

Complicit all around

by [Thomas Jay Oord](#) in the [February 17, 2016](#) issue



*Boston Globe* reporters Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams), Michael Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo), and Matt Carroll (Brian d'Arcy James) in *Spotlight*. Image via Open Road Films. © 2015. All rights reserved.

"If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one," says Mitch Garabedian (Stanley Tucci), the attorney representing victims of pedophile priests in *Spotlight*. The film is a fictionalized account of how the *Boston Globe's* investigative reporting team found widespread child molestation and cover-up in Boston's Catholic archdiocese. The team won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service as a result of its work.

But in this film there are few heroes.

The victims, most of them underprivileged boys, were sexually abused by respected local priests. When the priests' transgressions became known, their lawyers asked victims and their families to sign confidentiality agreements and offered only minimal financial compensation. The transactions were kept off the record, reducing

the chance of public outcry and full disclosure.

One might expect *Spotlight* to be fascinating because of the victims' stories, but it's the focus on the clerical and legal institutions that grabs the viewer. At first Garabedian is reluctant to participate in the investigation because his past efforts at whistle-blowing have gone unheeded. But his input becomes crucial for the *Globe's* reporting, reminding viewers that each victim's story must be heard and that justice must be pursued one case at a time. *Spotlight* explores how large institutions are implicated in crimes that are intimate and personal.

The movie identifies more than one guilty party. Complicity occurs in the higher echelons of the Roman Catholic Church—especially under Cardinal Bernard Law's leadership. But *Globe* editors admit their failure in not having seen the bigger picture sooner. And viewers will indict the legal system, which prevented victims from getting the help they needed.

Reporters Michael Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo) and Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams) ponder what their investigation means for their own relationship to the church. Both were raised in Roman Catholic communities but attend infrequently or not at all. Sacha decides that she can no longer attend mass with her grandmother. Michael says he will never go back.

An advocate for the victims tells reporters that what happened is “not just physical abuse; it's spiritual abuse.” The victims' view of right and wrong, their trust in authority, and their sense of the holy have been distorted. Many victims felt conflicted when priests asked them to engage in illicit sexual acts. As one victim asks, “How do you say no to God?” The cover-up orchestrated by the Roman Catholic institution prompted the families of victims to ask a similar question: “How do you say no to the church?”

At the end of the film, *Spotlight* lists U.S. cities and cities abroad where clergy sexual abuse scandals have occurred. It's a heavy-handed technique for a film to use, but it brings the message home.