headline question, "Think you can spot the sex offender in the crowd?", was a silhouette of a priest: faceless, the silhouette was clearly a male wearing a priest's collar and black jacket. None of the questions or answers mentioned anything about a priest, or about religion in general.

As we said in a news release, "The newspaper is a disgrace. By slandering tens of thousands of Catholic priests all across the nation, the *Orange County Register* has carved out a special place for itself in the annals of journalism."

When the Danish cartoon controversy exploded in 2006, the *Orange County Register* refused to offend Muslims by printing the depictions of Muhammad. Ken Brusic, the editor, explained the decision by saying that to publish the cartoons the newspaper "would needlessly offend many in our community and would add little to the debate." But offending Catholics, especially Catholic priests, is perfectly legitimate.

We made it clear that nothing short of an immediate apology would suffice. By posting the e-mail address of Terry Horne, the president and publisher of the Santa Ana newspaper, we felt confident that he would get the message. He did.

Horne quickly released a statement saying, "Singling out one group, especially in such a recognizable way, was unfair and inappropriate." He ended his apology by offering, "We hope you

will forgive the lapse in judgment. And I hope you will accept my personal apology.”

As always, we accepted the apology. Interestingly, critics of Horne’s apology emerged both inside and outside the newspaper.