

On sexual abuse scandal, the pope gets a bad rap

By Michael Gerson,
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By any human standard, Pope Benedict XVI and the American Catholic Church are getting a bad rap in the current outbreak of outrage over clerical sexual abuse.

Far from being indifferent or complicit, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was among the first in Rome to take the scandal seriously. During much of his service as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the future pope had no responsibility for investigating most cases of sexual abuse. Local bishops were in charge -- and some failed spectacularly in their moral duties. It was not until 2001 that Pope John Paul II charged Ratzinger with reviewing every credible case of sexual abuse. While poring through these documents, Ratzinger's eyes were opened. The church became more active in removing abusive priests -- whom Ratzinger described rightly as "filth" -- both through canonical trials and administrative action.

"Benedict," says the Rev. Thomas Reese of Georgetown University, "grew in his understanding of the crisis. Like many other bishops at the beginning, he didn't understand it. . . . But he grew in his understanding because he listened to what the U.S. bishops had to say. He in fact got it quicker than other people in the Vatican."

And the American Catholic Church -- once in destructive denial -- has confronted the problem directly. It is difficult to contend that justice was done in the cases of some prominent offenders and the bishops who protected and reassigned them. But it is also difficult to deny that the church has made progress with a zero-tolerance policy. The vast majority of abuse cases took place decades ago. In 2009, six credible allegations of abuse concerning people who are minors were reported to the U.S. bishops -- in a church with 65 million members.

Some will allow none of these facts to get in the way of a good clerical scandal. Editorial cartoons engage in gleeful anti-clericalism. The implicit charge is that the Catholic Church is somehow discredited by the existence of human sinfulness -- a doctrine it has taught for more than two millennia.

Many of the current accusations, as I said, are not fair by human standards. But the Christian church, in its varied expressions, is accountable to not merely human standards because it is supposed to be more than a human institution. Apart from the mental, emotional and spiritual harm done to children, this has been the most disturbing aspect of the initial Catholic reaction to the abuse scandal over the past few decades: the reduction of the church to one more self-interested organization. In case after case, church leaders have attempted (and failed) to protect the church from scandal -- like a White House trying to contain a bad news story or an oil company avoiding responsibility for a spill.

From one perspective, this is understandable. A church exists in a real world of donor relations and legal exposure. But the normal process of crisis management can involve a theological error -- often repeated in the history of the religion.

It is the consistent temptation of faith leaders -- Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Hindu -- to practice the religion of the tribe. The goal is to seek public recognition of their own theological convictions and the health of their own religious institutions. For many centuries of Western history, the Christian church vied and jostled for influence along with other interests, pursuing a tribal agenda at the expense of Jews, heretics, "infidels" and ambitious princes. The mind-set can still be detected, in milder forms, whenever Christian leaders talk of "taking back America for Christ" or pay hush money to avoid scandal for the church. The tribe must be defended.

But the religion of the tribe is inherently exclusive, sorting "us" from "them." So it undermines a foundational teaching of Christianity -- a radical human equality in need and in grace.

The story of modern Christian history has been the partial, hopeful movement away from the religion of the tribe and toward a religion of humanity -- a theology that defends a universal ideal of human rights and dignity, whose triumph benefits everyone. And the Catholic Church has led this transition. Once a reactionary opponent of individualism and modernity, it is now one of the leading global advocates for universal human rights and dignity.

The Catholic Church's initial reaction to the abuse scandal was often indefensible. Now, through its honesty and transparency, it can demonstrate a commitment to universal dignity -- which includes every victim of abuse.

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