



The cover-up of child sexual abuse by the Catholic church is not about sex and it is not about Catholicism. It is not, as Pope Benedict rightly argued in yesterday's distressingly bland pastoral letter, about priestly celibacy. It is about power.

The urge to prey on children is not confined to the supposedly celibate clergy and exists in all walks of life. We know that it can become systemic in state and voluntary, as well as in religious, institutions. We know that all kinds of organisations – from banks to political movements – can generate a culture of perverted loyalty in which otherwise decent people will collude in crimes "for the greater good".

In none of these respects is the Catholic church unique. What makes it different – and what gives this crisis its depth – is the church's power. It had the authority, indeed the majesty, to compel victims and their families to collude in their own abuse and to keep hideous crimes secret for decades.

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