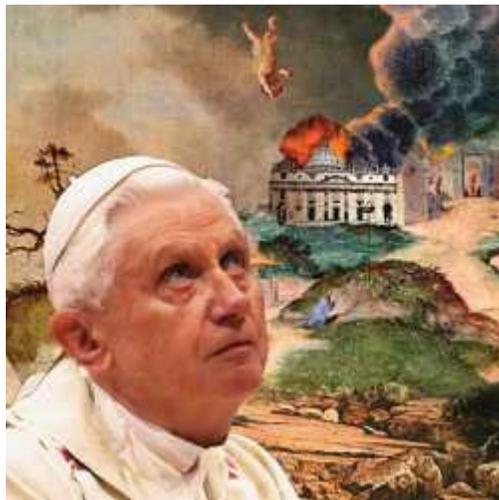


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Forgive Not

By Garry Wills
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passthru=MDFjNWQwNjRiMTkYmQ5MWQ4YzZjMGYwZDBiNzUxNDQ#comments](http://www.tnr.com/article/forgive-not?passthru=MDFjNWQwNjRiMTkYmQ5MWQ4YzZjMGYwZDBiNzUxNDQ#comments)



This early in the twenty-first century, the rulers of the Catholic Church have suffered an earthquake of crumbling credibility. Nearly ten years ago, with the initial revelations about sexual abuse of the young by priests, some argued that the problem was limited in time and place, since most of the abuse cases had occurred 30 or 40 years before, and they took place in the United States. There was hope that an investigative and reformist effort would restore the U.S. Church's authority. An emergency Dallas meeting of American bishops in 2002 and a lay inquiry with its recommendations in 2004 were supposed to make the problem go away.

But, ten years later, all across the globe, the problem has shown a stubborn refusal to subside. Pedophile scandals have devastated the Church in Ireland. Fresh horrors have come to light in the United States, especially in Wisconsin and Arizona. There are urgent investigations in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Australia, and Italy. And the Pope himself has been implicated in the scandals, some of which occurred when he was Archbishop of Munich and some when he oversaw the treatment of pedophile reports at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This has led to calls for the Pope's resignation, or arrest, or criminal indictment—things not even imaginable ten years ago.

It should come as no surprise that a world scandal has succeeded the American troubles. Leading members of the hierarchy in country after country dismissed the U.S. reports of abuse by priests as a thing made up by the hyperthyroid American press, out of an anti-Catholic animus, a pro-Jewish zeal, or the hope to cash in on Church wealth. It is no wonder these foreign cardinals have been blindsided by their own neglected scandals. At first, the Vatican rejected the measures taken by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, after their meeting in Dallas, as not being fair to accused priests, giving too much scope to lay panels of critics, and violating the confidentiality of confessions.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, at the time a second-in-command to Cardinal Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and later the second-in-command (secretary of state) to

Ratzinger as Pope Benedict, set the tone in an interview with an Italian magazine:

[T]here is a well-founded suspicion that some of these charges [of abuse], that arise well after the fact, serve only for making money in civil litigation. ... In my opinion, the demand that a bishop be obligated to contact the police in order to denounce a priest who has admitted the offence of pedophilia is unfounded. ... If a priest cannot confide in his bishop for fear of being denounced, then it would mean that there is no more liberty of conscience.

Bertone was soon chosen by the Vatican to serve on a panel that would soften the directives adopted by the American bishops for punishing pedophile priests. Another member of this panel, made up of eight bishops, was Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, the head of the Congregation for the Clergy, which handled all issues having to do with priests. Castrillon Hoyos was delegated to read a papal letter that mentioned the scandals, where he defended a policy of "keeping things within the family." A third member of the panel was Archbishop Julian Herranz Casado, who attributed the pedophile scandal to American "exaggeration, financial exploitation, and nervousness."

Some critics of the American bishops' treatment of the pedophile problem cited an article from the Vatican-monitored newspaper *Civiltà Cattolica*, written by the dean of the canon law department at Rome's Gregorian University, famous for training the clergy. It said that "the bishop and the superior [of religious orders] are neither morally nor judicially responsible for the acts committed by one of their clergy." Among those attacking the Jewish press in the United States for causing the scandal was Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, who said that the Vatican's reception of Yasir Arafat had offended the media, that a supporter of feminism was judging the priests' cases in Boston, and that Cardinal Bernard Law had been subjected to "Stalinist processes against Churchmen." At a press conference in Rome, Rodriguez called the emphasis on the scandals by U.S. newspapers an "obsession [that] is a mental illness," and a trick to get money from the Church:

When I was in the United States in the 1970s, there was a fashion when one slipped on a sidewalk to sue the owner of the house for millions. This became a kind of industry. I remember that people used to put on a neck brace and go find a lawyer. ... So why now is there such interest in taking up these [pedophile] cases from the past? Because there is money in play. But we know that money doesn't heal any wound. ... If it were up to me, I would give the money neither to the lawyers nor even to the victims. ... For me it would be a tragedy to reduce the role of a pastor to that of a cop. We are totally different, and I'd be prepared to go to jail rather than harm one of my priests.

The harm, you notice, was to the priests, not to the children they preyed on. The priests, Rodriguez said, can "also be victims."

Members of the hierarchy outside the United States regularly called accusations against priests the real scandal. Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City said there was "an orchestrated plan for striking at the prestige of the Church" that constituted a "ferocious persecution." Cardinal Jan Schotte of Belgium (where new scandals have now been reported) cited with approval the *Civiltà Cattolica* article by Father Gianfranco Ghirlanda, saying that the priests should not be accountable to secular authorities and noting that the Belgian bishops had successfully avoided turning over their records on the grounds that they were official Church documents. Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iniguez of Guadalajara claimed that the Church was being persecuted for its opposition to abortion and its support of Palestinians:

The powerful don't like what the Church affirms and testifies to regarding the defense of life and of the family. For the powerful of the world, the positions of the Church against the financial strangulation of the countries of the Third World and in favor of the millions and millions of robbed and exploited poor don't go down well. The powerful also won't tolerate the balanced position of the Church regarding the dramatic situation in the Holy Land.

Most of these reactions by the hierarchy date from two to four years after my book, *Papal Sin*, was published. But they show the same patterns of denial, evasion, defensiveness, accusation, and protestations of innocence and holiness that I had already analyzed. The U.S. scandals had not reached their height in 2000, and they did not lead me to write the book. The occasion for my doing so was a careful reading of Lord Acton's collected historical writings. Though Acton was a lifelong Catholic, he had been a scathing critic of the First Vatican Council, and of the dishonest way Pius IX extracted from it a definition of papal infallibility. But he assured William Gladstone that a papacy

that had survived the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and had based its claims on fraud and forgery for centuries was just acting true to form.

Acton's most famous criticisms of the papacy occurred in his dealings with Mandell Creighton in 1887. Creighton would later become the Anglican bishop of London, but, at the time, he was a professor of history at Cambridge University and the editor of the *English Historical Review*. He asked Acton to review in that journal volumes three and four of *The History of the Papacy*, which Creighton had just published. Acton attacked the volumes for whitewashing papal crimes. Creighton honorably published the review, despite its criticism of him, but, when Creighton wrote objecting to certain matters in the review, Acton sharpened his attack. His letter of April 5, 1887, contains this famous passage:

I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favorable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way, against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. ... There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.

Though Acton lived before the Second Vatican Council defined the Church as "the people of God," the entirety of Acton's writings prove that he never equated Catholicism with the papacy. He was too good a historian for that. The Pope is a freak of history—specifically, of medieval history. His office does not date from the early history of the Christian community. Peter was not a Pope, or a bishop, or a priest—offices that did not exist in his lifetime. There are no priests in the New Testament. Peter was not the leader of the Church in either Jerusalem or Rome—communities led, respectively, by James, Jesus's brother, and Clement. Paul, at the famous clash in Antioch, showed that he did not think Peter a sound interpreter of Jesus's message. Males were not the only ministers at the outset, as the apostle Junia proves. In fact the early preachers of the Gospel were often a husband-and-wife team.

When the current Pope was Cardinal Ratzinger, he was asked how so many Catholics could disregard official teachings of the hierarchy. He answered that doctrine is not set by majority vote. But that is precisely how creeds and doctrines were formulated. At the great Eastern councils, like that of Nicaea, hundreds of bishops from around the world voted on the deepest mysteries of the faith—the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection. And there was no Pope at any of those councils. The democracy that would be denounced by Pius IX had been practiced in the early Church, where priests and bishops were elected by the people, and bishops could no more leave a people, once elected, than a man could leave his wife. (That is why, for a long time, no bishop could become a Pope—he could not leave his diocese.)

In the Middle Ages, it was the worldly assumption that all authority had to be feudal or monarchical in character. So the Pope became a monarch. He ruled territories. He had armies, prisons, spies. These things were finally stripped from him, but not until the nineteenth century, and despite the frantic efforts of Pius IX to retain them. Even now, the vestigial papal state is being invoked to show that the Pope, as ruler of a sovereign government, cannot be called to account for priestly sins.

In keeping with its ahistorical and medieval roots, the papacy has been reflexively opposed to social changes. Pius IX condemned democracy as an evil and illegitimate form of government. The papacy has historically been at war with science—against the Enlightenment, against textual criticism from Erasmus's time onward, against cosmology and astronomy in Galileo's time, against the "liberalism" of Lamennais and others, against biology and geology in Darwin's time, against psychology in Freud's time—and, at present, against prenatal scans, in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, fetal stem-cell research, and condoms to prevent AIDS in Africa.

In order to protect what are considered timeless truths, for centuries, the papacy prevented the study of the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek forms, insisting that only the Latin Bible of the Catholic liturgy be considered authoritative. It made it a condition of ordination that would-be priests take an oath against modernism, subscribing to the biblical simplisms of Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi*. It tolerated when it did not encourage—until the 1960s!—the idea that the Jewish people were guilty oficide.

Since the papacy has been frozen in a defensive crouch, defying historical fact and free inquiry, it

has been opposed to anything that might diminish the power of the Church to define reality. The authority of the bishop, of the priest, of the papacy, was more important than the Gospel. It was considered the only power that could say what the Gospel is or demands. Thus, the covering-up of sacerdotal sins and errors was a given in the Church. The infantilism of priests, the combined sexual inexperience and prurience resulting from celibacy, the belief that a celibate male is more attuned to spiritual reality than a married man—all this created a framework where sins, when they occurred, had to be denied, the victims had to be blamed, the solution to the problem was simply one of praying harder. Where therapy failed, the confessional would take the sinner with spiritual force beyond the worldly wisdom of psychiatrists.

Even now, as Church leaders belatedly try to repent and repair things, the mythical underpinnings of the priestly system continue to be taught—that only celibates can be priests (the apostles were married, all but Paul), that refusal to marry gives a man a superior caringness, that it makes him unworldly and concerned with other souls. What real change can occur when such myths are clung to with a blind ferocity? The resistance to change can be seen in the fact that the papacy has not faced the facts of a priesthood dwindling in both numbers and quality, of a financial base eroding as Church attendance goes down and donations dry up, even as damages in the billions must be paid to victims of “holy” predators. The wonderful teaching and nursing services of the nuns have evaporated.

The reaction of the hierarchy has been to dig itself even deeper into the past—to blame the Church’s troubles on such old evils as secularism, relativism, positivism, pluralism, and a “permissive” culture. The Second Vatican Council is blamed as well, and the Popes have tried to blunt or reverse its changes. Pope Benedict wants to go back to the Latin mass, with the priest turned from the people. He has cut back ecumenical initiatives, denying again the validity of Anglican orders, forbidding concelebration of Mass with Protestants, declaring (in *Dominus Iesus*) that all other churches are “gravely deficient.” He wants to put nuns back in their habits. He is driving to canonize the anti-Semitic Popes Pius IX and Pius XII. These are further signs of the structures of deceit—of self-deception as the first step to defying “worldly wisdom.”

I am asked, if I believe this, why I remain a Catholic. I do that precisely because I do not equate the people of God with the papacy. Well, I am told, other churches honor the Creed and the Gospel without the burden of a papacy as outdated as the medieval costumes it affects. I want to be at one with Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and others; but I want all of these communions to come together, and I cannot do that by renouncing the Catholic membership in such an ecumenical Christianity, saying some churches are better than others. When the disciples of Jesus came back from their first mission away from him, the apostle John reported, “Master, we saw a man driving out evil in our name, and he was not one of us, we tried to stop him.” Jesus asks why they did that: “No one who does a work of divine power in my name will be able the next moment to speak evil of me” (Mark 9:38-39). All of us who honor his name must come together. When a Catholic tells me—often these days, it is a young woman—that she can no longer put up with the male monarchical Church, I tell her, “Stay with us, we need you. The people of God need you.”

All those who honor the name of Jesus are engaged in a joint search for the Jesus who will not be found in marble halls or wearing imperial costumes. He is forever on the run. He is the one who said, “Whatever you did to any of my brothers, even the lowliest [*elackistoi*], you did to me” (Matthew 25:41). That means that the priests abusing the vulnerable young were doing that to Jesus, raping Jesus. Any clerical functionary who shows more sympathy for the predator priests than for their victims instantly disqualifies himself as a follower of Jesus. The cardinals said they must care for their own, going to jail if necessary to protect a priest. We say the same thing, but the “our own” we care for are the victimized, the poor, the violated. They are Jesus.

Garry Wills is the author, most recently, of *Bomb Power*. A tenth-anniversary edition of his book *Papal Sin* will be published later this year.