

Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime, and the Era of Catholic Scandal

Michael D'Antonio

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A Publishers Weekly Best Nonfiction Book of 2013

A Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2013

An Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime Nominee

An explosive, sweeping account of the scandal that has sent the Catholic Church into a tailspin -- and the brave few who fought for justice

In the mid-1980s a dynamic young monsignor assigned to the Vatican's embassy in Washington set out to investigate the problem of sexually abusive priests. He found a scandal in the making, confirmed by secret files revealing complaints that had been hidden from police and covered up by the Church hierarchy. He also understood that the United States judicial system was eager to punish offenders and those who aided them. He presented all of this to the American bishops, warning that the Church could be devastated by negative publicity and bankrupted by its legal liability. They ignored him.

Meanwhile, a young lawyer listened to a new client describe an abusive sexual history with a priest that began when he was ten years old. His parents' complaints were downplayed by Church officials who offered them money to go away. The lawyer saw a claim that any defendant would want to settle. Then he began to suspect he was onto something bigger, involving thousands of priests who had abused countless children while the Church had done almost nothing about it. The lawsuit he filed would touch off a legal war of historic and global proportions.

Part history, part journalism, and part true-crime thriller, Michael D'Antonio's *Mortal Sins* brings to mind landmark books such as *All the President's Men*, *And the Band Played On*, and *The Informant*, as it reveals a long and ferocious battle for the soul of the largest and oldest organization in the world.

Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime, and the Era of Catholic Scandal Details


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From Reader Review Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime, and the Era of Catholic Scandal for online ebook

Michele Weiner says

A very comprehensive look at the sex abuse scandals of the Catholic Church. D'Antonio describes the behavior broadly - he does not dwell overly much on specific sex acts except when necessary to illustrate the extreme depravity of the pedophile priests and the awful damage done to the children victimized. There are extensive character studies of the lawyers who pursued the cases, the volunteer activists and experts, the worst of the serial predator priest-monsters, and the most egregiously negligent of the bishops.

The laws regarding sexual abuse of children were limiting in the extreme, and were changed as a result of the magnitude of the Catholic problem. As the lawyers found ways to crack open the legal system in each state individually, documents that were discovered in lawsuits proved that bishop after bishop had protected the priests and sacrificed the children. Once a single victim was permitted to take the priest to law, invariably many more victims came forward. Some of the perpetrators had been hurting children for decades; hundreds of victims of a single predator were found as he was moved from parish to parish a step ahead of trouble.

The toll on the victims, usually among the most dysfunctional or disturbed of the boys the priests met in their work, was massive. Many were suicides and addicts. The priests were almost unaffected; think Penn State's Jerry what's his name, who has absolutely no understanding of what he has done.

My biggest take-away, aside from the complete complicity of Benedict the former pope, was that the Catholic Church attracts people with sexual dysfunction and then protects them while they hunt and hurt children on the theory that priests are exempt from human laws. There is a huge gay lobby inside the church, along with many fornicators and addicts. Who else would live the kind of life expected by the church? Beware large groups of men with feelings of entitlement and the power to protect themselves from the consequences of their depravity- be it a football culture (ala PennState) or a so-called church.

Karen Christensen says

After reading all the bits and pieces of the Catholic sex scandal over the years, it's nice to have a comprehensive picture laid out...as is the case with this book. I was concerned that the author would dwell too much on the details of the actual abuse, making it too repulsive to read, but he doesn't. D'Antonio treats it with a good balance, giving enough information to appreciate the horrific nature of what these men were (are?) doing, while not crossing that line. The author also spends some time developing characters of the "good guys," so there are some heroes to help balance out the story.

Kathi says

I had to take this book in sections because I was so bothered by the response by law enforcement and the church. I was raised as a Catholic, went to an all girls Catholic high school and dropped away from the church once I graduated high school. As a 5th grader I was slapped out of my seat by a nun for supposedly talking when we were told to be quiet; the reality was that the boy next to me was trying to get me to talk and

be in trouble and all I was doing was shaking my head trying to get him to stop. Next thing I knew I was on the floor with my face stinging. I got back up in my seat, clamped my jaw and refused to give "that woman" the satisfaction of seeing me cry. She was never a "nun" to me from that minute forward and from that moment on I saw nothing special in these women in their heavy black dresses and belts with the rosaries hanging down. In fact, once I was detailed to go and help clean the convent and there were shelves and shelves in a storeroom stocked with cigarettes and alcohol for them. Here they were preaching goodness and purity and then going home to get loaded and blow smoke rings.

Reading this book brought that back to me in it's entirety and ignited feelings I thought I had long ago resolved. It is very clear now, reading this book, that nothing has changed in the Catholic culture and I doubt it ever will. You will rarely see a "nun" these days and if you do they expect you to defer to them because they wear a giant cross around their neck in their street clothes) as the women's cultural revolution has informed our thinking and makes female celibacy pretty much outdated; apparently the church is also having trouble getting men to commit to celibacy as well and those that do probably have their little "vacations" from it when they can. It seems now that what the Catholic church is most concerned with now is the money that extort from their parishes so they can maintain their palatial residences, satin and gold outfits, etc.

If you are reading this and are a religious-minded person I have nothing against that or you; I consider myself a pragmatist now and dealing with life day to day on earth instead of worrying about what will come when I am "dust".

Linda Atkinson says

Well documented, but a very depressing book that is best taken in small doses :-(

Holly says

I had heard of pedophile priests at some point in the last couple decades, who hasn't? But I had no idea the scope of the problem. I thought it was comparable to the occasional Protestant minister who has an affair with the organist - which happens, but most don't and those who are do are exposed quickly and forced to resign.

I had no idea that at any given time 45-50% of the priesthood is not celibate. And that priests count themselves as celibate if they have a sexual experience a couple times/year even if they have multiple children. I imagined that pedophilia might be slightly higher in the priesthood than in the general public as men with desires that scared them might join to restrain themselves. Even so, It was still surprising to see how rampant pedophilia/rape was in the ministry, and that church authorities chose to ignore criminal acts against children to avoid scandal. When parents complained that a priest fondled/raped their child, the church "handled the situation" by moving him to a new church with fresh kids and fresh parents. Some priests had hundreds of child victims in six states and the church didn't care. I remember Sinead O'Connor on SNL in 1992, but I didn't know why.

Then the lawsuits. As I was reading about the now suicidal and drug abusing adult victims suing the church, I didn't know who to root for. Of course I wanted the victims to win to send the message. But it was hard to root for millions of dollars - to go from the pockets of hardworking, earnest Catholics who probably thought

their tithes would help feed the poor or some other noble cause to go through the church to the abuse victims who probably would be more harmed than helped with a influx of cash when they are abusing drugs. But it had to be done.

I'm not Catholic, so I feel like it's not my place to comment, but it seems like so much could be avoided by 1) allowing priests to marry and 2) having a system of checks and balances, so no one is above the law 3) having a means to identify troubled men as they enter the ministry. As it is, if I had an emergency and was forced to temporarily leave my children in the care of a stranger, after this reading this book, I'd feel safer with a random stranger watching over them than a priest.

Christopher Fox says

A worthy recipient of the Pulitzer Prize this solid, extensive reportorial investigation of the on-going sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church reads like a detective story, populated with very human characters on all sides. It pulls the reader along inexorably with its captivating, richly coloured narrative. D'Antonio explores all aspects of this complicated problem: ecclesiastical, social, legal, psychological, historic, theological, philosophical, political, economic and moral. Many of the main characters on both sides re-appear throughout this chronology, no one more so than Jeff Anderson, the crusading Minneapolis attorney for whom this volume is almost biographical.

Powerful, disgusting and riveting.

Kerry says

Michael D'Antonio certainly did his research. This book is a comprehensive account of the sexual abuse scandal that rocked the Roman Catholic church starting in the mid-1980s and continuing in conversation even today. As of 2012, the worldwide church had paid \$3 billion to settle civil lawsuits, and yet many more claims went unresolved. The accusations, denials, cover-ups and lawsuits rocked the church to its core. As a lifelong Catholic myself, I knew about the scandal and the many victims, but still was shocked by how far the church went to protect some priests and bishops in the face of overwhelming evidence of abuse. And, how so many in the church hierarchy really didn't see anything wrong with sexual contact with some of the victims. For example, the archbishop of Milwaukee, Father Weakland, wrote in 1988 that "sometimes not all adolescent victims are so innocent; some can be sexually very active and aggressive and often quite streetwise." What?! A classic example of blaming the victim! The author discusses many lawsuits, some successful, some not, and the determined lawyers, activists and church laypeople who wouldn't stop their fight for justice.

Tiffany Reisz says

I read this book to better understand the "clerical culture" as it's referred to in the book. Anyone who has read my Original Sinners series will know why. I thought I knew the scope of the abuse of children and the cover up in the Catholic Church before reading this. I was, quite frankly, shocked by how worldwide, pervasive, and epidemic the problem is. My ultimate conclusion after reading the book is that celibacy is a failed

experiment. The priests with healthy sexualities will find appropriate romantic and sexual partners and carry on in secret. The priests with damaged sexualities will seek out the vulnerable and harm them. According to a study conducted by a former priest/psychologist in the church and funded by the church, at any given time 45-50% of priests are sexually active. That includes sex offenders, gay priests with adult male lovers, and straight priests with mistresses. One bishop laments in the book that he can't find any Latin American priests to promote to higher office as they all have shadow families with children.

This book is not an easy read, but I think it was a necessary book. It certainly was important for me to read it since I'm writing a forbidden love story between a priest and a young woman. The more I read about clerical abuse the more I see the difference between it and a healthy love between equals that I'm writing.

I pray for the victims and survivors. I also pray for the bishops and the curia to get their own heads out of their asses and once and for all impose a zero tolerance policy on all priests, bishops, monks, sisters, and nuns. I appeal to Pope Francis, a Jesuit, and remind him of the hundreds of natives who were victims of rape and molestation by Jesuit priests in Alaska. There's blood on your order's hands, Pope Francis.

BlackOxford says

A Metaphysical Monster

The Catholic Church is the world's first and largest corporation, an organisation which can own things but which is not owned by anyone and an entity which is composed of its members but is superior to them. These are legal facts, which could be changed by legislation. But the Church's legal status, it claims, is grounded not in law but elsewhere - in metaphysics, the study of existence itself. It is from metaphysics that the Catholic Church argues its uniqueness, its exception to all civil law, and its absolute right to govern itself without interference. These claims are ancient. So are their effects: most recently the demonstrable inability of the Church to purge itself, after almost forty years of trying, from the plague of paedophilia (more than sixty years from the earliest internal reports). Until it drops its metaphysical pretensions, even another forty years effort is unlikely to be enough to solve the problem.

Like most things Catholic, the rationale for the existence of the Church comes from St. Paul. Paul called the Church a 'body'. He was not being metaphorical; he literally meant a body, an entity which was neither a tribe, nor a civil association, nor a state. The body he had in mind, he claimed, had a very different kind of existence, what philosophers call an ontology, from other sorts of organisations. According to Paul, the Church has an identity which is entirely independent of the identity of its members. Those who accept this identity take on mutual responsibility for the conduct as well as well-being of one other. And they are accountable only to the identity of the Church - effectively its clerical hierarchy - which determines if this responsibility is being carried out properly.

In short, Paul's body of the Church is a metaphysical being which is inherently superior to the being of its members. It is empowered, because of its mode of being, to demand accountability from its members. But it possesses a metaphysical immunity for any actions it takes to further its own interests, which are per definition the real interests of humanity and the entirety of creation. The Church therefore is the sole legitimate arbiter of the interests of its members. And although its members are responsible for each other, the Church is not responsible for anything they do.

If this sounds vaguely like the definition of the modern corporation in law, that's because it is. Paul's body

became an institution which spread throughout the world - not just the world of religion but also the world of law, which controls this very unusual, very troublesome institution. But the entity which began it all, the Church, has never been willing to compromise its metaphysical status by submitting to the mundane demands of law. The Church is and has its own law. And although it will submit to judgments of civil and criminal law because it is forced to, it will not admit to the superiority of civil justice.

D'Antonio calls the manifestation of this metaphysical theory "*clerical culture*." This isn't incorrect but it isn't the whole story either. The leaders of the Church, priests, do act to protect the reputation and the physical well-being of the Church as a matter of course. Nevertheless, the idea of the clerical culture is an incomplete description of the problems of deception, evasion, and duplicity which have been clear progressively in North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and South America as scandal after scandal has emerged. And it is a dangerously incomplete characterization because it doesn't address the essential metaphysical issue.

The apparently unending series of revelations of abuse of children by clerics also shows the complicity of the lay community. Family members of the abused children, parochial and episcopal administrators, and run of the mill parishioners, routinely cooperated in the cover-ups and often offensive denials of the culpability of the Church. This at least suggests that whatever it is about the Church that candidate priests learn in the education and that inculturates them into an attitude of both casual denial and equally casual rationalisation of abuse, is not an adequate explanation of the phenomenon.

The culture of the Church is not a matter of clerical attitudes or training alone. Clerical training, parochial and episcopal administrative responses to reported problems, and the perceptions of the non-clerical members of the Church are shaped not by policy statements or procedures. They are shaped and directed by doctrine - the drawing out of the logic of metaphysical presumptions. Catholics are not so much taught the doctrines of the Church, as immersed in them as reality from infancy. These doctrines are not separable from each other. They form a whole. Compromise on one implies compromise on all.

Baptism, for example is not simply a ritual of admission, it is doctrinally a metaphysical transformation which alters the fundamental existence of the new member of the community. Similarly the ordination of a priest is doctrinally a further change in being, a change which can never be undone. The Church itself is doctrinally a *societas perfecta*, an entity controlled and protected by the Holy Spirit which provides everything it needs to carry out its mission. Baptism creates a duty - primarily to obey. Ordination creates a privilege, to instruct, direct, and forgive (including of course other priests). The *societas perfecta* is an ontological status which cannot be improved upon.

Metaphysics is the sea in which Catholics swim. But metaphysics is not something inherited from Jewish roots. It is a Greek philosophical invention coopted by Catholic theologians over centuries. The resulting narrative of existence is not a topic of everyday conversation. Nevertheless it underlies any conversation involving the Catholic Church and what is possible to justify in the Church for itself. This is a pervasive metaphysical not clerical culture. Until the Church comes to grips with its obviously self-serving metaphysics, that is to say convenient fictions, conversation is futile and possibilities for reform are nil. The incidence of reported abuse may diminish but as long as the theory of the Church remains intact, abuse will recur in one form or another.

D'Antonio quotes Tom Doyle, a Catholic priest who was involved in investigating the first publicly litigated case of child abuse in Louisiana in 1984: "The Church in America is a dinosaur with a head the size of an ant, and the head thinks it's in charge." This is the kind of metaphysical monster which the Catholic Church has made of itself, and not just in America: a corporation which has lost control, particularly of itself. Ill-

considered metaphysics is wont to do that to folk.

Postscript: an article received today which touches on the importance of metaphysics in the abuse scandal:
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articl...>

Post-postscript 24July 2018: the crisis just doesn't quit: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/ch...>

Yet more: the scandal that keeps on giving: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/ho...>

15Aug2018: Incredibly, the pace of the thing appears to be increasing:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/a...>

19Aug2018: It's a fair question to ask: who lies more, DJT or the bushops of the Catholic Church?
<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/19/us...>

30Aug2018: It turns out that JP II had about as much credibility as DJT, but they made him a saint anyway.
Another symptom of the metaphysical mess: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/an...>

24Sept18: a very encouraging sign of rebellion. This is a sermon given last Sunday in Washington DC and reportedly met with sustained applause from the congregation: <https://docs.google.com/file/d/1DoogB...>

Carah Helwig says

Brilliantly written and well-documented, this is by far a chilling account of the coverups that existed during the greatest scandal ever to occur in the Catholic Church. I'll be honest - if I didn't have a core group of friends who are committed to progressive Catholicism, whom I know I can depend on for spiritual support, I might be tempted to leave the Church. A must read regardless of your politics or your views of religion and power.

Sabra says

The clear message of this book is that there is a fundamental moral failure at the heart of Catholic clergy. Clerical celibacy is unnatural and a failed experiment which has resulted in profound harm to men, women and children over hundred of years.

Aaron Baker says

Very well-researched book that reads like a courtroom drama. Unfortunately it's non-fiction. It should be required reading in every Catholic church worldwide, but then if it was, there might not be very many of them left.

John Purcell says

Full disclosure: I was adopted into and raised by a Catholic family. I'm what I call a "recovering Catholic" having rejected Catholicism when I was a teenager. I was never abused by a priest; never having any hint of abusive priests, so I have no personal axe to grind.

This book is about the Catholic Church, more than it is about abusive priests. What I came away with, in terms of horror, and disgust, and condemnation, is not so much that grown men were raping children, as bad as that is on a personal level, but that the institution of the church acted so horribly, and so selfishly, trying badly to protect itself, while putting on the face of moral rectitude, that it reminded me of organized crime. And not just me, but many of the antagonists of the church in the struggle to hold it accountable for the actions of its priests. That it wore the face of moral superiority, while it it knew, with absolute certitude, that its army of priests were out there molesting, and raping and sodomizing innocent children that looked up to it, that saw those priests as the next thing closest thing to a God, is the Crime of the Century - the Crime of the Second Millennium - and I say that because you know that if they were doing this to our children in the last half of the 20th Century, then they were doing it for the last thousand years. They just didn't get caught.

This is an excellent overview of the history of the "abuse crisis (As the church calls it - I would prefer the "abuse enlightenment") beginning with the first cases brought in secular courts after the Church failed to police it's own, to the most recent revelations (as of Ratzinger's resignation). The heroes of this story are courageous priests and ex-priests unwilling to be cowed by their employer from doing the right thing, along with lawyers willing to risk personal exhaustion (not to mention alcoholism) to set the record straight. Reading this book I felt proud to be a lawyer, because without the relentless lawyers in the book, the church would still be shuffling pedophiles from church to church while buying off parents for \$10,000 apiece.

Sometimes the writing got a bit clunky, but on the whole the narrative drove assiduously forward to the present telling the story of one priest after another ruining the lives of thousands upon thousands of innocent boys and girls who will NEVER fully recover. The fact that the Church was basically designed to attract pedophiles with its stilted sense of morality toward sex, its refusal to allow its priests a normal outlet for human sexual urgings, and it's monarchist and hierarchical structure that relied on secrecy, it set up a perfect storm for this crisis.

And we've only seen the tip of the iceberg. Most of the history of this crisis to date deals only with America, Ireland and a handful of European countries. Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America, (and I'm sure Antarctica if there was a Catholic Church ever there) have not even been explored yet. Personally, if the RC Church was forced to file bankruptcy and dissolve itself, never to inflict it's idiotic and deplorable morality on the world again, we'd all be better off.

Tara says

I could not put this book down. Mesmerizing.

Max says

D'Antonio tracks the child abuse scandal of the Catholic Church from the 1980s to 2013. In that time the

Church itself acknowledged 6,100 priests had been credibly accused of sexually abusing more than 16,000 children in the US. Over four hundred priests were sent to prison and the Church paid over \$3 billion in settlements. Many escaped trial and prison due to statute of limitations laws. These figures do not include Ireland which had an extensive abuse problem or the rest of the world. D'Antonio describes a revered institution that lost sight of its mission and responsibilities. Priests, bishops and their superiors were more interested in protecting each other than children in their flock. Safeguarding the reputation of their church was more important than honesty and helping victims.

D'Antonio details the legal cases that sought to redress victims' grievances and bring to justice perpetrators and complicit superiors. Patterns emerge. Serial rape of trusting and frequently already emotionally compromised children was epidemic. Lonely children were easy targets. The effects on abused children ranged from severe depression to rage at being violated by someone they trusted. Many would find themselves reliving their nightmarish experiences as adults, finding it difficult to trust again. These effects lasted a lifetime destroying relationships and livelihoods and too often resulting in alcoholism or substance abuse.

Responsible bishops often just reprimanded offending priests and admonished them to sin no more. Sometimes counseling was prescribed or a treatment program. But offenders were rarely defrocked or laicized. Frequently they were packed off to other unsuspecting parishes where they again worked with children and abuse was repeated. These pedophiles rarely changed their ways after repenting or attending Church directed "treatment." Most dioceses faced with court battles employed the best defense lawyers who fought tooth and nail to deny responsibility even when superiors had clearly known of abuse and done nothing to hold perpetrators accountable or stop them from further abuse. The Holy See was intimately involved in setting policy even to the level of individual cases in America, Ireland and many other countries.

D'Antonio writes in a true crime fashion. Victims come forward often years after the abuse they suffered as they realize the impact on their lives. Their lawyers struggle to collect evidence as Church lawyers put up roadblock after roadblock. The court cases twist and turn for years until the truth (sometimes) is revealed or is hidden after a settlement. In particular we follow Jeffrey Anderson who made a career of representing victims of priest child abusers. He develops a national practice and after years of experience wins some major cases. He even takes on the Vatican. D'Antonio takes us into Anderson's personal life and his struggles with alcohol. The author profiles others who formed and led support organizations for victims as well as outraged priests who defied their church to help victims in their legal fights.

D'Antonio also describes the Church culture that he believes created an environment conducive to pedophile priests. That clergy cannot marry and women cannot be priests creates an unnatural environment. This male dominant culture that denies sexuality to its members sets up a norm that casts a blind eye to priest sexual behavior. Most priests are not abusers. The author presents estimates of 4% and 5.6% that are. But many more priests are involved in affairs or relationships with consenting adults and such behavior is often overlooked and simply treated as a sin to be confessed. This mindset then extends to abusers, treating them as sinners rather than criminals. Their blind eye, failure to report, and active cover ups kept Church authorities from seeing the extent of the problem. Then there is the defensiveness, an attitude of not letting a few bad apples destroy the Church's good work. The Church does do much to help the poor and unfortunate. Sadly the Church's defensive strategies are both cruel to victims and undermine the good works the Church does. A change in Church policies is required but more fundamentally a change in Church culture.
