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Benedict in the 1980s

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NCR Today

Stunning article in Friday's *New York Times*, detailing decades of confusion and delay within the church hierarchy regarding how to deal with the incipient pedophilia problem.

The report focuses on then-Cardinal Ratzinger and his Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Throughout the article, local bishops (especially Americans) come across as the central force for facing the crisis head on. They, the *Times* said, could see the damage at street level, and knew it had to be confronted in a far more definitive manner.

By the end of the report, Benedict himself is somewhat redeemed -- painted as a man who took a while to "get it," but who eventually over-rode obstinate Curia functionaries and began to tackle the pedophilia issue head-on.

But why did it take more than 25 years, as portrayed by the *Times* report? Because, simply, Cardinal Ratzinger and his office did not consider it a priority. Back in 1983, changes in Canon Law gave the cardinal's Congregation office authority to deal with pedophile priests. But, as the *Times* describes, that office and its three dozen staff members were "busy pursuing other problems." Chief among them: stamping down the liberation theology movement sweeping through Latin America. That, the church felt, was a greater threat to the faith.

It certainly got more headlines back then, as I remember well. Pope John Paul and Cardinal Ratzinger, both witness to Communist totalitarianism, saw liberation theology as just another wing of Marxist hegemony -- rather than as a sincere movement for the poor and powerless. They dismantled it with a laser-beam focus one now only wishes could have been applied to the pedophilia issue.

And yet the misplaced priorities continue to this day. Even-though the abuse issue has finally taken center

stage in Rome, the Vatican has still decided to put energy, resources and attention into ... investigating American nuns. Fears that these nuns are too liberal, and too far from theological purity, are now deemed a threat similar to liberation theology. At best, this muddies the church's message that it does at last "get it" when it comes the scope and importance of the very real threat posed by the child abuse crisis.

At worst, it implies that the church is still too busy looking for enemies where there are none, while underestimating the damage right in front of its eyes.

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