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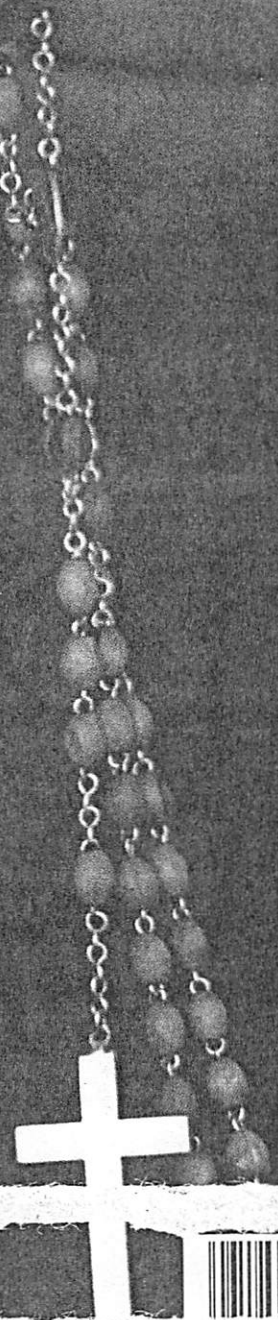
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# NATIONAL REVIEW

## THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S  
UNSPEAKABLE PROBLEM

BY ROD DREYER



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# Sins of the Fathers

Pedophile priests and the challenge to the American Church

ROD DREHER

**W**HEN news broke in 1992 that former Catholic priest James Porter, known for years to Church officials as a predatory child rapist, had sexually abused dozens of children during his clerical career, making his the worst clerical pedophilia case in U.S. history, it was hard to imagine how anything could get worse for the Church. But as American Catholics have learned since the wave of clergy molestation lawsuits began in 1985, new lows are always just around the corner.

Porter assaulted many of the children while serving in the Diocese of Fall River, Mass., which prompted the *Boston Globe* to report aggressively on the assaults and the Church cover-up. Under fire, an angry Bernard Cardinal Law, the archbishop of Boston, denounced the media for what he believed was sensational reporting of the scandal. Later that year, Law said in a *Globe* interview that his staff had gone through past molestation cases the archdiocese had investigated and found no cases that merited further attention or concern.

It wasn't true. While Law was fulminating against the press and assuring the public that all was well with his clergy, a Boston priest, Father John Geoghan, was in the final years of a 36-year career, during which he molested scores of children in at least three Boston-area parishes, including a four-year-old boy and seven boys in one extended family. Documents show that the archdiocese had long been aware at its top-most levels of Geoghan's abuse of children. Law's predecessors knew about this priest, and they made sure Law knew about him when he took over in 1984.

Law nevertheless approved Geoghan as pastor of St. Julia's parish, where he would go on to molest more children. In 1989, following molestation complaints, Geoghan, by then a veteran of institutions that treat sexually abusive priests, went back into treatment. The archdiocese then returned him to the parish, where he continued to

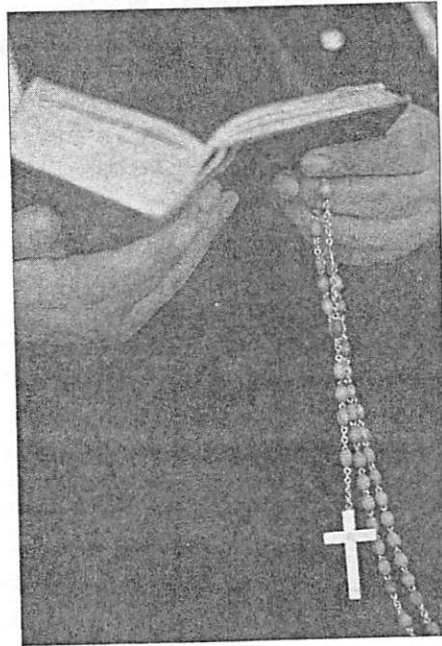
molest kids. After leaving parish work in 1993, Geoghan was assigned to the chaplaincy at a nursing home, but continued to seek out and abuse children.

By the time Geoghan was convicted in the first of three criminal trials in early January, more than 130 people had come forward, claiming to have been sexually assaulted by Geoghan when they were children. Though the criminal statute of limitations has expired in nearly all of the cases, the Church has paid millions to settle civil suits in the Geoghan matter, and faces 90 more suits—none of which are being contested by the accused priest, who was defrocked by Pope John Paul II in 1998.

Following new revelations in the *Globe*, Law gave an extraordinary January 9 press conference in which he apologized for his "tragically incorrect" 1984 decision to continue Geoghan's ministry. The cardinal claimed that assignment came after psychiatric and medical evaluators cleared the known pedophile for parish work. He announced a new "get tough" policy that would require all archdiocesan employees to report suspected incidents of clergy sex abuse to civil authorities.

Yet subsequent reporting by the *Boston Globe*, based on documents made public as a result of civil trials against the archdiocese, revealed that Geoghan had been in his new parish for a month before the archdiocese ordered his evaluation. And, reported the *Globe*, one of the two doctors who gave Geoghan a pass had no psychotherapy credentials. The other, a psychiatrist, had no experience treating sexual offenders, and had himself settled a 1977 lawsuit in which a female patient accused him of sexual molestation.

It gets worse. Last year, pedophile Christopher Reardon pleaded guilty to 75 counts of criminal molestation of young boys, some of whom he abused at the office of the Boston-area parish in which he worked. Workers in the parish testified before a grand jury that lawyers for the archdiocese counseled them not to aid authorities looking into the matter, out of concern that the sexual activities of Reardon's supervisor, Father Jon C. Martin, would open the archdio-



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cese to negligence claims. The workers testified that they found condoms in Fr. Martin's bed, and that he often had male overnight guests in his rectory bedroom. If it can be proved that Fr. Martin was homosexually active, and that that in some way caused him to be negligent in his supervision of Reardon, the archdiocese could be in for another devastating round of lawsuits.

Molesters and sexual deviants among the Catholic clergy, episcopal negligence and cover-up, stonewalling chanceries and empty claims that at long last the Church is going to get serious about cleaning house: This is, of course, not a new story. And that, say critics, among them conservative Catholics loyal to Church teaching, is the real scandal.

#### AN ECCLESIASTICAL ENRON

"For God's sake, this is the umpteenth time something like this has happened!" says one angry priest. "The Louisiana case [that initiated the wave of lawsuits against the Church] was 1985! This is 2002! How does Law have the hubris to stand in front of cameras and say that now, *now* he's come up with a policy?"

Accurate estimates of the amount of money the Catholic Church has paid in damages and settlements to victims of clergy abuse are impossible to come by, but informed sources within legal and abuse-survivors' circles put the number at between \$600 million and \$1.3 billion since 1984. The Church is hemorrhaging both money and the trust of its members. Morale among priests, the vast majority of whom serve with integrity, has suffered. And many place the blame squarely at the foot of the American bishops, whom they accuse of placing the "good" of the institutional Church over the welfare of the flock.

"The bishops have the mindset of company men," observes one priest. "Being company men is fine when the company is on a growth curve. But not when your company is Enron."

The analogy to the disgraced energy corporation collapsing under the weight of its leaders' own malfeasance may sound extreme, but consider what happened in Dallas in 1997, when a jury returned a staggering \$120 million judgment against the diocese in a molestation case egregious even by the abysmal standards of such matters. Church officials, pleading that the Dallas diocese would be bankrupted, convinced the plaintiffs to settle for \$31 million instead. Had the victims not agreed, the 400,000 Catholics in Dallas could have witnessed the selling off of many of their schools and parishes.

"It is disgusting. It is revolting. It tries your faith," says a veteran clergyman, a Dallas native. "But priests who try to speak out just get crushed."

The scandals involving Porter and Geoghan are arguably the worst in modern times, but they are by no means the only ones to receive national attention. Consider these high-profile cases, all from the last decade:

♦ The landmark civil suit in Dallas primarily involved Rudy Kos, a former priest, who was convicted in criminal court of serial molestation of altar boys, and sent to prison. During the trial, it was revealed that Church officials were

repeatedly warned that Kos was a danger to children, and did nothing. After the verdict, Msgr. Robert Rehkemper, former vicar general of the diocese, said in an interview, "No one ever says anything about what the role of the parents was in all this"; also that Kos's child victims "knew what was right and what was wrong. Anybody who reaches the age of reason shares responsibility for what they do." Michael Sheehan, the seminary rector who was advised time and time again about Kos's attraction to children, but allowed him to remain, continued to rise in the hierarchy, and is now archbishop of Santa Fe.

♦ In 1999, the Diocese of Santa Rosa, Calif., already paying out \$5.4 million in child sex-abuse settlements from the early 1990s, shuddered when DNA and taped evidence proved that Bishop G. Patrick Ziemann had been having sex with one of his priests—a relationship the priest claimed Ziemann forced on him with blackmail. It emerged that Ziemann, who resigned, had lost millions of the diocese's funds in shady investment schemes—fraud for which he was never prosecuted because, said local law-enforcement officials, Church authorities refused to cooperate with investigators.

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♦ John Bollard, a former Jesuit seminarian in San Francisco, filed a sexual-harassment lawsuit four years ago against the Society of Jesus, claiming his superiors in the order pressed him constantly for gay sex. When their claim to be immune for religious reasons from sexual-harassment law failed, the Jesuits settled the suit.

The ongoing crisis began, as a public matter, in 1985, when a Louisiana priest named Gilbert Gauthé was convicted of molesting a number of boys in the Diocese of Lafayette. On the heels of the Gauthé conviction, the American bishops and heads of religious orders received a confidential report co-authored by the Rev. Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer working in the Vatican embassy in Washington. The lengthy document warned the bishops that the Gauthé case was likely to be only one of many, and that if they didn't act swiftly and decisively to clean out their stables, the Church could lose an estimated \$1 billion over the next ten years. It also cautioned that conventional methods for treating pederasty are not effective.

The bishops shelved the report and, by and large, took no action, Doyle says today. Radicalized by the extent of the problem, the damage to victims, and the hierarchy's inaction, Doyle sabotaged his ecclesiastical career by speaking out on behalf of victims. He now serves as a consultant to plaintiffs in civil suits. "Average people feel totally powerless when it comes to the hierarchy," Doyle says. "Every

time I speak with a victim—and I've counseled hundreds of them—I'm shocked by how deep the pain is. And in every single case I've been involved with, I'm the first person from the Church who has come to them with comfort."

It is true that the hierarchy, nationally, hasn't been entirely unresponsive. Some bishops have indeed mandated the reporting of suspected child abuse by clergy to civil authorities. The national bishops' conference recommended stricter guidelines in the wake of the Porter disaster, and issued a committee report in 1994 offering further advice to its members.

Some observers believe that bishops have gotten better in recent years because they've become more sensitive to the problem. A more cynical view holds that they tightened up because they were scared of being financially ruined by all the lawsuits.

Last June, Edward Cardinal Egan and a representative of the Archdiocese of New York's insurer met with priests to issue stringent new guidelines for reporting suspected instances of sexual abuse by archdiocesan employees. Yet the supposed new level of vigilance in the chancery did not prevent a New York diocesan priest who had been named in an ongoing sex-abuse lawsuit involving a minor in a Bronx church from remaining in his Staten Island parish. Egan suspended the priest pending the outcome of the lawsuit only after the *New York Post* reported the allegations against him.

Three other priests named in the lawsuit—all Carmelites—had been taken out of the Bronx parish by the religious order responsible for them. As of last summer, at least one was doing parish work in his native Puerto Rico, and, when reached by phone by a *Post* reporter, admitted that sexual molestation had taken place in the Bronx rectory with the teenage plaintiff, but claimed that he had not taken part.

#### TROUBLE AT THE TOP

Why does this continue to happen? For several reasons, priests and others say. For one thing, Church law restricts the right of bishops to move quickly against suspected pedophile priests. Says one canon lawyer, "In all fairness to the American bishops, they tried to get the Holy See to approve an expedited process for laicization, but Rome didn't go for it." That's not necessarily a bad thing, says Doyle, himself a canonist. Accused priests are entitled to a fair hearing, a right that may in fact be more important than ever, given the risk that false accusations in the current environment pose to an innocent cleric's vocation. In fact, Doyle complains that the guidelines newly promulgated by the Vatican ordering bishops and religious superiors to refer sex-abuse cases directly to Rome are a step backward. "It's an attempt to quickly solve the problem to reduce liability. It actually further erodes credibility. The accused priest will be tried in a secret tribunal in Rome. It enshrouds the issue in more secrecy, and calls into serious doubt whether these priests will receive due process."

Another reason for the inaction, say priests, is that the kind of men who rise to the episcopacy are generally not the sort who rock boats: "Most bishops are very choice-averse,"

says Father G., a southern priest. "They were chosen because they would do the things that were not unusual." Says Father R., who serves in the Southwest, "Priests and bishops see so much evil, it can deaden one's sensibilities, so one doesn't have a normal kind of reaction."

Some argue that the age of the American hierarchy has a lot to do with its demonstrably poor ability to handle these problems. Most bishops today were formed in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, before the widespread loss of faith and the turmoil of the sexual revolution. They have been temperamentally and psychologically unable to adapt to changing social realities, particularly the post-conciliar idea that the life and governance of the Church must be more open and accountable to the laity.

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Others attribute the failure of bishops to act firmly in these matters to a bureaucratic reliance on experts and committees as a way of diffusing responsibility for difficult or unpopular decisions. In Boston, this dovetailed tragically with the culture of therapy, which medicalizes the problem of radical evil and disables the common sense of men, like Cardinal Law, who know better. Washington lawyer Charles Molineaux, a Knight of Malta who called for Law's resignation in a recent *Wall Street Journal* column, observed that "after 2,000 years of experience with sin and recidivism," it is surprising that the Church allows itself to be guided in these grave matters by trendy psychotherapy.

Then there is old-fashioned clericalism, in which bishops, particularly older ones, reflexively defend priests as if they were their sons. And finally, the concepts of mercy, redemption, and humility come into play. "What I have seen—and I have experienced this myself—is, you don't like to judge other priests," says a priest who is a top administrator in an East Coast diocese. "We all have some kind of failing. The first thing an accused priest says to a bishop is, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.' They know from history that almost every priest has a weakness of some kind, not that they've acted on it. So when a priest says something like that, the bishop thinks, 'Well, I'm not perfect either.'"

Take the case of Bishop J. Keith Symons, 68, who resigned in 1998 as the head of the Palm Beach, Fla., diocese after five men came forward to accuse him of having molested them decades earlier, when they were altar boys in his parish. Symons admitted the charges and left his post. Two years later, to the dismay of victims'-rights groups, Symons resurfaced in Michigan, living in a convent and conducting spiritual retreats for adult Catholics.

When the activist group Roman Catholic Faithful discovered that an admitted child molester was quietly allowed by the bishop of Lansing to resume ministry, it alerted the media, which reported the story. Not only did

the Lansing bishop defend his action, but the bishop emeritus, Kenneth J. Povish, denounced RCF in a newspaper column as a "self-appointed vigilante group" and praised the pederast bishop as a "wounded healer" who is "likely to do an excellent job."

#### A PROTECTION RACKET

One disturbing facet of this willingness to overlook serious sexual sin, say a number of priests and seminarians, is the existence of a discreet but powerful homosexual network within seminaries and chanceries. A. W. Richard Sipe, a psychiatrist and former Benedictine monk who has treated scores of sexually abusive priests and has written extensively about the phenomenon, says that the reality of the gay network is well known to clerics and others closely familiar with the workings of the Catholic Church, though difficult to prove from public sources.

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"I've reviewed over 100 cases of sexual abuse by priests. In there you get the documentation, which unfortunately often gets sealed by the Church after they settle the cases," says Sipe, who is an expert witness in abuse cases. "It's very clear that you can trace [the network], one person to another, through a sequence of appointments, the sequence of who follows whom in what position, and how they got there. It is a fact, and nobody can sincerely deny it." A typical pattern involves a priest becoming sexually involved with a seminarian or younger cleric, and then the junior man following his elder up the diocesan hierarchy. Sipe and others interviewed say this "bond of secrecy" introduces the possibility of blackmail: Those in positions of authority are prevented from acting against others because they themselves are compromised. It's a form of mutually assured destruction.

For the last decade, Church officials around the country have been moving quietly, with some success, to reform the worst of the so-called "pink palace" seminaries. "It's not official policy, but it would be very hard for a man with a homosexual orientation to get into the seminary here," says a top administrator in a major archdiocese. "Everybody knows it has been a problem, and bishops are trying to clean it up. But you can't say that officially, because it will blow up in your face."

A quiet policy of excluding homosexuals may not please liberal Catholics, whose names and phone numbers tend to be in reporters' Rolodexes. Some dissenting Catholics capitalize on sex-abuse scandals to agitate for their pet causes, including an end to priestly celibacy. (There is no evidence to suggest that celibacy turns normal people into pedophiles—and there's plenty of evidence that married men can be pedophiles as well.)

If orthodox Catholics want to force positive change on

the hierarchy, they can speak out—loudly. The Rev. Charles Fiore, an outspoken conservative priest in Wisconsin, says, "Change is going to come only when the laity stands up and says, Enough." Tom Doyle believes the most significant development since 1985 has been an increased skepticism of the hierarchy on the part of lay Catholics, many of whom no longer trust the bishops to do the right thing by their children, and will hold the bishops' feet to the fire on these matters. And this often means being uncowed by the bishops' stature, and unafraid to appeal to law-enforcement authorities and the secular media for remedy.

When Roman Catholic Faithful uncovered a secret pornographic website for gay priests and clergy, it documented the names, photographs, and writings of the participants and sent the information to members of the Church hierarchy. "Nothing was done about it, so we made all the information public on our website," RCF president Steve Brady says. "The press coverage got the site taken down, and some of the priests in trouble."

Lay Catholics should demand more openness from the institutional Church. Dioceses should open their books to laymen as a matter of accountability and oversight. Doyle, who as counselor to many victims is privy to settlement details, says the people in the pews "would be absolutely shocked to discover how much of their money was being paid out on these settlements."

Similarly, given how poorly the institutional Church has policed itself, there should be lay boards to review diocesan personnel files to make sure sex abusers aren't being concealed. "I don't want to hear about another new policy until someone says to me that someone other than the fox guarding the henhouse has examined the files," says lawyer Steve Rubino, a leading victims' attorney.

Restoring the Church's credibility also depends on the bishops' being less lawyerly and more Christian. Johnnie Cochrane didn't come to save the world, Jesus Christ did. This means seeing those who have been raped or molested by priests as suffering souls in need of pastoral care, not moneygrubbing plaintiffs who deserve the brass-knuckles routine.

One parish priest says he will never forget the day he realized his former boss, an East Coast bishop (now retired), was a true man of God. "We had to meet with a family whose child had been abused by one of our priests. When we sat down face to face with them and the lawyers, we told them that the bishop had said his first priority was to do the right thing. We told them our investigation had found that the priest was guilty, but that he had never been in this kind of situation before. We had removed him from any further parish involvement. We told them that we didn't believe we had been neglectful, but we wanted to help the family in any way we could, because we recognized lives had been damaged, and we were profoundly sorry. And that was the bishop's position.

"I looked across the table, and the family was crying," the priest recalled. "The father said, 'Thank you. We never wanted to persecute anybody. That was all we wanted to hear.'" NR