

# Answers to Questions Catholics Are Asking

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# 1 The Catholic Church Today

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Ever since Pope John XXIII called on the Roman Catholic Church to open the windows and let in the fresh air, a mighty wind has rushed through the Church and brought changes to what was perceived as a static institution. The time for the unchanging Church to change had arrived. The documents of the Second Vatican Council grew out of this environment and reflected the new face of Catholicism. The documents were received with enthusiasm by the Roman Catholic world, and nods of approval came from Christian traditions other than Roman Catholic. A new dawn was breaking.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal also made its contribution to

the changing face of Catholicism. Whatever misgivings one might have about some aspects of the movement, it must be credited with producing some positive results. For the first time, the Scriptures became a vital part of the lives of many Catholics.

The papacy also took on a new image. In its long history it never enjoyed as high a profile as it does today. No longer is the pope seen only within the confines of the Vatican; globe-trotting has become a papal duty. And the media have given the pope celebrity status.

The popularity of Pope John Paul II during his long reign was expressed in the outpouring of grief at his death in 2005. The Roman Catholic Church had lost a great leader. Throughout his reign, he faithfully held to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and did much to recover ground that had been lost to the liberal wing of the Church. His pontificate will not be forgotten in the dusty annals of history. Outside the Roman Catholic Church he had his admirers; his uncompromising stand on such moral issues as abortion, homosexual practice, gay marriage, materialism, and the importance of the family was refreshing in a morally lax world.

However, some of the teachings of John Paul II (and his predecessors) can never be accepted by those of us who hold the Bible to be the Word of God and our sole authority for what we believe and practice. For example, John Paul II tirelessly promoted devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and canonized over 400 saints, more than had been canonized by all the popes before him. On June 2, 1998, he issued a clarion call to all Catholics to pray for the souls in purgatory, assuring them that their prayers and the sacrifice of the Mass would secure the release of those souls suffering in purgatory.<sup>1</sup> These teachings are at variance with the gospel and demeaning to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

Conflicting voices are heard in the wider religious arena, each calling for our attention. Do we listen to the Roman Catholic Church, which purports to be speaking for God, or do we listen

to Scripture, which is “the word of God.... [and] sharper than any doubled-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12)? The Word of God, the apostle Paul tells us, is able to lead us to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). Furthermore, he says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (verses 16-17). Whose voice do we listen to? God has revealed his will in Scripture; therefore, we cannot go outside of that. It is at this point that we must part company with the Roman Catholic Church, which holds that not all truth is contained in Scripture; the tradition of the Church must also be heard. In other words, all truth is derived from combining Scripture and the Tradition of the Roman Catholic Church.

## THE WRONG MODEL

The model of the Roman Catholic Church is not one Jesus would endorse. For example, Jesus was approached by an overly ambitious mother who wanted her two sons to have places of prominence in the kingdom—one on the right side of Jesus’ throne, and the other on the left. Such prominence would have reflected well on her for having raised such successful sons. In reply, Jesus looked to the Gentile world and referred to a model of what this mother (and the other disciples) wanted. “You know,” he said, “that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” This they all recognized. Then Jesus said, “Not so among you” (Matthew 20:25-26). He was saying that this pyramid model with earthly rulers whose power is unquestioned was not what he came to build. My kingdom, he said, is not of this world. It bears no resemblance to anything you see in the world. It is entirely different. Positions of power and prestige, such as those that existed

among the Pharisees, never impressed Jesus. He said, “They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi’” (Matthew 23:5-7). What Jesus came to build bears no similarity to that which he found so repugnant.

Yet when we look throughout Europe in particular, what do we see? We see that the Roman Catholic Church has been a powerful political force to be reckoned with. The affairs of the state and the Church were interwoven. Kings, queens, and heads of government deferred to the Roman Catholic Church. Some powerful princes were also bishops. The magnificent cathedrals were also making a statement about the power of the Roman Catholic Church. Because of its alliance with the secular state, the Roman Catholic Church grew powerful and rich, owning vast tracts of land throughout Europe. And all of this was done in the name of him who said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

It’s been said that power corrupts. There have been times throughout history when the Roman Catholic Church has used its power to ill effect. The Inquisition is a case in point. The sexual abuse of children by Roman Catholic priests—a problem that has come to light in recent years—was possible only because of the power and secrecy of the institution. Because of the magnitude of the problem and the extent to which Catholics have expressed concern over it, let’s examine it a bit more closely.

## SECRETS AND SCANDALS

The whole sordid scandal of children being sexually abused by Roman Catholic priests has been an embarrassment to the Church. The revelations of such evil behavior have shocked the faithful.

When these revelations first surfaced, many went into denial mode. The manner in which their Church handled the complaints, which go back at least half a century, has disillusioned many. I'm fully aware that Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (see John 8:7). I want to state that my purpose here is not to be needlessly critical of the Roman Catholic Church. But in discussing this issue, I want to provide an insight into how this could happen within the traditional structure of the Roman Catholic Church. I do not want to overlook the fact there are many priests and nuns who are good, decent people who have served their communities faithfully; their character should always be protected.

There can be a tendency to be silent about the bad things that have happened in life, saying, "It's in the past; forget about it." But that is a very dangerous position to take. Simon Wiesenthal died recently, at 96 years of age. Like many other Jews in Europe, Wiesenthal spent time in a Nazi concentration camp. He lost 89 members of his family to the Nazis and devoted his life to pursuing those responsible for these crimes. He brought over 1,100 criminals to justice. Through his efforts, he did not allow the world to forget the evil of the past. Was he right to do this? I believe he was. We need to understand and remember how one nation, rich in culture, could become responsible for the murder of six million people, lest it be repeated.

Similarly, the sexual abuse of children by members of a respected Church needs to be examined lest it be repeated. How the Roman Catholic Church handled the charges made by the victims tells us much about the Church and how she views herself.

We all make mistakes; we may later reflect upon a crisis and realize we could have handled it better. We can learn from our mistakes and respond more wisely the next time. Not so with the Roman Catholic Church: Its handling of sexual abuse charges made

against priests has been a pathetic failure, not once, but over and over. In fact, a definite pattern has emerged. For example, consider Father Brendan Smyth. His name will not be forgotten in Ireland for a long time.

Smyth has the distinction of being one of the worst—if not *the* worst—serial abuser of children revealed to date; his evil trade stretched over 35 years and covered two continents. In 1968 he was sent from the United States back to Ireland when his bishop became aware that he was sexually abusing young boys and girls. Back in Ireland, Smyth continued abusing children until his conviction in an Irish court in June 1997. Smyth's evil conduct was known to the Norbertine Order of which he was a member and to Cardinal Daly, the Primate of Ireland. Yet nothing was done to stop him. This predator was allowed access to children without restraint. So great was the level of disgust for Smyth that when he died in 1997 he was buried at 4:15 AM in his order's cemetery in County Cavan. Four police remained in the background. The lights from the hearse were used to light the graveside. Concrete was poured over his grave.

Why was such an evil man allowed to continue in a ministry where he had access to children? Did the Roman Catholic Church not know that sexual abuse of children is wrong? Of course they knew that. But the image of the Church had to be protected. There could be no scandals, so allegations were either buried or ignored. Either way, nothing was done about the complaints. Is this excusable?

Let's look at an illustration from another discipline. A football coach is accused of sexually abusing young boys. He is dismissed but goes on to coach another team that is told nothing of his background. He abuses boys in that club and is again dismissed. He coaches yet another team and again abuses boys. It is outrageous to think that such would be allowed to happen—that a known



pedophile would be allowed to move from club to club. Yet that is exactly how the Roman Catholic Church handled priests charged with sexually abusing children. When charges were made against a priest, he would be moved by his bishop to another parish, where he was free to continue his evil. The good people of the parish would not be told that a sex abuser has been sent among them and they had better protect their children at all times. No such warning would be given by the bishop to the flock. And so “Father” would endear himself to trusting parents, who were flattered that “Father” visits so frequently and shows such special interest in their children. When the horror was revealed, “Father,” the family friend and confidant, would be reported to the bishop and reassigned to a new parish where the evil cycle would be repeated.

Unfortunately, this is not fiction but fact. It has happened again and again and again, not with one or two priests, but with hundreds. Who then is responsible for providing protection from the law and a safe haven for these pedophiles? The Roman Catholic bishops, those claiming to be successors to the apostles. Can you believe it? The mind boggles at such outrageous behavior.

What has deeply offended Catholics is the sense of having been betrayed by those in privileged positions. A priest holds a position of power in the community. He is an authority figure. During the fifties and sixties in Ireland, the clergy held extraordinary power. What the priest said was final. No one dared contradict him. To accuse him of sexual abuse was unthinkable. And the pedophiles knew it. This provided them with unlimited scope to abuse children, and they did, with a vengeance, knowing that accusations would not be believed. They also knew that their bishops would not report them.

Unfortunately, charges against priests have come from all over the world. And the same pattern has emerged in every case: Ignore

the accusation and move the priest. This is borne out by the investigation ordered by the Irish government into sexual abuse allegations in the diocese of Ferns in County Wexford, Ireland. The Ferns report (2005) reveals that the diocese not only knew about the allegations but did nothing about them. The inquiry reveals that one priest assaulted ten girls on the altar of the church where he ministered. The girls were examined by the Health Board, who then notified Bishop Brendan Comiskey. Nothing was done about the matter. The report also reveals the Church's lack of cooperation during the investigation. There is also evidence that the Vatican was aware of some allegations against priests yet failed to discipline the offenders. The notorious pedophile Father Sean Fortune, who was from Ferns, was a violent rapist and a repeat offender. Despite complaints to Bishop Comiskey, Fortune was never removed. In March 1999, Fortune was found dead from an overdose of drugs and alcohol.

Colm O'Gorman was abused by a priest in Ferns. He is now director of One in Four, a charity offering support and resources for people who have suffered sexual abuse. He has this to say about the Ferns report:

The Ferns report demonstrates beyond any doubt that protestations that the church was unaware of the nature of child sexual abuse until it was alerted by the media in the 1990s are wholly false.

It details how in 1962 the Vatican distributed a document entitled *Crimen Solicitanis* to every bishop in the world. The instructions from the Vatican, that this document was to be maintained in secret archives and was not to be published or publicly commented upon, are evocative of a Dan Brown novel.

*Crimen Solicitanis* instructs the church officials and even witnesses and complainants are required to take an oath of secrecy in relation to any disclosed sexual abuse. The penalty for breach of that secrecy was automatic excommunication.

While many commentators have suggested that this document

deals only with the ecclesiastical crime of solicitation—priests procuring sex in the confessional—the Ferns report and Mr. Justice Murphy are clear that it also relates explicitly to the cases of child sexual abuse.

This document may explain the abject failure of cardinals, bishops and priests to break silence and report these crimes to the State and civil authorities. The threat of excommunication was in effect a death sentence to men who saw their lives only within the context of their priestly vocations. It was an incredibly effective tool in preventing the disclosure of widespread sexual abuse in Roman Catholic dioceses across the world.

The Ferns report states that it found “no evidence of this document in the files of the Dioceses of Ferns that it had examined.” Given the fact that bishops remain under an obligation, perhaps still under threat of excommunication, not to publish or comment upon the document, it is unsurprising that the diocese was unable to confirm its existence.

It seems unlikely that the diocese of Ferns, alone of all the Roman Catholic dioceses in the world, was left off the mailing list for such a sensitive and secretive document....<sup>2</sup>

Most shocking of all...Archbishop Alibrandi and his successors as Papal Nuncios knew of the scale of abuses, but they prevailed upon Irish church leaders like [Bishop] Comiskey to grapple with them under the code of canon law—church law—rather than hand over the errant clerics to the Gardai. Furthermore, Alibrandi and his successors invoked diplomatic immunity as the representatives of the Holy See to avoid giving evidence in court cases taken by victims.<sup>3</sup>

Even today there are those who deny that the Holocaust happened, even though a mountain of evidence confronts them. They just don't want to believe. The same is true with some Catholics; they just don't want to believe that their Church has been so corrupt. I saw this unwillingness to believe the evidence when

the news broke that Bishop Eamon Casey was the father of a 17-year-old boy. Casey was a very popular bishop in Ireland, a larger-than-life character. So when it was revealed that he was the father of a son, everyone was shocked. Casey immediately left Ireland and went to Rome and resigned as bishop. Some time later Annie Murphy, the mother of the boy, was a guest on *The Late, Late Show*. A lady in the audience who had worked for Casey repeatedly denied that Casey was the father of the child. I thought her response was amazing because by this time, 1) Bishop Casey had said he believed he was the father; 2) Casey had told Pope John Paul II that he was the father, and the pope believed him and allowed him to resign; 3) Annie Murphy said Casey was the father; 4) and the boy looked like Casey. So why does this woman not believe when the evidence is so compelling? Because she does not want to believe that a priest broke his vow, and nothing will convince her otherwise. There are some Catholics who will never believe the level of corruption that exists in their Church even though the evidence is compelling.

It emerged from Annie Murphy that Casey had tried to persuade her to put the child up for adoption, but she refused. It was obvious Casey was attempting to protect himself and the image of the Church. The only reason the story came to light was because Casey had failed to support his son, and the media was notified. The same pattern has been evident in the sex abuse cases: the image of the Church was being protected through a web of secrets and lies. Is this what Jesus came to build? The suggestion is ludicrous.

My sympathy goes out to the victims and their families who have had to live through this nightmare and try to make sense of how a Church could have provided known pedophiles with free and open access to their lovely children. How could their Church have provided protection for sex abusers? Why were they not warned that the new priest who had come to their parish had abused children

in a previous parish? Many lives have been ruined and emotional scars will be carried for life by these victims. Some never recover, and others have taken their own life. And the only reason some victims are finally getting their day in court is because they have had the courage to tackle the Church. It has not been the Church that has brought about this purging of evil; it has been the victims. And if the victims had not done so, the bishops would have continued taking refuge in *Crimen Solicitanis* and excusing themselves from any personal responsibility. It has to be daunting and confusing to the victims as they try and come to terms with how their bishops could have committed themselves to remaining silent when the most precious and vulnerable members of the Church—the children—were left unprotected to be preyed upon by known pedophiles in shepherd's clothing.

### THE CHURCH JESUS CAME TO BUILD

Jesus looked at the institutional religion of his day and said that new wine cannot be put into old wineskins (Luke 5:37-38). New wine, as it ferments and ages, bursts old wineskins that have become hardened with age. The Roman Catholic Church is like a wineskin that cannot contain the new wine of grace and truth. It's an old wineskin that has been shown to be corrupt in that it concealed the evil of pedophile priests while also providing them with repeated opportunities to abuse the innocent and justifying its inaction by its oath of silence. It has grown rich, powerful, and, in the process, corrupt. This is not the church that Jesus came to build, and as the psalmist says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). Jesus' church is his people, those whom he has redeemed. They are being transformed into his image by the indwelling Spirit. Holiness is their hallmark. His church is a universal body of believers in local congregations, communities of faith cared

for by godly shepherds who feed the flock with the living Word of God. This is the new creation Jesus came to bring into existence.

The challenge to Catholics reading this book is to read through the book of Acts and see how the early church “did church.” Note the simplicity yet effectiveness of its organization. See its evangelistic zeal, its care for the poor, and its commitment to prayer. See its ministry involving every member. So great was the impact of the work of the church on the pagan world that when Paul and his fellow workers arrived in Thessalonica, the people said, “These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also” (Acts 17:6 KJV). Today our sinful world needs to be turned “upside down” by a return to the saving message of the living Word of God.