

Benedict XVI and Tom Doyle on the crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 24, 2010 All Things Catholic

By any objective standard, the sexual abuse crisis would have to rank as the top Vatican story of 2010. Though the crisis has been around for a long time, this was the year in which critical attention came to rest squarely on Rome, including the personal track record of Pope Benedict XVI.

As fate would have it, two different assessments washed across the radar screen this week, both from people whom any court would sanction as "expert witnesses." The contrast suggests that while everyone can agree the crisis has been devastating, the questions of what caused it, and what to do about it, remain far from settled.

One of those assessments came from the pope himself, in the form of his annual year-end address to the Roman Curia. The other is from a priest today seen as perhaps the church's most determined in-house critic on the crisis: Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, who has decades of experience in documenting priestly abuse, working with victims, and consulting with plaintiffs' attorneys.

In some ways, lumping them together risks a classic apples-and-oranges comparison. For one thing, the genre is different: Benedict XVI was offering a pastoral and spiritual reflection, while Doyle's analysis, which he originally penned as a memo just for me, is pitched at the level of policy and media coverage. Naturally, there's also a vast difference in ecclesiastical standing between the pope and Doyle — even if Benedict would be the first, I suspect, to concede that the dogma of papal infallibility does not mean his assessment of the causes and context of the crisis is beyond question.

However dissimilar they may be, these reflections both come from people with unique standing on the issue. (I suspect a "Top Ten" list of people on the planet who have read the most case files of Catholic priests accused of abuse would include both Benedict XVI and Doyle.)

Anyone who wants to think beyond pre-conceived notions, whether hostile to the institutional church or supportive of it, would do well to listen to both men. I'll recap their perspectives here, as a final contribution to taking stock of 2010 — and, no doubt, previewing a debate that will continue well into 2011 and beyond.

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The Christmas address to the Curia is typically the moment in which popes take a look back at the year. The fact that Benedict spoke first about the crisis reflects just how long a shadow it cast over 2010.

Sound-bites from the pope's speech have been widely reported, but to understand what Benedict was saying it's important to bring the full context into view.

Reading the pope's words, there can be little doubt about his personal anguish. He quotes at length from a 12th century vision of St. Hildegard of Bingen, which vividly describes how the "garment" of the church is "torn by the sins of priests." The pope said the vision is directly applicable to current events.

?The way she saw and expressed it,? the pope said, ?is the way we have experienced it this year.?

June 29, 2010, marked the close of a ?Year of Priests? called for by Benedict XVI, and he situated his reflections on the crisis in the context of appreciation for the ?great gift? of the priesthood.

?We realized afresh how beautiful it is that human beings are fully authorized to pronounce in God?s name the word of forgiveness, and are thus able to change the world, to change life,? the pope said.

?We realized how beautiful it is that human beings may utter the words of consecration, through which the Lord draws a part of the world into himself, and so transforms it at one point in its very substance; we realized how beautiful it is to be able, with the Lord?s strength, to be close to people in their joys and sufferings, in the important moments of their lives and in their dark times; how beautiful it is to have as one?s life task not this or that, but simply human life itself ? helping people to open themselves to God and to live from God.?

Especially in that context, the pope said, we were ?all the more dismayed? by revelations about priests who ?twist the sacrament into its antithesis, and under the mantle of the sacred profoundly wound human persons in their childhood, damaging them for a whole lifetime.?

Facing that ugly reality, Benedict called for an examination of conscience about what went wrong, and offered a resolution to make things right.

?We must ask ourselves what we can do to repair as much as possible the injustice that has occurred. We must ask ourselves what was wrong in our proclamation, in our whole way of living the Christian life, to allow such a thing to happen,? he said.

Benedict vowed ?to make every possible effort in priestly formation to prevent anything of the kind from happening again,? and also expressed his thanks both to those who work to help victims, and to ?the many good priests? who exhibit humility and fidelity.

At the level of diagnosis, Benedict returned to a familiar theme, asserting that mistaken theories in Catholic moral theology in the 1970s helped make the sexual abuse crisis possible. By downplaying absolute good and evil and treating morality as a matter of weighing consequences, the pope said, those theories opened the door to justifying gravely immoral behaviour, including the sexual exploitation of minors.

As a result, Benedict called for renewed emphasis in moral formation on Pope John Paul II?s 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, which explicitly rejected theories such as ?consequentialism? and ?proportionalism,? asserting that some acts are always ?intrinsically evil? and can never be justified.

I filed a story this week about the doubts some experts harbour as to whether proportionalism forms part of the backdrop to the crisis, which can be found here: [Condoms not a 'lesser evil,' Vatican insists](#) [1]

The full text of Benedict?s address to the curia can be found here: [Address to the Curia](#) [2] The speech could profitably be read in tandem with the extended comments from Benedict XVI in his recent book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, *Light of the World*, which devotes two full chapters and portions of several others to the sexual abuse crisis.

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Doyle?s take came in response to my [Nov. 19 ?All Things Catholic? column](#) [3], in which I wrote about a session for reporters led by George Weigel and myself in Miami, under the aegis of the ?Faith Angel Forum? of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, on media coverage of the sexual abuse crisis. (The full transcript of that

session should be available on the Ethics and Public Policy Center Web site shortly after the New Year's holiday.)

Albeit in different ways, both Weigel and I suggested that coverage of the response to the crisis by the Vatican and Benedict XVI in 2010 was a mixed bag, sometimes missing important bits of context which would offer a more balanced perspective. Both of us also said the media isn't entirely to blame ? the Vatican's underdeveloped communications capacity is part of the picture.

In response, Doyle sent along a 21-point memo. He intended it as feedback for me, but he was gracious enough to give me permission to use it in this column.

The memo is too long to reproduce in its entirety, but what appears below is a line or two from most of Doyle's points. In some spots it's strong medicine, but it articulates convictions that are deeply held in some sectors of opinion, and which must be part of a serious conversation about where things stand.

1.t?The overall impression of the article is an apology for the Vatican's response and for its communications with secular media. ? The real subject is the widespread sexual violation of minors and the systematic, inadequate response of the institutional church.?

2.t?Defenders of the papacy, as well as most if not all [members of] the curia and hierarchy, lack an essential credential for credibility: an understanding of the victims and their families, especially parents.?

3.t?By my estimation [Benedict XVI] has met with approximately 20 victims in the U.S., Great Britain, Malta and Australia, with an average of one minute or less with each victim. These encounters were carefully planned and the victims carefully chosen. This hardly qualifies for gaining any level of understanding.?

4.t?None of the criticism of media stories about cases involving the Vatican provided any evidence that the facts upon which the stories were based, were erroneous ? These were but a small sampling of many other priests guilty of sexually abusing minors whose cases were delayed or buried in the Vatican.?

5.t?I seriously question George Weigel's credibility as an expert on clergy sex abuse. Weigel's current remarks about the crisis of 2002 are at variance with the numerous statements he made at the time, statements that defended Cardinal [Bernard] Law and tried to shift the focus from what it was, sexual violation of children and cover-up, to cultural and theological issues.?

6.t?Weigel's claim that Pope John Paul II received deficient information through Vatican channels doesn't hold water. ? I prepared an extensive report in 1985 that was personally given [to John Paul II] by Cardinal [John] Krol. I also recall giving a detailed briefing to [a top Vatican official] in May 1985. ? I am quite certain that since that time much more information has found its way to the Vatican.?

7.t?Defenders of the Vatican, including you, regularly fall back on the standard defenses: the Vatican does business in a way Americans don't understand; the Vatican wants to let the U.S. solve its own problems; the Vatican uses a unique form of communication which Americans don't ?get.? ? If it wants to be understood, the Vatican should abandon its convoluted language and have someone help them learn how to speak directly and to the point.?

8.t?Appealing to the fact that the incidence of abuse among Catholics is no higher than other groups makes as much sense as one of the Wall Street financial giants trying to save face by claiming, ?Why pick on us when we cheated no more than the other banks down the block???

9.t ?It's misleading to say, ?The Catholic Church is arguably the safest environment for young people and

adolescents in the country. First off, there are no data to support this. More importantly, all of the procedures and programs have been put in place after the Boston revelations of 2002. [They] were put in place because the bishops were forced to do so.

10.t The question of reliable sources is most important. This crisis began in 1984 and continued to simmer, with occasional events of major magnitude such as the James Porter case of 1993 and the Kos trial in 1997. Very few people are still on the playing field who were involved at the beginning and have continued involvement. I have never been contacted by defenders of the institutional church, no doubt because I am written off as totally biased. This tag is unjustified because I have struggled from the early days to understand and accept the institution's response.

11.t On plaintiff's lawyer Jeffrey Anderson: The accusation that Jeff is in it only for the money is based on subjective opinion and certainly not facts. The number of victims Jeff has helped pro bono is unknown because there have been so many. Jeff has given away huge sums of money to organizations that help children and to individuals in need. He is sometimes flamboyant and passionate, but he is committed to bringing justice to victims and a safe environment for children in the future.

12.t Over the past 22 years I have worked with over two hundred attorneys in the U.S., Canada, Ireland, the U.K. and Australia, all of whom represented victims in civil suits. I vividly recall one attorney telling me that he had served in just about every capacity in the legal system, from public defender to State Supreme court judge, and had been both a defense attorney and a prosecutor. He remarked that he had never encountered an organization as duplicitous and manipulative as the Catholic Church.

13.t Benedict is not a great reformer. I believe he is personally shocked and possibly even devastated by what he has seen, [but] his responses have been very limited. They have concentrated on the canonical prosecution of accused priests, but they have remained mute about the core issue, namely the lack of accountability of complicit bishops and the lack of penal measures against bishops who have themselves sexually abused minors.

14.t The response to the crisis by the late John Paul II is indeed a serious stain on his legacy. John Paul's personal theology of priesthood is that of a highly mystical state consisting of an ontological change at the time of ordination, which he often referred to as a joining with Christ. What this amounts to is the belief that it is acceptable to sacrifice the spiritual and emotional welfare of innocent children for a theory that would return priests to their theological pedestal.

15.t I have had firsthand experience with hundreds of victims, if not thousands, and second-hand experience with countless others. I have not once learned that a bishop's first response on receiving a report of alleged sexual abuse was directed at the welfare of the victim.

16.t The secular media are not anti-Catholic, nor are they biased against the hierarchy. They do not set out to make the institutional Church look bad. The institutional Church needs no help at that it has done a thorough job on its own.

[Editor's Note: Readers may be interested in Fr. Tom Dolye's analysis of Benedict's curia address: [What victims hear in pope's talk on sex abuse](#) [4].]

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My bringing these perspectives together is, of course, a media exercise. As a holiday wish, here's hoping that 2011 will bring an honest-to-God conversation among thoughtful voices on all sides of the issues raised here, one not conducted primarily through the press or the blogosphere, and in the context of shared concern both for

victims and for the church.

That would mark an important step indeed towards the examination of 'what went wrong' in our whole way of living the Christian life? which the pope has invited.

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