

How Pope Benedict Handled Abuse: 2 Revealing Case Studies

by Phil Lawlor

How has Pope Benedict XVI reacted to reports of pedophile priests? We now have two revealing case studies. One case involves an otherwise ordinary parish priest who had a record of molesting children. The future Pope — then Archbishop of Munich — was never directly involved in his case and appears to have known very little about him. The other involves one of the most prominent, influential priests in the Catholic Church: the head of a wealthy religious order, a man with powerful friends at the Vatican. The future Pope Benedict led the charge against him.

The first case is that of "Father H" in Munich. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger allowed an accused abuser to live in a local rectory, and when his subordinate allowed the accused priest to take up parish work, the cardinal evidently failed to notice the assignment. But Father H was not a prominent priest. After his transfer from another diocese he apparently did nothing to attract attention during Cardinal Ratzinger's tenure in Munich. For all we know the future Pontiff might never have met him. Should he have been more attentive to the dangers posed by an abusive priest in his archdiocese? Probably.

The second case is that of the late Father Marcial Maciel, founder and head of the Legion of Christ. By the time Cardinal Ratzinger took up his position as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Father Maciel had already fended off one Vatican investigation. He had used his connections, and the wealth of the Legionaries, to curry favor with other important Vatican officials. In two eye-opening reports for the National Catholic Reporter, Jason Berry has detailed how Maciel steadily expanded his influence within the Roman Curia, especially the Secretariat of State. But Cardinal Ratzinger wasn't buying. He refused gifts from the Legionaries. He pressed for a fresh investigation of the abuse charges that had been lodged against Father Maciel. At first pleas for a thorough inquiry were thwarted, but it is no coincidence that shortly after his election as Benedict XVI the case moved forward, and soon Maciel was permanently removed from active priestly ministry.

Father Maciel had enjoyed the protection of influential prelates. But Cardinal Ratzinger did not protect him. On the contrary, in this case, when the pursuit of a predator priest involved a long battle against entrenched interests at the Vatican, the future Pontiff took up the struggle. If there was ever a case when a cardinal would have been tempted to let an abusive priest escape punishment, this was it. Pope Benedict did not let Maciel escape.

So again, we have two test cases: one involving a priest that the future Pope barely knew, the other involving one of the world's most prominent clerics. In one case it would have been relatively easy for Cardinal Ratzinger to discipline the priest; in the other, the disciplinary process could only move forward if the cardinal was willing to pay a price. Maybe he should have been more vigilant in Munich, but later Pope Benedict took up the tough case. Now which case tell us more about the Pope's real attitude toward sex-abuse cases? At a time when other bishops were denying the problem, Cardinal Ratzinger was speaking passionately about the to eliminate the "filth" from the priesthood. His track record confirms his determination.

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