

Decline and scandal: Symptoms of secularization

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

This has been a dreadful year for the Roman Catholic Church in Europe. Across the continent, churches are suffering from sexual scandals of a kind long familiar in the United States. European media commonly present the picture of a systematic church crisis and ask how—or if—the church can recover. Will the scandals irreparably destroy Catholic authority? Will they drive millions away from the church? Will they lead believers to divert their giving to secular causes, devastating church finances?

Actually, these questions confuse cause and effect. While abuse scandals may well thin church numbers and subvert the Vatican's political influence, they are symptoms of secularization as much as causes. If the Catholic consensus had not been so badly undermined already, stories of clerical abuse would not have appeared in the media and would have had nothing like the effect they did.

This does not mean that the media were in any way inventing or generating false stories. But their unprecedented willingness to address these issues so publicly needs to be understood.

Particularly in Western Europe, Catholic countries have been becoming steadily more secular for at least a generation, quite independent of any claims of priestly deviance. In no sense is European religion dying—just witness the continuing popularity of pilgrimage and other popular devotions—but loyalty to the institutional church has weakened disastrously. Rates of mass attendance have declined steeply, as have the numbers of those admitting even notional adherence to the church. Today, fewer than half of French people claim a Catholic identity. The number of priestly vocations has been in free fall since the 1960s, leaving many seminaries perhaps a quarter as full as they were in the time of Pope John XXIII.

One gauge of transformed Catholic attitudes has been the sharp drop in fertility rates and family size. Since the 1970s women increasingly pursued careers and higher education, and the use of contraception spread rapidly, despite stern church

disapproval. Fertility rates plummeted, such that Spain and Italy today have among the lowest fertility rates in the world, far below the level needed for population replacement. Catholic Germany stands about the same level. German sociologist Ulrich Beck notes wryly that in Western Europe today, the closer a woman lives to the pope, the fewer children she has. Ireland's fertility rate today is less than half what it was in 1970.

There is no reason a couple with few or no children should not be fervently pious. But the trend away from large families reflects broader social changes. A society in which women have more economic autonomy is less likely to accept traditional church teachings on moral and sexual issues. The resulting conflicts have steadily pushed back the scope of church involvement in public life. Abortion became legal in Italy in 1978 and in Spain in 1985. The Irish church suffered a historic defeat in 1997 when a referendum narrowly allowed the possibility of divorce. Today, across Catholic Europe, same-sex marriage is the main moral battlefield—with Spain in the vanguard of radical secularism and sexual liberation. The Catholic Church struggles to present its views to a society suspicious of institutional and traditional authority of any kind and quite accustomed to ideas of gender equality, sexual freedom and sexual difference.

Europe's mass media now speak to audiences whose assumptions are utterly different from what they might have been in the 1970s. Once upon a time, publishing stories embarrassing to the hierarchy would have been seen as defamatory or antireligious, and faithful believers would have reacted furiously. Today, few Catholics deny that the media have a right and duty to investigate abuses of church authority in a world that sees sexual exploitation as an ultimate evil. Is it surprising that mainstream media across Catholic Europe are now so predictably secularist and anticlerical? Often the scandals they expose show Catholic leaders responding to abuse cases no differently than their secular counterparts would have done in the same years, although it's the church's decisions that are painted in the most diabolical colors.

These same media operate increasingly in a European dimension, so that a story in one nation will be reported across the continent and will shape future investigations. When Ireland published its damning inquiry into church abuses last November, the story instantly made headlines across Europe, putting editors in other countries on notice about the likely presence of similar scandals in their own backyard. It was inevitable that these individual stories would flow together to create a general

continent-wide crisis. Stories of abuse by clergy are very likely to surface, to be believed and to spread.

Almost certainly the Catholic Church will continue to lose influence and members in Western Europe, and it may well suffer serious political defeats. But we should see the coverage of the abuse cases as by-products of a wider cultural revolution, rather than as the engine driving it.