

The Analysis of a Smear

by Father Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R.

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I have been expecting a smear attack from the anti-Catholic segment of the media for years, and on March 2, 2003, it came. The *Dallas Morning News*, which I had never heard of, carried an article by Brooks Egerton entitled, "Priest plays down abuse crisis while helping clergy keep jobs." The article began with a charge that I claimed that the sex-abuse scandal was "the stuff of fiction." The article went on to report that a New Jersey diocese criticized my part in cases involving priests accused of abuse, and Egerton even quoted one victim as saying that I had "failed a lot of victims."

Egerton also maintained that I had refused to be interviewed by him. In fact, he called my office twice while I was out on the road preaching. I did not refuse to be interviewed. In the case of a smear, you are between a rock and a hard place. It is common enough for the person called by an investigative reporter to become a victim. If you speak to one, prepare to have your remarks twisted, significantly abbreviated in a negative way, or simply turned against you. In this case I later learned a number of things about this investigative reporter that make me grateful to God that I was not at home when he called.

The trick in all this is that if you do not speak to the so-called investigative reporter, he will make you responsible for all inaccuracies in the article. If you do speak, you will be grossly misquoted. The heart of the smear is always a plain old-fashioned distortion, such as saying that I called the scandal a fiction.

A number of recent books and articles have been critical of the media. Ann Coulter's fascinating book *Slander* (Crown

Publishers) and Bernard Goldberg's book *Bias* (Harper Perennial) are very good examples of the severe criticism of the media. Several writers as different as Richard Neuhaus and Andrew Greeley, as ideologically diverse as George Weigel and Peter Steinfels, and also of course William Donohue, have criticized the media for their handling of the clergy sex crisis.

When the media are not biased, they are often just inept. I got a taste of this from a small New England newspaper, the *Metro News*. Covering a talk I gave, which was attended by nine hundred people, the reporter indicated that two hundred people were present. I said that in the case of the resignation of the late Archbishop Eugene Marino of Atlanta several years ago, I could testify that about 98 percent of what was reported in the media about him was not true. The *Metro News* correspondent reported that I had said that 98 percent of the accusations against clergy in the present scandal were untrue. Egerton must have known I did not say this, because he had read at least the first part of my book. If you don't believe me, read the book yourself (*From Scandal to Hope*, OSV 2002).

The victim I referred to above claimed that I had "failed a lot of victims," according to Egerton. The victim later admitted he had never read my book and got his information from Egerton, who based it on the *Metro News* article. This victim was apologetic and friendly when he learned the facts of the case.

If you find all this complicated, welcome to the world of smears. Distortions, sprinkled with partial truths, are stock-in-trade because the average reader gets tired of the whole thing, shrugs his shoulders, and decides that some of the charges must be true. This was the apparent reasoning of Josef Goebbels, Hitler's propagandist, who is reputed to have said, "Never tell a little lie; no one will believe it. Tell a big lie, and they will believe it."

Often those who are involved in smear tactics do some legitimate things. They tell a story, which the media are supposed to do, but they tell it in a way to suit themselves. It is absolutely amazing how the public is unprepared to think even for a moment that the media would not tell the truth. We all think that the media can be sued if they lie. What a denial of reality! It is actually very difficult and expensive to hold the media legally responsible, especially for half-truths and unbalanced reporting.

Obviously investigators, reporters, and their editors are partially motivated by their own causes and opinions. I am very clear in my book that the present scandal is about homosexual incidents with minors; it is not about pedophilia, which involves prepubescent children. I am critical of the "gay" influences in the churches, and I distinguish gays from those who experience same-sex attractions but who follow the commandments of God and do not try to induce others into a sinful lifestyle. It is interesting to note, for example, that the *Chicago Tribune* (12/9/85) reported that Egerton was in a dispute with the Big Brothers/Big Sisters in Wisconsin who had a homosexual-exclusion policy. Egerton is quoted as saying, "That is deeply offensive to me. I really like kids, but I'm not going into the closet to be a Big Brother."

The *Tribune* also reported several other gay activities Egerton was involved in. He was described as the assistant city editor of the *Dallas Morning News* and chairman of the Texas chapter of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association in 1995. One should not be surprised that he may have a little bias against the Catholic Church, which, along with most other world religions, disapproves of homosexual acts and lifestyles.

It is part of the usual smear campaign to make extraneous charges to undermine the credibility of the individual. This is known as "getting the dirt" on someone. In his article Egerton had me living in a mansion. In fact, I have lived for

many years in a garage next to a retreat house. He also makes much of my not having a license as a psychologist. Many professors of psychology (I have been a professor for about forty years) do not get licenses, because they are not paid by insurance companies or other third parties. A license is required for such payment. I actually could charge individuals for my services even without a license, but I have never taken a single cent for my counseling and spiritual direction and never will.

In an original response I made on the friars' website (www.franciscanfriars.com), I said that I could not discuss the priests whose names Egerton mentioned in the *Dallas Morning News*. Apparently he obtained information on some of these cases from the public relations person of the Paterson (N.J.) Diocese. How and why did she ever give such information to an investigative reporter? At my insistence, the Paterson Diocese later issued a clarification, which was intended to shed light on the remarks Egerton quoted from the diocesan spokeswoman. The clarification proved inadequate, and the Paterson Diocese refused to send it to the *Dallas Morning News*, limiting it only to the local paper. It makes a juicy part of the smear if a reporter can change the quotations of a public representative who is injudicious enough to give the reporter information that can then be misconstrued.

Since the smear came out, I have obtained permission from the priests involved to indicate that I neither evaluated nor treated them. They were all in well-recognized treatment programs and obtained recommendations from a skilled staff of mental health professionals, including psychologists and psychiatrists. Only one of them was involved in a charge of the abuse of minors, and he is no longer in the priesthood. What I did was to arrange for these priests to receive therapy. The one involved with minors has not been accused of a similar charge since the original accusation in the mid-1980s and the treatment he received.

Smears spread. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, to which I once gave an anti-Catholic Robey award (named for Robespierre) on television, reprinted Egerton's article, adding the original touch of an even worse headline ("Critic of media had a role in sex-abuse scandals"). I'm waiting for other papers to pick it up, particularly those I have identified publicly as having an anti-Catholic bias.

It's rare that one can do much legally with a smear, but at the insistence of friends of mine, who are well-known lawyers, I am looking into this possibility. You can do one of two things with a smear or unjust attack. You can lie down and play dead and hope that they won't notice you again, or you can come back at them. Most, if not all, of what they say is lies and distortions. Unfortunately, not to respond appears to give consent to what they say (silence gives consent, as the old legal adage has it), and I think such a policy has proved disastrous in the present clergy scandal situation.

I am deeply grateful to the Catholic League, especially to *Catalyst*, for their excellent defense of Catholicism and for their taking on all the smears possible. I expect other smears, and in fact I will be looking forward to them. They may even help the Church to be purified and spark reform. Since we Franciscan Friars of the Renewal are pro-life, pro-reform, and pro-Catholic, we'd better not be afraid. And there are blessings in being smeared. If it is for the sake of the Gospel, we will receive something much better than a plenary indulgence. Christ Himself has said:

"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12).

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