

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 9, 2010 at 1:36pm

When does this end?

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

How long does this go on? When will this end? The "this," of course, being the, oh, so dispiriting saga, now generically called "the clergy sex abuse" story. We've been on this story since 1985 when we first published reports by freelance writer Jason Berry as he covered a trial in his native Louisiana of a priest, Fr. Gilbert Gauthe, accused of having molested several young boys. We began editorializing about it that year as we began to see the story's ubiquitous twin patterns of priest abuse and episcopal cover-up.

Eventually the story became an ecclesial story, one calling for honest answers but unfolding begrudgingly, primarily in U.S. courts. Sadly, answers, when they have come, have been few and always late. A quarter century later after our first sustained coverage, the story has reached our church's top administrative structures, going to the very credibility of Pope Benedict XVI and his handling of these matters, first as an archbishop in Munich, Germany, in the early 1980s, and then as head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith after 2001, the year the congregation took full responsibility for handling abuse cases.

So when does this end? Before it can end, an open, thorough and transparent accounting will have to come forth. This will require unprecedented actions and will have to somehow involve all the Catholic faithful. It might take some kind of independent, trusted clergy-lay commission. But learning "what," as difficult as that might be, without honest efforts to understand "why," will inevitably fall short. Meanwhile, it is woefully inadequate for anyone within our church to point elsewhere saying this is a widespread problem, one found in many institutions. No, this is unacceptable. Our institution must be held to higher standards. It is to reflect, even imperfectly, Christian values. Required will be a thorough examination of church structure and governance as well as teachings and attitudes toward human sexuality. Resisting this, as much as some might want, will only prolong the agony.

Meanwhile, some in the media have commended us, citing the tenacity of our coverage over the years. National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" April 2 did such a feature. Few outside our Kansas City, Mo.-based home office, however, will ever know how many times we wanted to walk away, how many times we wished we could have left the story, only to be drawn back into it by the heartbreaking personal trauma we discovered time and again in the lives of vulnerable people.

On a related note, we plan to post on Monday the second part of Jason Berry's investigation into the how Legion of Christ founder, the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, curried Vatican favor.

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