NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The financial scandal in the Catholic church

Richard McBrien | Sep. 27, 2011 Essays in Theology

It has been said that the next scandal to hit the Catholic church after the sexual-abuse crisis in the priesthood would be financial.

Jason Berry has turned now from the former to the latter in his *Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church* (Crown, $25).

The two problems are, of course, connected. The church in the United States alone has already paid out almost $2 billion to victims of clergy abuse, just as Dominican Fr. Thomas Doylehad predicted.

At least some of this amount was made larger because of the truculence of certain bishops, who stonewalled and moved predatory priests from place to place before the law and lawyers caught up with them.

Berry's book covers some old ground, for example, the activities of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ and a favorite of the late Pope John Paul II.

Berry and the late Gerald Renner, former religion writer for *The Hartford Courant*, had initially exposed Maciel's behavior in copyrighted articles in *The Courant* and then in a book, *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II* (Free Press, 2004).

But there is much more in this new book than a rehash of that subject and the various (now embarrassing) reactions to Berry's and Renner's exposé, including the protestations of such conservative Catholic luminaries as the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, founding editor of *First Things*, Harvard Law Professor Mary Ann Glendon, Pope John Paul II biographer George Weigel, William Bennett, former Secretary of Education under President Ronald Reagan, William Donahue, head of the Catholic League, former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, and, of course, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, former Vatican Secretary of State and current Dean of the College of Cardinals.

Jason Berry treats the sexual-abuse scandal in Boston, where the crisis first broke out for most people with an investigative series of articles in *The Boston Globe* beginning in January 2002, the Vatican itself, and the U.S. bishops relationship with the Holy See.

There is an epilogue on Pope Benedict XVI titled, "Benedict XVI: Pope of Ironies."

"The pope," he writes, "cannot be an authentic voice for peace, affirm the dignity of human life, and preach the values of a greener planet if people see that Vatican justice is a farce."

One big American church finance story has recently been back in the news: The Knights of Columbus has purchased the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center from the Archdiocese of Detroit for $22.7 million. That was a lot of money, to be sure, but it represented a $34 million loss for the archdiocese.

As I wrote in my column for the week of Sept. 5 [1], following the news story by Tom Roberts [2] in the Aug. 19 issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*, the archdiocese bore most of the original cost but also loaned the Center more than $54 million under an arrangement worked out privately by the former Archbishop of Detroit, Cardinal Adam Maida.

Within five years of its opening, the Center was $36 million in debt to the Archdiocese of Detroit because of the loans. The amount rose to more than $54 million today.

Unfortunately (and this makes Jason Berry's point), Cardinal Maida made the loans without any consultation with the priests and laity of the archdiocese. It was only after the *NCR* reported on the debt in a February 2006 story that Cardinal Maida acknowledged the financial scope of the loans in a letter to the archdiocese.

Although there is no reference to this misuse of funds in Jason Berry's new book, I am happy to recommend *Render Unto Rome* to readers of this column. Jason Berry is a good journalist and the issue he touches upon here is too important to ignore.

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