

# The Clergy Abuse Scandal

## Part One

### Media Myths Fuel the Clergy Abuse Scandal

by John Burger and Kathryn Jean Lopez

BOSTON — The way some of the media report it, one would believe the Church is overrun with pedophile priests, and bishops are protecting the abusers rather than the victims. No priest is to be trusted alone with children. It's not safe for a kid to go to confession or to become an altar boy. Several assumptions need to be called into question here. Is the clergy full of pedophiles? And are celibacy and an all-male priesthood holdovers from the Dark Ages that fan the flames of lust? To begin with, it took a non-Catholic to point out that the term "pedophile priest" is largely a misnomer when applied to all cases of sexual impropriety. Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University, wrote *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis* in 1996. Yes, some priests have engaged in pedophilia — exploitation of children below the age of puberty — but their number is very small. By and large, the scandals have involved sexual relations between priests and adolescents — mostly boys — which suggests that homosexuality is involved in most cases.

After a sex scandal in the early 1990s, the Archdiocese of Chicago opened records of the 2,252 priests who had served there over a period of 40 years. Less than 2% had been accused of sexual misconduct with a minor, and only one was alleged to be a pedophile. Jenkins said there is no evidence that the rate pedophilia among Catholic priests is higher than it is among clergy of religions that do not have a rule of celibacy — or in other professions. Fred Berlin, a psychiatrist who founded the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins University and has been called on for advice by many denominations dealing with the subject, agrees.

Berlin, a member of Cardinal Bernard Law's Commission for the Protection of Children, pointed out that the problem of pedophilia and child sexual abuse has also plagued the Boy Scouts and Big Brothers organizations. In most abuse cases the culprit is a close family member or acquaintance, he said. This suggests that the typical media approach, which starts out describing the abuse of an individual (in this case, ex-priest John Geoghan) and then broadens that to a diocesan and national trend, is either ignorant of the difference between pedophiles and homosexuals, or is deliberately distorting the characterization of the abuse, for ideological reasons. Secular media with an agenda to discredit the Church tar it by pretending that the abuse is pedophilia rather than homosexuality, which they have less difficulty with. Many Catholic leaders and institutions are still in denial that homosexual seminarians and priests are the problem, so they collude in fudging the issue.

The Register spoke with Philip Jenkins, whose research sheds important light on the scandals.

**What do you mean when you say there is no "pedophile priest" crisis in the Catholic Church today? The headlines seem to suggest otherwise.**

I think there is indeed a crisis in the sense of the upsurge of attacks on the Church and its clergy, and the enormous pressure to change Church practice, not to mention the loss of confidence among ordinary believers. The Church also faces enormous financial risks. But what is it about? It certainly is not about pedophiles, who represent only a tiny minority of priests, perhaps one out of every 2- or 3000. While there are serious problems with abuse and sexual misconduct, they have nothing to do with pedophilia. I sometimes say that "pedophile priests are neither." What I mean is that many clergy who offend with minors are not priests — i.e. not Catholic priests — and most offending priests are not pedophiles. I don't want to understate the crisis, the loss of faith caused by the abuse of trust. But let's not use words that trust. But let's not use words that are simply inaccurate. But put another way, 97 or 98% of priests are not involved with minors, which makes the issue sound rather different. The glass is 97% full.

**What is ephebophilia and why is it the more accurate term?**

I tend not to use this word any more, though it has some value. It arises from the idea that most misconduct cases with minors involve young people of 14-18. There is a technical term here, ephebophilia, meaning sexual interest in those around the age of puberty, or older. It seems silly to me, since in most societies, this is a normal age for marriage, so why can we call it a psychiatric disturbance? Also, if the word carries no meaning for most people,

best not to use it. But the word does carry the important message that most "pedophile cases involve no such behavior — they involve young people of 16 not 6. The proper word for a man who has sex with a boy of 16 or 17 is homosexuality.

You have written that the numbers of Catholic priests accused are no higher, proportionally, than other denominations and other services professionals. Does that still ring true, even with the latest revelations out of Boston and so many other places?

Always remember that there are a lot of Catholic clergy compared to those of other denominations, and if we are counting cases that go back to the 1960s, any numbers we use have to take account of everyone who was a priest or religious in the United States in the last 40 years or so — what is that, perhaps 200,000 individuals?

If we assume that 2 or 2.5% of clergy are involved with minors — which seems likely — that suggests an offending population around 4 or 5000. That number is well in keeping with all the cases that have come to light in the last 20 years or so. Don't forget, many of the cases arising now involve acts from the 1970s and before. Also, don't assume that every charge against a priest is automatically justified. Even when the Church settles a case, that does not necessarily involve an admission of guilt. In Civil 'cases, it is often cleverer to cut your losses and settle out of court.

### **Is the Catholic Church getting an unfair rap in the media because the media fundamentally misunderstand all this?**

I think so, both in the exclusive focus on the Catholic side of things, and the exaggeration of what they are supposed to have done ("pedophiles"). I am also shocked by the disingenuous neglect of the legal factors involved in all these cases, and the suggestion that the lawyers representing the victims are always crusaders for truth and justice. A lot are sharks, pure and simple, who shamelessly exploit the media to promote anti-clerical stereotypes.

They are also misusing it to make the issue celibacy, aren't they? This isn't about men who are frustrated because they've taken a vow of chastity, is it?

I would point to the many cases of offending clergy in denominations that allow marriage. If someone produces statistics suggesting a higher offense rate among celibate clergy, I will be happy to accept those figures, to admit defeat, and to change my argument. But I'm still waiting for a worthwhile study on those lines.

### **Why is it then that there are so many homosexuals, it seems, in the priesthood and seminaries?**

I do believe that the rate of gay clergy is far higher than in the population at large. Partly, this is because gay subcultures developed during the 1970s, partly because the exodus of other clergy in this time meant that bishops had to accept the situation or be left with no priests. Of course, a man with homosexual tendencies might make a magnificent priest — as I understand it. Catholic teaching asserts that the tendency itself is not sinful.

### **Do you see this all getting worse before better?**

The main danger presently is financial — litigation in the next few years could be disastrously expensive, and it will be hard to find impartial juries in New England especially. Perhaps the only change could come if a flagrantly false accusation was made. This is after all what defused the panic in 1993, when [Chicago] Cardinal [Joseph] Bernardin was wrongly accused.

### **What would you suggest in terms of solutions for the Catholic bishops in the United states?**

Think much harder about presenting the case for the Church and it's priests; don't accept media definitions of the crisis; don't be afraid to counterattack. Make it clear that mistakes have been made, victims have been hurt, and huge reparation is owed to them; also that wrongdoers will be purged — but that having said all this, the American Church is not going out of business on this matter.

I would also ask liberal critics of the Church to think very, very seriously about what they are doing — do they really, really want to turn this whole affair into an attack on homosexual men who have sex with teenagers? What would that do to other issues in which gay activism is deeply involved, e.g. concerning gay adoptions, gays in the Scout movement etc? Many gays may dislike the Church hierarchy, but do they really want to see an anti-gay panic stemming from this affair?

### **How did you come to study sexual issues in the context religion?**

The topic brought together two of my major interests. I have published on the history of sexual abuse and molestation, in books like *Moral Panic* (1998); and I am interested in bigotry and racist movements in American history [*Hoods and Shirts*, 1997]. This topic brought the themes together perfectly, since I was able to recognize the power of the visceral anti-Catholic imagery that was pervading coverage of the clergy-abuse issue when it surfaced in the late 1980's.

### **In your next book you write about global Christianity. In the context of the whole "Catholic world," how big of a role does the United States and this mess play?**

Americans and Europeans often forget what a small proportion of the Catholic world they represent — and that share is declining steadily. Consequently, they ignore the fact that the Vatican has to take account of global matters, and won't jump to the voices coming out of Boston or Chicago. Of course the Vatican is so conservative on social and sexual matters — they have seen the population projections, and they can count! This current crisis might actually reduce U.S. influence in the catholic world, especially if vocations fall any further. Personally, I note that the American Church was missionary territory until 1908 — I wonder if it might regain that status by 2008 or so?

Copyright © 2002 [National Catholic Register](#)

Kathryn Jean Lopez is executive editor of National review Online and an associate editor of National Review

Posted on StayCatholic.com