

## Sex abuse scandal in the Netherlands brings requiem for Dutch Catholicism

Mathew N. Schmalz | Dec. 22, 2011



Church of St. Nicholas in Amsterdam, Netherlands (Dreamstime)

### *Commentary*

Last Friday, Archbishop of Utrecht Wim Eijk [held a press conference to apologize for the abuse of tens of thousands of children in Catholics institutions in the Netherlands](#) [1]. The abuse was documented in a report that covered the year 1945 onward. Since the story is now a familiar one, the report has merited mention but little sustained attention.

But for some Catholics of my generation, the press conference was a coda, a requiem of sorts. Back in the '70s, Dutch Catholicism represented an open and engaged Catholicism. It embodied a vision of what Catholicism could become in the wake of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

For more than a decade after its publication in 1966, what was called the "Dutch Catechism" was considered necessary reading for earnest young Catholics trying to make sense of their faith and their intellectual commitments. I remember how accessible the text was, especially when compared with the traditional catechetical materials of my childhood days. I also remember how the Dutch Catechism inspired open and heartfelt discussions about the Bible and its historicity, Catholicism's relationship with other religions, as well as about the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life. It was a text that allowed believers, agnostics and atheists to sit together and honestly share their hopes, dreams and questions.

When my parents gave me the Dutch Catechism as a birthday present in the late 1970s, I had no idea the text had evoked such controversy. Some bishops in the United States had withdrawn their endorsement of it, the Vatican had called for revisions and clarifications, and a Dutch bishop had even said [his purported support of the text had been misconstrued](#) [2].

Dutch Catholicism always had a contentious and contrarian history. For example, Holland and the Diocese of Utrecht is the original home of the ["Old Catholic Church,"](#) [3] created by a complex series of historical events and doctrinal disagreements that came in the wake of the Reformation and extended through the 19th century. Old Catholics claim the title "Catholic" through "apostolic succession" but are not recognized by the Vatican.

But while a few Catholics in the Netherlands departed from allegiance to Rome, it was the hierarchy in full communion with Rome that seemed to represent the best that Catholicism stood for. When German forces in World War II overwhelmed the country, the Catholic hierarchy of the Netherlands took a firm and courageous stance. Bishop Johannes de Jong denied sacraments to members of the Nazi party. The hierarchy of the Netherlands also denounced the deportation of Jews in a letter read at all Masses -- an act that distinguished Dutch bishops from many other Catholic and Protestant leaders who often refused to even acknowledge the persecution of the Jews, yet alone oppose it in any coherent way.

This awareness of a world outside the ecclesiastic structures of Catholicism animated not only the Dutch Catechism, but also the work of bishops like [Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, who died in 2006](#) [4]. Willebrands was widely admired for his work in the service of ecumenical dialogue and for arguing that the laity should be more broadly included in church governance. He was one of the *papabile* -- potential popes -- that many liberal-minded Catholics favorably looked upon before the election that brought John Paul II to the papacy.

Even those who did not study the intricacies of Church politics, doctrine and leadership knew that Dutch Catholicism was different -- perhaps even special.

When the abuse scandal exploded in the United States, I expected something similar in other European countries like Ireland. But I never would have considered [the Netherlands to be a likely place for abuse to foster](#) [5]. I thought Dutch Catholicism was too self-consciously open for something like that to happen.

But abuse not only happened, it was aided and abetted by cover-up over a period of six decades.

Even in the most detailed reports concerning clerical sexual abuse, there is always some potential "out:" records were bad, the hierarchy was not informed or the number of perpetrators was relatively limited. In the Dutch case, it has been said that the rate of abuse was not higher in Catholic institutions and that, in any case, Catholic dioceses were "fragmented."

But Catholics don't view the Catholic church as just another institution. As far as the hierarchy goes, whether Catholic bishops were in Amsterdam, Utrecht or Rome, it is doubtful that "fragmentation" could explain how such an extended period of cover-up would have successfully kept them totally unawares.

I do not think there are any "outs" here.

Narratives about the sexual abuse scandal are usually spun in relation to the ideological commitments of the Catholics who are telling the story. Catholicism has been too conservative, some say; others say the church was too liberal for too long. The second view seems tailor-made for the story of sexual abuse in Dutch Catholic institutions.

I, for one, tend to see the sexual abuse narrative in terms of power -- a power that equally tempts conservatives and liberals. But there is nonetheless a mournful quality to the latest revelations about Dutch Catholicism: mourning for the victims who can never be compensated or receive justice for their sufferings. But to this I would also add that the revelations about clerical sexual abuse in Holland have also become a requiem, mourning the loss of dreams so favored by Catholics like me in the distant days of our youth.

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