

# THE POPE AND THE SCANDAL: REJOINDER TO CRITICS

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*Pope Benedict XVI and the Sexual Abuse Crisis: Working for Reform and Renewal* by Gregory Erlandson and Matthew Bunson. Our Sunday Visitor, 2010. Available at [www.osv.com](http://www.osv.com)

The title doesn't make you want to read it—*Pope Benedict XVI and the Sexual Abuse Crisis*. The daily carpet-bombing of the Church in media has given us more than our fill on the topic and many of us would be reluctant to go through the rack and rope of a book-length treatment.

But that would be a mistake. This is an important book that is neither a whitewash of the Church or a tabloid rehash.

Instead, the authors offer a serious study of the extent of sexual abuse in the Church, how the Church responded and, more specifically, how Pope Benedict XVI has responded.

The book, published by Our Sunday Visitor, is written by Gregory Erlandson (president of Our Sunday Visitor) and Matthew Bunson (general editor of the annual *Catholic Almanac* and editor of the bi-monthly magazine, *The Catholic Answer*).

The book provides a solid response to the over-the-top sensationalism that has created more heat than light in understanding sexual abuse of minors yesterday and today. While they don't pretend to answer why sexual abuse happened within the Church, they make it clear that it did happen, the Church as a whole did not always respond properly in the past, and that it is vital that reform and renewal take place to ensure that it does not happen again.

They make certain strong points in regard to the sensationalism that surrounds the issue today.

There is the not-so-thinly-veiled accusation in media, particularly the *New York Times*, that Joseph Ratzinger—as a German archbishop, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and as Pope Benedict XVI—was at best negligent and, at worst, attempted to cover-up and protect abusive priests.

The authors make the definitive case that this is a “defamation of one of the Church officials who has understood clearly the scale of the crisis of sexual abuse and who has labored to end it and to reform the Church in such a way that it can never happen again.”

At the same time, they point to the extensive progress—virtually ignored in media—which the Church has made to address the issue, particularly in the U.S.

The Church in the United States provides a “road map to reconciliation, reform and authentic justice,” through a dynamic program to ensure a safe environment for young people that is a model not only for the Church universal, but for any entity, secular or religious.

The authors cite four factors that created the sexual abuse crisis within the Church. The first factor is the scale of the crisis. While the numbers are small, they are universal with cases of abuse in Catholic environments taking place everywhere from Brazil to Newfoundland.

Second, the modern crisis became very public. In the past, sexual abuse of children was generally kept private. Whether the environment of abuse was in the home, public schools, or the Church, cases rarely became public because neither the family nor the institutions wanted it public.

Third, for whatever reason civic authorities themselves stayed

out of the picture. It was a crime, but one that was rarely prosecuted.

Finally, the authors argue, many in Church leadership simply refused to believe “that such a profound evil” could exist within the Church.

From the mid-1980s on, particularly in the United States, cases of abuse and what was perceived as a cover-up by Church leadership began to go public. Public cases in Louisiana and Fall River, Massachusetts, involving two priests who were serial abusers, led the Church in the U.S. to a series of reforms codified in 1992.

The 1992 reforms, built on practices adopted before hand in dioceses such as Pittsburgh under Bishop Donald W. Wuerl, called for immediate reporting of accusations to civil authorities, quick removal of priests from active ministry for credible allegations, assistance to the victims and their families, and transparency in responding to the issue publicly.

The flaw in the 1992 guidelines, the authors contend, was that they had no force of law. Dioceses could pick or choose what to and what not to implement.

In 2002 the abuse crisis exploded in the Archdiocese of Boston when the *Boston Globe* won access to Church documents involving an abuse case. The documents showed Church authorities moving a serial abuser from one parish to another and aggressive reporting soon exposed the names of other abusive priests.

The scandal then went national as many dioceses faced cases of abuse—many from decades past—going public. Lawsuits were filed and attorneys for victims were providing the ammunition reporters needed to build an ugly case against the Church.

The bishops responded by expanding the 1992 norms with additional stress on the screening of anyone in the Church

involved with young people, as well as mandatory “safe environment” programs in every parish and an independent audit to verify Church practices.

The “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” along with the Essential Norms that put canonical teeth behind the legislation were approved by the U.S. bishops in Dallas in 2002.

The Holy See, with the support of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, quickly approved the Essential Norms which became law for the Church in the U.S.

Outside the U.S., however, the reaction of the Church was often much slower even as the abuse crisis went worldwide. The authors outline cases that exploded in Australia, Canada, Germany and Austria with devastating impact.

Today’s crisis—in the sense that the crisis has once again dominated media recently in America —began with the release of two in-depth government reports in May and November of 2009 of abuse that took place in Ireland.

The first report document decades of abuse inflicted on children in residential institutions run by 15 religious orders. The second report, focusing on the Archdiocese of Dublin, found “a systematic willingness on the part of Catholic leaders to ignore terrible cases of abuse and sexual misconduct—in the hope, mainly, of protecting the good name of the Church.”

Coverage of the scandal in Ireland resulted in the same kind of media scrutiny elsewhere. A case in the Archdiocese of Munich led to media charges that Cardinal Ratzinger had been involved in keeping an abusive priest in active ministry. A case from the 1970s in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee— involving a priest who molested deaf children—lead to charges that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal

Ratzinger had impeded the priest being removed from ministry.

In both cases, it became clear—after the headlines—that Cardinal Ratzinger was not involved in any cover-up or keeping a priest from being removed. However, media had begun to take aim at Pope Benedict, which is where the story stands today.

The authors are at pains to refute the charges against Pope Benedict. Not only do they point to his innocence, but they make the strong case that the rooting out of abusive priests, and bishops who hid abuse, and safeguarding against future misconduct, are part of an ongoing reform and renewal that the pope has been shaping and directing.

They note that immediately after his election, Pope Benedict proceeded on the case of Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, a worldwide and influential religious order. Accused of sexual misconduct with seminarians of his order, he was removed from ministry.

The book details the pope's ongoing campaign to rid the Church of what he calls "filth," and to put in place universally a screening system to make certain that abusers will never be ordained again. At the same time, he has accepted resignations one after the other of bishops who failed to address the issue of abuse within their dioceses.

"Pope Benedict, both as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and as pope, has played a historically pivotal role in the Vatican's response to the crisis: From leading the CDF's efforts before and after 2001 in reviewing the case files of suspect priests to his own efforts to address the issue forthrightly as pope, Benedict has grown into a leadership role just when the Church has most needed him," the authors conclude.

"He has met with victims. He has rebuked the abuser priests. He has challenged the bishops. He has overseen a series of procedural reforms that have allowed the Church to respond

more quickly when it is necessary to restrict, suspend, or even laicize a priest," they state. Pope Benedict has made it clear, the authors state, that "avoiding scandal" cannot be the response by the Church to claims of abuse and that victims and their families must be the Church's deep pastoral concern.

The authors acknowledge that the Church has been unfairly singled-out for condemnation and that "there are many agendas at work in the current round of controversies." They rightly dismiss any implication that abuse exists uniquely in the Church, or that practices such as celibacy, or the doctrine of a male-only clergy, are contributing factors to abuse.

They also dismiss both the secular and religious agendas that exploit the abuse of young people for their own causes, particularly agendas that are at odds with the moral teachings of the Church.

But they clearly see that the sexual abuse crisis has presented the Church with the challenge of continuous reform and renewal.

The sexual abuse crisis, they write, requires "accountability that the pope has already established (and) must be continued." Those who have abused children must be held accountable in both civil and Church law. And this accountability must continue to be extended to Church leadership.

The authors write that the Vatican should also make certain that the norms and policies established in the United States, and England as well, should be principles implemented universally.

The review and screening that has been established in the Church of the United States for anyone involved in dealing with children should also become an example for any entity, government, or institution that deals with children.

Finally, they state, "the renewal of the priesthood and religious life must continue, with the ultimate aim of renewing the entire People of God in their relationship with Christ." This is a strong, courageous and necessary book.

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