

The Pope, Pedophilia and the Class Struggle

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More than 150 years ago Karl Marx explained that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Patrician and plebian, lord and serf, in a word oppressor and oppressed.” The struggle is an “uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight.” With modern society come “new conditions of oppression and new forms of struggle.”

A fierce struggle has gripped the Catholic Church for the past 25 years as some of the most oppressed survivors of childhood sexual abuse have increasingly demanded an accounting against individual priests and ultimately against the powerful church hierarchy, including bishops and cardinals who consistently protected the abusers.

This demand for justice erupting from below has now done the unthinkable. It has exposed the role of the present pope, Pope Benedict XVI, in a monstrous international criminal cover-up.

Marxism is a science for understanding the class issues that underlie social developments which can seem obscure and far from the immediate workers’ struggle. The present controversy, although hidden in clerical garb, is in every way a class struggle within the Catholic Church. It is one small part of a global class struggle for full equality, rights and empowerment.

What was once accepted, because there seemed to be no recourse, has become intolerable. Thousands of the survivors raising the charges of pedophilia were loyal working class believers who were utterly powerless until years later to resist or even tell their own families of the crimes being committed. They were abused as children in orphanages, reform schools, schools for Deaf and disabled, local parish schools and churches.

This challenge from below against secrecy and repression was a sharp break from the past. Abuse had been unchallenged because religious authority was unchallenged. In many parish schools, although sexual abuse was hidden, physical and psychological abuse and humiliation were so routine that they seemed part of the curriculum.

As survivors began to speak out, any priests who sided with the abused were silenced and removed from teaching or positions of authority. But the church hierarchy, a small grouping that holds absolute religious authority, has not been able to silence or stop this movement.

Almost every exposé has come not from the outside or from secular authorities, who were fearful of offending such a powerful institution, but from presumably powerless Catholics within the church who refused to remain silent. They filed grievances, depositions and finally lawsuit after lawsuit. They called press conferences, set up websites, organized demonstrations and support groups, and leafleted Sunday services. Whether they see themselves as part of the larger struggle for rights and dignity or not, they have used many of the same tactics that countless other struggles have used.

The church hierarchy, in fighting to defend its undisputed authority, wealth and privilege, has demanded absolute silence, threatened excommunication of those raising the charges and demanded that secular officials comply. This effort to maintain the absolute authority of the priesthood is part of a larger internal struggle over whose interests this powerful religious institution should serve.

This international scandal rocking the Catholic Church now involves detailed evidence of tens of thousands of cases of child rape and sexual abuse, committed by thousands of priests. The charges span decades. The struggle erupted in its fiercest form in cities that previously had the strongest religious believers in the U.S. Next it broke out in Ireland, followed by Italy and then parts of Germany with large Catholic populations.

What is new and now receives almost daily media coverage is the evidence seeping out from every side showing the personal responsibility of the present Pope Benedict XVI in decades of suppression, cover-up and quiet reassigning of sexual predators. The strongest condemnations are coming from those who still consider themselves part of the Catholic Church.

Liberal Catholic theologian Hans Keung described Pope Benedict XVI's role in allowing the abuse to flourish, covering it up and ordering silence: "There was not a single man in the whole Catholic Church who knew more about the sex-abuse cases than him, because it was ex officio (part of his official role). ... He can't wag his finger at the bishops and say, you didn't do enough. He gave the instruction himself, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and repeated it as Pope."

The National Catholic Reporter editorialized on March 26: "The Holy Father needs to directly answer questions, in a credible forum, about his role — as archbishop of Munich (1977-82), as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1982-2005), and as pope (2005-present) — in the mismanagement of the clergy sex abuse crisis."

Before his elevation to the top of the Catholic hierarchy in April 2005, Pope Benedict XVI was known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. His opponents referred to him as a pit bull and as "God's rottweiler." Ratzinger was an extremely right-wing political appointee of Pope John Paul II, who was determined to enforce discipline, conformity and church authority in an institution in the midst of a profound upheaval.

For 24 years Ratzinger headed the most powerful and historically repressive institution in the Catholic Church, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This body was known for centuries as the Holy Office of the Inquisition. It was the church institution responsible for establishing religious courts for the charging and torture of tens of thousands of people accused of witchcraft and heresy. It led the pogroms and mass expropriations of Jews and Muslims. Through this office within the church Pope John Paul II tried to install a modern-day Inquisition.

Documents expose vast cover-up

The scale of the criminal international conspiracy of silence to protect serial molesters and to put church interests ahead of child safety and well-being was fully revealed over the past year in the handling of sexual abuse in Ireland, an overwhelmingly Catholic country.

After years of demands by abuse survivors for church action and government prosecution, and a series of exposes in the Irish news media, the Irish government commissioned a study that took nine years to complete. On May 20, 2009, the commission released a 2,600-page report.

The report drew on testimony from thousands of former inmates and officials from more than 250 church-run institutions. The commission found that Catholic priests and nuns had terrorized thousands of boys and girls for decades and that government inspectors had failed to stop the chronic beatings, rapes and humiliation. The report characterized rape and molestation as “endemic” in Irish Catholic church-run industrial schools and orphanages. (www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/)

The scale of the abuse in Ireland and the force of the movement demanding an accounting forced Pope Benedict to issue a weak apology on behalf of the Catholic Church that blamed local Irish bishops. This abdication of all responsibility for his own well-known senior role that had insisted on silence enraged millions of sincere and believing Catholics and further inflamed an opposition that has grown inside the church for decades.

Preaching in Springfield, Mass., a long-time critic of the church cover-up, Rev. James J. Scahill, responded to the weak apology by describing some in the clergy as “felons” and calling for the resignation of Pope Benedict.

“We must personally and collectively declare that we very much doubt the veracity of the pope and those of church authority who are defending him or even falling on the sword on his behalf. It is beginning to become evident that for decades, if not centuries, church leadership covered up the abuse of children and minors to protect its institutional image and the image of priesthood,” said Scahill. (New York Times, April 12)

Scahill said he began to speak up after his own parishioners came to him in 2002 during the exposure of decades of sexual abuse in Boston and told him that something had to be done.

Cardinal Bernard Law of the Boston Archdiocese clearly played a role in protecting child-molesting priests from punishment by religious or secular authority and quietly transferring them. This became a national scandal in 2002 when a judge in Massachusetts permitted the release of thousands of pages of documents, memos and legal depositions. The documents showed a clear pattern of cover-up, protecting perpetrators and marginalizing victims, revealing that more than 1,000 children had been abused by 250 priests and church workers in the Archdiocese since 1940. Cardinal Law was forced to resign his post in disgrace and the Boston Archdiocese was ordered to pay a settlement of between \$85 million and \$100 million to settle 552 cases.

This multi-million-dollar settlement, growing scandals in other cities and the media coverage forced the U.S. bishops to issue a “Charter for the Protection of Children and the Young People” that declared a “zero tolerance, one strike and you are out” policy for offending priests. It did not propose any action against bishops who covered up the crimes.

Even this modest effort to develop a clean-up policy by U.S. bishops was opposed by then-Cardinal Ratzinger at the Vatican. He demanded that all abuse charges be referred to the office he headed — the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — before priests could be expelled from the priesthood. One of his first acts as Pope was to elevate Cardinal Law of Boston to a prestigious Vatican post.

In an often quoted, infamous letter sent to bishops in 2001, Cardinal Ratzinger used his position to order that sexual abuse allegations be kept secret under threat of excommunication. Priests accused of sex crimes and their victims were ordered to “observe the strictest secret” and be “restrained by perpetual silence.”

Former Vatican lawyer Father Tom Doyle denounced this top Vatican policy by saying: “What you have here is an explicit written policy to cover up cases of child sexual abuse by the clergy and to punish those who would call attention to these crimes by the churchmen. When abusive priests are discovered, the response has been not to investigate and prosecute but to move them from one place to another.”

Negligence or criminal complicity?

How extensive are the sex abuse crimes committed against youth? Are the church hierarchy guilty of ignoring the problem — meaning criminal negligence? Or are they guilty of criminal complicity by refusing to take action even when crimes were brought to their direct attention?

A memo personally signed by Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, when he headed the powerful Vatican office where all charges of abuse were centralized, was exposed this April and has aroused a new outcry. Ratzinger overrode and stopped any action against the predator priest Rev. Lawrence C. Murphy.

Reverend Murphy was accused of sexually abusing more than 200 boys at a Milwaukee School for the Deaf, despite appeals for his expulsion even from his bishop. For decades the former students had used sign language and written affidavits in meetings with bishops and secular officials to demand that Father Murphy be charged and prosecuted.

At the same time, the story broke in Italy that 67 former pupils of another school for the Deaf in Verona had accused 24 priests, brothers and religious laymen of sexually abusing them from the age of 7 years.

In Germany, more than 250 suppressed cases of abuse have surfaced in the last two months, including in districts directly overseen by Pope Benedict when he had been the bishop.

International publicity surrounding the Boston suit over sexual abuse of children and the multi-million-dollar settlement gave many other victims of abuse the courage to also speak out and seek justice. More than 4,000 priests have been accused of molesting minors in the U.S. since 1950 and the Catholic Church here has paid out more than \$2 billion in settlements to victims of abuse. In 2007 the Los Angeles Archdiocese announced a \$600-million settlement to about 500 plaintiffs. Six dioceses have been forced into bankruptcy and many dioceses have been forced to sell substantial church assets to pay settlements.

Many of these cases are detailed by an organization called SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. SNAP describes itself as the oldest and largest support group for

clergy abuse victims.

Not only children have been the victims of abuse. According to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch of Jan. 4, 2003, a national survey conducted by researchers at St. Louis University was paid for, in part, by several orders of Catholic nuns. It estimated that a “minimum” of 34,000 Catholic nuns, or about 40 percent of all nuns in the United States, have suffered some form of sexual trauma.

It is important to take note that overwhelmingly the testimony, lawsuits, inquiries and exposés of sexual abuse have come from within the Catholic Church itself, from survivors of abuse. Many other ordinary, but outraged, Catholics have joined in demanding an accounting from a privileged, clerical hierarchy bent on protecting their position, authority and wealth and not on protecting children.

Throughout Europe there is a growing call to criminally prosecute Pope Benedict at the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the grounds that protecting the church, not its victims, is a criminal offense. Geoffrey Robertson, U.N. Justice Council member and president of the Special Court in Sierra Leone, says he believes it is time to challenge the pope’s immunity.

In an article in the London Guardian of April 2 headlined, “Put the pope in the dock,” Robertson wrote: “Legal immunity cannot hold. The Vatican should feel the full weight of international law. Pedophilia is a crime against humanity. The anomalous claim of the Vatican to be a state — and of the pope to be a head of state and hence immune from legal action — cannot stand up to scrutiny.”

Of course, it is important to remember that the International Criminal Court has to date brought charges only against four African countries that are targeted by imperialism.

U.S. war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Israeli crimes against Palestinian and Lebanese civilians have been ignored by the ICC. A bulwark of U.S. imperialism on a global scale, it is unlikely that the Vatican will face charges any time soon.

War on global movement for justice

What role does the Vatican play in class society that is of particular value to U.S. imperialism?

While absolving, covering up and transferring thousands of priests who were guilty of child abuse, Pope Benedict XVI used his position for 25 years as head of the most powerful church institution, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to remove from parishes, schools and all positions of authority thousands of priests, bishops and religious persons who were in any way progressive or concerned with advocating for the rights and dignity of poor and oppressed people.

Dissident Catholic theologians, teachers, writers and intellectuals were prevented from writing, publishing and teaching in church institutions. Bishops who attempted to use their authority for social change were investigated for loyalty and forced to resign. They were replaced by the most politically reactionary clergy who were concerned mainly with preserving religious authority and dogma.

This was a right-wing effort to stamp out a progressive religious current known as “liberation theology,” which sought to align the church with the liberation movements and anti-colonial

and revolutionary struggles sweeping Africa, Asia and Latin America and the civil rights movement in the U.S.

Priests such as Father Camilo Torres in Colombia, who wrote, spoke and organized around the effort to unite revolutionary Marxism and Catholicism, were considered a direct threat to capitalist exploitation. Father Torres joined the armed struggle against the U.S.-supported dictatorship and died in combat.

Activist nuns who led the sanctuary movement to provide assistance and safe transit to Salvadoran immigrants fleeing death squads were targeted. So were Philip and Tom Berrigan, priests who continually risked arrest and served jail time with a militant Catholic grouping opposed to the Vietnam War.

Liberation theologians, such as the charismatic Leonardo Boff of Brazil, were prohibited by the Church from speaking or writing. Priests who sought to serve the poor, like Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti, were expelled from their religious order and forced to resign for the crime of "glorification of class struggle." Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas, Mexico, was ordered to refrain from "Marxist interpretations."

It was a witch-hunt and a purge that targeted anti-racist and social justice activists. Yet the reactionary breakaway Bishop Richard Williamson, who publicly denied the Holocaust, was welcomed back into the church.

Faced with growing opposition on every level, this powerful institution that has for centuries protected the property and privilege of the Western ruling classes increasingly chose to elevate the most fanatically reactionary forces to do battle with those urging change, opening, equality and attention to the needs of the poor and oppressed.

Under Pope John Paul II and then Pope Benedict XVI, the Catholic Church was a staunch ally of U.S. imperialism opposing socialist construction in Eastern Europe. In turn the powerful U.S. media played an active role in promoting and giving favorable coverage to the church while demonizing Muslims and other religions of oppressed people.

In 2006 Pope Benedict gave Catholic support to the anti-Muslim propaganda that Washington had consciously enflamed in order to justify war and occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. In a major papal address he quoted a 14th-century Byzantine emperor who said that the Prophet Muhammad had brought the world only "evil and inhuman things."

The alliance with U.S. imperialism forced the Catholic Church to revive the most reactionary excesses of its own dark past. Members of groupings tied to death squads and military dictatorship throughout Latin America and to fascism and extreme reaction in Europe, such as the secretive Opus Dei and Legionnaires of Christ, were promoted to top offices in the Vatican and around the world.

Two fascist clerics, Josemaria Escrivá, who sided with Hitler during World War II and organized fascist gangs to hunt down communists and revolutionary trade unionists in Franco's Spain, and Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac of Croatia, who helped establish extermination camps for Jews, Serbs and Roma people, were proposed for sainthood.

It is not a contradiction that priests who abused children were protected and hidden while those religious forces who sought to defend the rights of the oppressed and ally with their movements were forced to resign. Leniency to criminal thugs and harsh repression of

progressives are two sides of the same class policy of defending the authority of the established hierarchy. The same approach played out on every social issue.

Repressive view of all sexuality

From the Roman slave state to European feudal society and then as a major instrument of imperialist conquest, this is a religious institution rooted in class society and patriarchy. This patriarchal heritage is the basis of its repressive views toward all forms of human sexual expression. Gay or straight, married or unmarried, the Catholic Church asserted the right to legislate to society as a whole all forms of human sexual expression.

While taking no action against sexual predators because this threatened the authority and sanctity of the priesthood, Ratzinger was the leading enforcer of archaic religious doctrines on sexuality and the subordinate role of women in the church and in society as a whole. No liberalization on issues of birth control, abortion, divorce or recognition of homosexuality was allowed. Within the church these rules were enforced through focus on sin and guilt. Gay Catholics, Catholics who remarried, practiced birth control or had an abortion were denied the sacraments, barred from the church or excommunicated.

The full weight of Church institutions with large amounts of funding and political leverage were aggressively used in secular society to oppose liberalization of divorce laws and a woman's right to birth control and to abortion. The Catholic Church organized and funded political campaigns against same-sex marriage and adoption of children by gay couples. But while proclaiming their religious duty to protect the "unborn child," they refused to protect children directly under their control.

As the storm of protest over the attacks on children under their care grew, this reactionary grouping tried to turn its criminal cover-up into a struggle against gay people by linking pedophilia, meaning sexual abuse of young children, with homosexuality between consenting adults.

On April 14, Pope Benedict's top appointee, Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, blamed pedophilia on homosexuality, which he called "a pathology." Pope Benedict in a well-known letter to bishops in 1986 described homosexuality as an "intrinsic moral evil." He went so far as to justify and even encourage violent attacks on gay people by stating that "neither the church or society should be surprised if irrational and violent reactions increase" when gay people demand civil rights.

These crimes against all movements of oppressed peoples must be included in the anger directed at the church hierarchy.

The years of repression, witch-hunts and organized bigotry have given the Catholic hierarchy less and less a basis of support. They are more out of touch with their own congregation and totally out of touch with the values of society as a whole.

Despite every effort, they cannot go back to their absolute hold of 500 or even 100 years ago, when priests and bishops did not have to account for crimes against women or against slaves, serfs, peasants or illiterate workers.

Carefully crafted apologies that accept no blame and scripted public relations meetings with a few selected abuse survivors will not solve the crisis facing the reactionary leadership of the church.

Today those who have suffered abuse have found their voice and have found allies.

The writer attended/survived 14 years in Catholic schools.

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