

Comparison of Penn. State Sex Abuse Crisis and the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church

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At first the details sounded painfully familiar. It was, the defendants said, a matter of misplaced loyalties, of valuing the reputation of the institution above all other considerations. This institution had a long history of service and respect. Many people identified themselves with it. It raised enormous amounts of money in both gifts and revenues and did much good work with it. Then, however, there was a dramatic shift in the story line. This was not the Catholic Church still under attack, but Penn State University, whose football team attracted 100,000 people to each home game. Every business in State College, Pa. was dependent on that for its economic well-being. Coach Joe Paterno was bigger than life. His name was a household word across America. His teams regularly competed for the NCAA title. High profile bowl games were an annual expectation. Protecting and saving all that from the taint of scandal seemed to those in charge to be more important than addressing a reality about which all of its top leaders seemed to have been aware. The fact was that a pedophile lived in their midst. He had been there for at least thirty years. He was good in his role of defensive coach. Paterno depended on him. They had worked well together. He would be hard to replace. Keeping both the football program and University's reputation intact outweighed all other values.

The long-running presence of this crime has now, however, been overwhelmingly demonstrated by indisputable, written data. The sexual abuse of young boys in the showers of Penn State by defensive coach Jerry Sandusky had been both known and tolerated, indeed protected for at least fourteen years and quite probably for far longer than that. Documented evidence reveals that Coach Paterno knew it. Thomas Harmon, the university police chief, knew it. Tim Curley, the athletic director, knew it. Gary Schultz, the university vice president, knew it. Graham B. Spanier, the university president, knew it. It is now clear that no one in the Penn State community encouraged disclosure. The Board of Trustees helped to set that culture. This culture permeated the entire university town of State College. Even janitors and laborers were aware of this scandal, but were not willing to risk incurring the wrath of the university leaders by reporting it. Every level of the university's life participated in this cultural sickness. A gigantic elephant was in the room that everyone refused to see, pretended that it did not exist and repressed rumors about its presence whenever they arose.

Finally, the dyke built to protect the abuser broke. Violated boys made accusations.

Irate parents demanded investigation. The first line of institutional defense was denial. All the top officials, whose names I have just mentioned, circled their wagons, covered up, lied and tried to maintain the fiction that these charges were at best only the imagination of a disturbed boy or, at worst, just one or two isolated events, not a regular and ongoing reality. Ignorance was claimed or feigned. The barn doors were locked and no one wanted to look for the horses. It was business as usual. In time Mr. Sandusky was allowed to retire with honor. Those who knew about his proclivity, named him "coach emeritus." They provided him with the ongoing use of the university's athletic facilities, in which his activity of abuse could go on. He was even given a "retirement bonus" just short of \$200,000. His crimes continued.

When it became the public scandal that they all dreaded, the board finally acted. The president, the vice president, the athletic director and the coach, who was the icon of the university, were all dismissed. The police chief had previously retired. This was the first step and a necessary one, but that was not to be the last.

The new leaders then appointed and empowered Louis J. Freeh, a man of impeccable credentials, a former judge and the former head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to make a thorough investigation and to report his findings publicly to the board. The cover-up had ended. Neither the members of the board nor the officials of the university made any attempts to hinder the investigation, to conceal data or to control his access to it. They were finally no longer willing to protect the institution or even the reputations of key officials. It took Mr. Freeh seven months to complete his work, but when he released his report, there were no longer myths, excuses or rationalizations behind which the guilty could hide. No one was spared, from the board of trustees who formulated and participated in building the culture of Penn State, to the top university officials and the top athletic officials who knew about these crimes and took no action, to the university's maintenance staff who also knew what was going on, but who were silenced by the power of intimidation. Now the fallout from the report was strewn like debris all over Central Pennsylvania. No, the facts are not yet all in. They never will be. In time more kids will inevitably come forth to tell their painful stories. There will be continuing lawsuits for years that will have severe repercussions on the university and on the state of Pennsylvania. There will undoubtedly be criminal indictments. Mr. Sandusky, already convicted, will not be the only official of that university to face incarceration. There may well be penalties imposed on the university's athletic program. It could even be shut down for a period of time. If not shut down, the program will surely be penalized, perhaps crippled, with punitive restrictions on scholarships and recruiting. Lots of people will be hurt. Innocent football players will have their college careers aborted and their future hopes of playing professional football compromised.

Merchants who make their living in State College will have their incomes dramatically lowered. Potential students will have to decide whether this will be the campus to which they want to matriculate. Alumni giving to the university will drop precipitously. Many will pay the price for the behavior of the few. That is the way it always is in an interdependent world.

To the credit of the university officials, we need to note that, even if it was belated, when they were faced with undoubted and incontrovertible evidence of wrong-doing, they acted. The Freeh report spared no one. It let the chips fall where the evidence led. It forced Penn State University to be honest, to admit its duplicity. It shattered carefully crafted reputations. It risked enormous liability exposure, but it was honest, painfully honest. This report broadcast Penn State's willingness to pay the price it takes to restore integrity, a process that will not be accomplished in a month, perhaps not even in a decade or in a generation, but it did what had to be done to make it possible for integrity to be recovered in time. No other solution would address the cancer at the heart of this institution. Tarnished reputations are never restored by allowing suspicion to remain uninvestigated and the lack of transparency to continue. Healing begins only when honesty replaces duplicity, rationalization and lies.

I cannot help but compare the Penn State tragedy with the tragedy that has engulfed the Roman Catholic Church in the last twenty plus years over the abuse of children by priests and the overt cover-up by the bishops and the cardinals. There are obvious similarities: the desire to protect the institution from scandal was present in both cases. The widespread presence of guilt caused an almost identical first response of the leaders. Both institutions circled their wagons to defend the accused. Both institutions practiced denial. The leaders of the church first denied any wrong doing; then they denied that they knew; then they denied that they had acted to protect the reputation of the church, not the lives of its victims; then they denied that these behaviors were widespread; then they denied the fact that these behaviors could only be widespread if a culture of support was in place, a culture that cannot be created in a short period of time; then they denied that they had in the past and still do transfer abusing priests to other jurisdictions, even sending Bernard Law to the Vatican to avoid the specter of this obviously guilty man having to testify under oath before a grand jury. Cardinal Law is a major symbol of an institution's unwillingness to be honest and as long as he remains a high Vatican official the cover-up is obviously continuing. The fallout of this pattern of denial did not stop at the edges of the Catholic Church, it tarnished the Christ they claimed to serve, it violated the integrity of all Christians and it embarrassed the cause of honesty. They have not yet been honest. If guilt and hiding go all the way to the front door of the Vatican, then that reality needs to be revealed by that Church. The

presence of abuse in this church in almost every nation of the world screams out the fact that this is a systemic sickness that tries to hide crimes under piety. This is not the action of a few bad priests, but a signature reality of the whole Catholic Church. This scandalous behavior of abuse and the even more scandalous behavior of hierarchical cover up, denial and continuing attempts to stop the investigation in an effort to protect the church's reputation, I believe, sounds the death knell for this Church and perhaps for Christianity as well. The coin of the Church's realm is trust and once trust is lost the decline will be swift and total. Can we imagine anyone listening to the moral pronouncements of this church on any topic when no one believes their honesty is intact on this issue? Rampant dishonesty always trumps a pious witness.

Penn State is guilty, but Penn State will recover, because it did what it had to do and it did it at great cost. The Catholic Church is guilty, but it has not yet begun to recover because it has not yet faced its problem and by not facing it, it is admitting quite publicly that this problem is so deep and so pervasive that they are not able to deal with it. Cover-up is always fatal. Honesty is painful, but it gives hope that there will be a future. Penn State finally acted properly. The Catholic Church still has yet to do so.