



Catholic Civil Rights League

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Monthly highlights

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League criticizes biased coverage of abuse scandal

The following article, and several others, were prepared by the League and published in several news outlets in response to coverage of the sex abuse scandal.

By Sean Murphy

Christopher Hitchens venomous attack on Pope Benedict XVI (The Great Catholic Coverup, 18 March, 2010) is a revelation that deserves wider attention. Were it not for its appearance in the National Post, it would be difficult to believe that a reputable newspaper would publish such absurdity.

Mr. Hitchens states that in May, 2001, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger sent a “confidential” letter to Catholic bishops to remind them that anyone who disclosed “child rape and torture” by priests would be excommunicated. He claims that Cardinal Ratzinger imposed a ten year “statute of limitations” on actions against such priests, and was thus guilty of “obstruction of justice.”

These assertions are false.

The 2001 instruction was issued to clarify how reports of clerical sexual misconduct were to be handled. Ratzinger’s directive actually facilitated Church proceedings against clerical sex offenders by *extending* time limits that had previously hampered prosecutions. Limitations of action are not unique to Canon Law. They exist in secular legal jurisdictions, and can prevent prosecution of serious sex crimes.

The so-called “confidential” instruction was published and appeared in English in 2001. It has been ‘discovered,’ ‘revealed’ or ‘exposed’ by so many reporters since then that it might give pause to those who doubt the possibility of the resurrection of the dead. Certainly, Mr. Hitchens’ wild fabrication that Cardinal Ratzinger threatened to excommunicate anyone who revealed “child rape and torture” has trumped the rhetoric of his predecessors. However, lurid prose is hardly a substitute for sound research.

Bishops were not “reminded” by Cardinal Ratzinger of secrecy or excommunication. The passage quoted by Mr. Hitchens as ‘proof’ of his extravagant claim is not (as his readers might believe) from Ratzinger’s instruction. It is from *Crimen Sollicitationis*, a 1962 instruction that Ratzinger merely noted had been under review.

Virtually all of *Crimen Sollicitationis* concerned the investigation and prosecution of complaints of sexual solicitation of penitents by priests in confession. Such procedures are difficult and sensitive because the seal of confession cannot be violated; a priest cannot

break the seal even to defend himself against an accusation. The same policies and procedures were to be adapted and applied to the “worst crimes,” including sexual aggression against minors.

Crimen Sollicitationis did not threaten excommunication of people who revealed “child rape and torture” by priests. On the contrary: it imposed not only a duty to denounce such crimes (and the lesser offence of solicitation) to the bishop, but the automatic excommunication of anyone who knowingly *failed* to do so.

Officials investigating or involved in proceedings pertaining to these “unspeakable crimes” were required to take an oath of perpetual secrecy, on pain of excommunication. This was the passage perverted by Mr. Hitchens’ selective quotation and extraordinary accusation. An oath of secrecy was also to be given to witnesses in the proceedings, but was not, it seems, to be backed by a threat of excommunication. Analogous oaths of secrecy and confidentiality are taken by secular professionals and officials. Confidentiality is usually maintained during secular investigations, and secular proceedings - Family Court hearings for example - sometimes proceed in secret.

Media reports over the last several years have mentioned some of the reasons the Church had for secrecy: protecting the seal of confession, ensuring the integrity of an investigation, shielding victims from publicity and encouraging them to come forward, and protecting reputations before guilt has been established.

Of course, such reasons are not always justified and not always persuasive. What is significant, however, is that canon law specialists consulted about *Crimen Sollicitationis*, while properly critical of wrongful conduct by bishops and priests, have dismissed the theory that the document was meant to cover up clerical wrongdoing, or that it was used for that purpose.

It would be unfair to conclude that Mr. Hitchens deliberately distorted and withheld all of this information. One hesitates to attribute his failings to malicious anti-Catholic bigotry.

Perhaps he was just remarkably careless in his reading and incompetent in his research.

- Sean Murphy is a Western region director of the League. Reprinted courtesy of Catholic Educators Resource Centre.

See our website for additional, published League letters and press releases on this topic.

(See page two)

G-8 initiative should support neediest, says League

The League continues to insist on a pro-life spirit in the G-8 maternal health initiative. We recently criticized the opposition motion introduced March 23 in the House of Commons, which demanded that the government's G-8 maternal health initiative include the "full range" of family planning options. Fortunately the motion failed after debate, in a vote of 144 to 138.

Adding partisan fuel to the controversy that has dogged the proposal since it was announced in February, the motion called for funding of "the full range of family planning, sexual and reproductive health options, including contraception," without mentioning abortion, although that has been the central issue in this debate. The motion also drew a parallel to the George W. Bush administration's ban on federal funding of non-governmental organizations that promoted abortion, calling it a funding ban on "organizations promoting medically sound family planning."

"It is unfortunate to see politicians using the initiative as a way to advance their agendas on abortion, given the great need for aid on the part of the world's poorest women and their children," said Joanne McGarry, executive director of the League. "The original announcement focused on the provision of medicines, food and safe drinking water, all critical needs in much of the Third World, and it's disheartening to see that there are parliamentarians who would not support the effort unless it reflects the liberal, western interpretation of women's health needs."

Most people have not yet seen the concrete details of the initiative, and the League will not evaluate it until they are available. But we have expressed the hope, both in press releases and in correspondence to the Prime Minister, that it will be pro-life in spirit and in implementation, and focus on the most pressing needs of the world's poorest.

- League letter about the G-8 plan published in The Toronto Star available on our website.

Media Watch

CBC re-airs "The Pagan Christ"

The League has protested the re-broadcast Feb. 28 of "The Pagan Christ" on CBC television. This documentary is based on Tom Harpur's 2004 book of the same name, challenging the historical existence of Jesus Christ. The historical inaccuracies on which the "Pagan Christ" theory rests have been elaborated upon by many qualified scholars, some of whom do so within the program itself. In a letter to

CBC's ombudsman, the League questioned why there would be ongoing "play" for a program that, in essence, refutes its own thesis. Even though competition from the Olympics probably kept viewership low, it remains troubling to many Christians that a tax-funded network would repeat a program that aims to attack the very origins of their faith, to the offense of a great many viewers.

Easter programming

As of this writing, some program schedules have been posted online, while some have not. The Easter lineup at Vision TV, among other programs, includes a repeat of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus", which denies the resurrection. (The documentary itself was widely criticized in 2007 for numerous historical inaccuracies.) If you see programs with an anti-Catholic or anti-Christian thread in your local lineup, express your concerns through a phone call or short e-mail.

On the positive side, complete Holy Week ceremonies will be available live from the Vatican on Salt and Light Television, and can be viewed on line at www.saltandlighttv.org.

Let the League know: Articles, cartoons and advertising that you believe have anti-Catholic content should be sent to ccrl@ccrl.ca to help us respond in a timely way.

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Faith and Freedom Alliance conference

The Christian Legal Intervention Academy (CLIA), hosted by Faith and Freedom Alliance (FFA), invites Christian lawyers and law students to attend its third training academy June 3 - 6, in Toronto. The event will feature some of the nation's top legal experts instructing in Canadian constitutional matters, religious freedom, and various Charter issues. Visit the website: faithandfreedomalliance.ca in the coming weeks for information regarding location, speakers and costs.

Please join us

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