

# THE TIMES

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## Call the police: what the Pope should have said

**It is typical of Benedict XVI that he should blame child abuse on ‘social change’, not the Church itself**

Ken Macdonald

When I was a child, my mother took me every Wednesday evening to Benediction where, we believed, the body of Christ was revealed. On Saturdays, my family went to confession and every Sunday morning, without fail, we attended Mass. If you asked my mother who and what she was, she would say “a Catholic” before she said “Scottish” or, even less likely, “British”. She believed that the Church of Rome was God’s own glory on Earth.

When I was 11, my parents sent me to a Christian Brothers boarding school. The Brothers were not priests but, even without the significant compensations of priestly rites and privileges, they had dedicated themselves to a life of celibacy, 30 or 40 years without the comfort of touch. We boys knew which of them couldn’t handle it, and we all knew why, from time to time, one or another moved stealthily on to a different school. It wasn’t a secret to us, even if it was to their Church.

The rituals of cleansing were no more worthy. In the past, when a priest raped a young Catholic, the child could expect to be offered absolution for the sin. If this seems a little shocking, we shouldn’t be too surprised. It’s a common enough trick of authoritarian religions to blame the victims of sexual violence for participating in their own abuse, particularly if the violator occupies the pulpit rather than a pew. Surely, such a terrible sin could only occur in the face of the most devilish temptation, presented without any shame.

Often after absolution, we discover, the child would be made to swear a vow of silence. This would be done in formal style, with all the force of a dark and mighty canon law. There was, of course, no real choice here. There was no real expectation that a nine-year-old boy or girl would sit back to reflect and consider. There was no question of advisers or social workers or any sort of comfort at all. There was instead a priest or a bishop or a cardinal, and their fearsome power to burrow into souls and to dispatch what they found there to Heaven or to Hell.

Often the parents, themselves sold at birth into believing in the rightness of the Church and in its hierarchy’s grasp on a scary and distant God, committed their own more innocent betrayal by looking away as their children learnt the absence of justice.

In last weekend’s letter of apology to the Catholics of Ireland, Pope Benedict took refuge in proclaiming that the problem of child abuse, and the cruelty of its covering up, were not born of the criminal failings of

an opaque and authoritarian Church. No, they arose because of “social change” and because Ireland had become too secular.

It is all very well, though not very taxing, to express regret for the sins of others. It is equally well to speak of your shame for the way that others have behaved. But expressions of remorse are perhaps best served by awareness, including an awareness of self.

Pope Benedict showed neither. He had nothing to say about the complicit behaviour of the Vatican over the years, or of his continued shielding of a former Cardinal of Boston from the American courts. He didn't address his own directive that secrecy must be maintained in church investigations into sex crimes. And his remarkable analysis was accompanied by an unseemly swipe at Pope John XXIII's Second Vatican Council, whose tender compassions and renewal were, apparently, “far from easy” to implement.

Yet it is no surprise that Benedict, who has spent decades trying to roll back reform from the heart of the Church, should find his perfect villain other than in the institution of the Church itself; and it is no surprise that he should find it in liberalism.

But child rape was not invented in the 1960s and it was not the result of a changing moral climate. Sad to say, paedophilia and abuse have always been around. Benedict may comfort himself by blaming priestly crimes on the decline of clericalism and the scourge of social freedom, but for most of us the opposite is true: it is only a stronger secularism and the flock's dimming fear that have finally defeated the Church's tireless efforts to keep civil society and its sharp means of justice away from these multiple crimes.

The Pope's first prescription for curing the Church in Ireland is a programme of adoration before the Eucharist. This may indeed provide spiritual comfort to Ireland's remaining churchgoers, though whether it will provide much succour to those who have long since abandoned the Church that tormented them is more open to question. A simpler prescription might have been that canon law is no equal to crime or to rape. If you suspect abuse, the Pope might better have told the people of Ireland, don't worry about canon law — just call the police.

The Catholic Church teaches the faithful that a penitent must approach the confessional with clean hands: if he comes to ask forgiveness without any real repentance, he mocks the sacrament. And this not only compounds the wickedness of the original sin, it marks the commission of another that is much harder to expunge.

Ken Macdonald, QC, practises at Matrix Chambers. He was Director of Public Prosecutions, 2003-08.