

Benedict is mistaken here!

A commentary by Thomas Schirmmacher

A year ago in April 2019, [Pope Benedict published a letter](#) intended to explain how the abuse scandal within the Catholic Church came about. Even though there were many press articles and many statements, most of them quite emotionally. Rarely did someone discuss the content as a whole and the major thesis of the author. Thus it is time for me to do this away from all emotional turmoil a year later.

The accusations of abuse by priests date back decades, if not centuries. Whenever Bishops' Conferences, as in Germany, commission investigations, they find cases going back decades. In the case of Germany, the files reach back to 1946.

Pope Francis assumes that this problem has existed for a long time and has never been tackled fundamentally. Furthermore, he presumes that it is a matter of "clericalism" and abuse of power, not of factors that emerged only recently. He also sees parallels to attacks by priests and bishops on nuns—another severe problem of long standing.



Pope Emeritus Benedict has now expressed a diametrically opposing view. As I read his letter, I thought that after the long silence since his resignation, it would have been better if Benedict had remained silent. I have read many brilliant texts by Benedict; this is by far his weakest.

From 1981 to 2003, Cardinal Ratzinger was Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which has been responsible for cases of abuse and for the secularization of priests on account of moral aberrations. Thus nobody has been closer to the evidence than he was.

In his letter he now gives the impression that the problem of abuse did not originate in the church, but is really a problem of our modern, godless society that has only rubbed off on the church. It began, he suggests, with the state-prescribed and state-supported introduction of children and youth into the nature of sexuality. He states,

“A society without God—a society that does not know Him and treats Him as non-existent—is a society that loses its measure.”

Although that statement may be true in itself, with regard to the problem at hand I would rather agree with Pope Francis: it is a problem of the Church and not of society. And it will be solved only if the Church changes, not if society changes. And even if the impulse had come from the outside, what kind of church would it be that is so defenceless as to become submerged in such a rampant pattern of abuse within a very short time on a broad international level? At least, that is the pattern of infection that Benedict's letter seems to depict.

Benedict gives the impression that sexual abuse by priests and bishops (or homosexual relations in seminaries among future priests) have existed only since the mid-1960s and were a consequence of the sexual revolution. He maintains that a collapse of academic Catholic morality at universities also occurred as a direct consequence of this revolution.

However, no one has ever taught that priests are morally allowed to sexually assault minors! Even very liberal Catholic moral theologians have never taught this.

Pope Benedict says either directly or indirectly:

Benedict says: There was no sexual abuse of this kind before 1965, or at least it was not nearly so serious a problem. (He does not present proof of this assertion.)

Response: What about the trials that took place before that time in the Weimar Republic or in the German empire? All enemies of the Catholic Church made use of this topic—often for polemical purposes, of course, but this does not change the fact that they could refer to real, existing cases.

There is also another problem. The abuse scandal is a global one. How should the sexual revolution of the 1960s in Germany have led bishops in Chile or Mali to be misappropriating minors at the same time?

Benedict says: In a very short time, the sexual revolution had a penetrating impact on the theology taught at universities to priests and bishops. “At the same time, independent of this development, Catholic moral theology suffered a collapse.”

Response: Really? How could the sexual revolution, which took place mainly in the secular space and at first met with bitter resistance on the part of large parts of society, have moved thousands of priests and bishops overnight to abuse minors? Where is the connection here? And if there were a connection, then it would have taken some time for the sexual revolution to arrive in the lecture hall, influencing only those priests who began their primary education 40 to 45 years ago at most. In other words, any case of abuse involving a bishop or priest age 50 or older cannot be chronologically related to the sexual revolution.

The Australian Cardinal George Pell, born in 1941, received his theological diploma in Rome in 1967. How can his abuse be traced back to the sexual revolution? Were modern views of sexuality revolution really taught in Rome as early as the mid-1960s? The founder of the Legionaries of Christ has fathered several children and abused seminarians in Mexico since 1960. A grand jury of the State of Pennsylvania counted 300 Catholic priests guilty of abuse since the 1940s.

Benedict says: Abuse takes place because and if there are no longer any strict sexual ethics.

Response: However, up to the present day perpetrators know that such abuse is wrong; otherwise, they would not hide such deeds or help to hide the deeds of others.

Benedict says: “Part of the physiognomy of the Revolution of ’68 was that paedophilia was then also diagnosed as allowed and appropriate.”

Response: That statement is as correct as it is too general. However, let’s suppose it were true: Is this to be the explanation given as to why priests abused minors?

I would like to add two more remarks:

A. The victims of the abuse are not mentioned in the letter. Most of them might find the letter strange.

B. Whatever one may think of other theses and insights of feminist movements, they are certainly right on one point—namely, that rape and abuse are not varieties of sexuality but varieties of oppression and abuse of power that become even more terrible due to their sexual component. Therefore, Pope Francis is more likely to be on the right path by associating the problem with misuse of priestly authority than is Pope Benedict, who remains purely in the field of sexuality and does not address the question of power at all.

Photo: The Pope receives books on the topic of the persecution of Christians © L’Osservatore Romano