

Clergy sex abuse scandal undermines Pope Benedict's crusade to reclaim Europe: Scandals mushrooming across the continent

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Days after being elected pope, Pope Benedict XVI referred to one of Europe's patron saints, Benedict of Nursia, as he explained his choice of papal name to thousands of pilgrims massed in St. Peter's Square. "He represents a fundamental point of reference for the unity of Europe and a strong reminder of the unrenounceable Christian roots of its culture and civilization," the new pontiff said on that sunny April morning in 2005.

Now, five years later, Benedict is reeling from reports of sexual abuse scandals mushrooming across Europe that risk undermining a central mission of his papacy: promoting and reviving Europe's Christian heritage. Worse, some analysts say, the scandals may accelerate the drift away from the Roman Catholic Church that has been under way in Europe for decades.

Whether it is a genuine crisis of leadership or the result of "petty gossip," as top aides claim, the scandal has laid bare the differences in how the Vatican responds to controversy compared to what many lay Catholics, and the media, might expect.

"The pedophilia scandals are seriously weakening the project to re-Christianize Europe," said Philippe Portier, director of the Group on Society, Religion and Secularity at the French National Center for Scientific Research. "The church will have great difficulty in regaining the confidence even of its activists who are essential [to] putting the goal of re-Christianizing Europe into action."

Other experts argue that the scandals may actually help cleanse and renew Europe's church. Indeed, the results of a poll published in France's *La Croix* newspaper offer a heartening statistic: some 61 percent of Europeans believe that

Christian messages and values still have meaning.

But whatever Christian revival takes place will be in the long term, predicts Isabelle de Gaulmyn, head of *La Croix's* religious coverage.

“For now, all the efforts of the pope and the Catholic churches in Europe to have a legitimate voice in society have really been hurt by these disclosures,” she said.

The damage is reflected in voices like that of Jean Gosset, a French Catholic in Paris. “The church has lied on many things,” he said. “It makes it difficult to hear the real message of Christ from a church which is riddled with faults.”

Benedict began his papacy by shouldering a project spearheaded by his predecessor, John Paul II. The church had lobbied hard—and unsuccessfully—for a mention of Europe’s Christian heritage in a draft of a European constitution that was ultimately discarded.

Even the watered-down constitution adopted last year, the Lisbon Treaty, makes only passing reference to holding an “open, transparent and regular” dialogue with churches.

The increasingly secular bent of institutional Europe is reflected among ordinary Europeans; little more than a quarter identify as Roman Catholic, according to the 2010 Atlas of Global Christianity. Of some 70 percent of French who consider themselves Catholic, for example, less than a third go to mass, church officials say.

Ironically, says Vatican observer David Gibson, Europe’s religious disenfranchisement might make it easier for the Vatican to handle the current crop of sex scandals—compared with those that rocked a stronger and more unified Catholic community across the Atlantic in 2002.

“In the United States . . . practice of the faith and at least cultural loyalty among Catholics was much higher, so the sense of betrayal and the anger was that much sharper,” said Gibson, a religion columnist for PoliticsDaily.com and author of *The Rule of Benedict*, a biography of the pope.

By contrast, “the effect of the scandals could be mitigated in Europe by the fact that so few people go to church anyway,” even as it makes the Vatican’s European evangelism all the more difficult.

To be sure, the impact of the pedophilia crisis has varied widely across Europe, with Germany, Austria and Ireland among the most seriously affected.

By contrast, the scandal has been more muted in nominally Catholic France, Spain and Italy—where Catholic communities arguably lack a culture of protest, analyst Portier says.

“It’s not that the scandals don’t exist, but there’s no structured movement to allow them to be publicly denounced,” he said, citing France in particular.

Others disagree, arguing that French bishops took steps several years ago to tackle pedophilia. In neighboring Belgium, a grisly and unrelated 1996 trial involving pedophile and murderer Marc Dutroux sparked national soul-searching.

“In Belgium society, the Dutroux affair was an enormous catalyst,” said Jean-Pierre Delville, a priest and theologian at the Catholic University of Leuven. “It had immediate repercussions within the Catholic Church,” and as a consequence a number of cases were brought before justice.

Belgium’s example, he says, shows that rather than bringing Europe’s church to its knees, the scandals may help revitalize it. “I think a new moral conscience is emerging and that it can allow a real purification,” Delville said. *-Elizabeth Bryant, Religion News Service*