

# 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.)*