

# America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

'America'  
Covers the  
Abuse Crisis



CURRENT ISSUE   ARCHIVES   SUBSCRIPTIONS   ADVERTISING   ABOUT US   CONTACT US   SUPPORT US   LOGIN/REGISTER

Text Size: [A](#) [A](#) | [Print](#) | [Email](#) | [Share](#)

## Pilgrim People, Part I

THE EDITORS | MAY 10, 2010

As a church we are a pilgrim people making our way together through history. Like Chaucer's companions on the road to Canterbury, we have a variety of tales to tell and not all are edifying. The latest waves of the crisis of clerical sexual abuse of minors have made Catholics keenly aware that even in high places we are a company of sinners as well as saints, of fallible human beings as well as faithful followers of Jesus—everyone in need of the forgiveness Jesus proclaimed. That forgiveness is one of the religious experiences that binds us to one another along our pilgrim way.

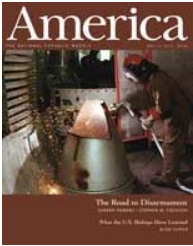


The rituals of confession and repentance remain among the most identifiable practices of Catholic life. Their centrality to the Catholic imagination has made the reluctance of the hierarchy to acknowledge successive revelations of molestation all the more painful for us all. The church's identity as a community of forgiven sinners makes particularly credible the demands by victims for public confession and open reconciliation. Even the church's most bitter critics have been unwitting witnesses to that Christian duty. That same Catholic sensibility made the recent encounter between Pope Benedict and the victims of abuse in Malta both necessary and affecting.

The church has known dark times: domination by emperors, co-optation by feudal militarism and modern colonialism, gangland struggles by Roman families for control of the papacy, coercion of heretics and wars of religion. Still, we members of the church make pilgrimage together in hope that the church may be the visible expression in history of humanity's new life in Christ. To us Jesus is the embodiment of fullest humanity and the model of its most appealing morality. Pope Benedict's planned visit on July 4 to the tomb of St. Celestine V, a hermit who was elected pope and then resigned the papacy, will hold up for view a penitent form of Christian life marked by meekness, prayer and self-sacrifice, close to the pattern of Jesus that Christians strive to imitate.

One reason Catholics love the church is that it fosters just that sort of holiness. Even as the secular world exposes the hypocrisy of church officials, it acknowledges implicitly that the followers of Christ hold themselves to a "higher law" and try to practice a more demanding love. Some believe that calling is humanly impossible; others, even if they allow the Gospel little direct claim on their own lives, are disappointed upon failing to find holiness where they always presumed it might be found in a moment of need. But Catholics love the church because here we have companions who do strain, in their stumbling ways, to lead their lives by the light of the Sermon on the Mount.

We love the church because here we keep the company of men and women who have lived the Gospel even as they challenged both secular and religious rulers to reform. Among them are figures like Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Thomas More, Ignatius Loyola, Mary McKillop, Mother Théodore Guérin, Dorothy Day, Franz Jägerstätter and Oscar Romero. Their witness to the Gospel brought them into conflict with the church authorities of their day. Yet attachment to the visible, hierarchical church was intrinsic to their own path to holiness. In an age that experiences mostly opportunistic, transitory relationships, the church fosters



CURRENT  
ISSUE  
Click  
To  
Download  
PDF  
GET  
ADOBE  
READER

SEARCH AMERICA

Enter  
Keywords:



[Advanced Search](#)

WEB-ONLY

[CNS News Briefs](#)

[Catholic Book  
Club](#)

[Editor's Picks](#)

[In These Pages](#)

[Abuse Crisis](#)

[Archive](#)

[Video](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Slideshows](#)

[Teacher](#)

[Resources](#)

PRINT

[Book Reviews](#)

[Culture](#)

[Of Many Things](#)

[John Kavanaugh](#)

[Maryann C. Love](#)

[Margaret Silf](#)

[John J. DiIulio  
Jr.](#)

[Thomas Massaro](#)

[Kyle T. Kramer](#)

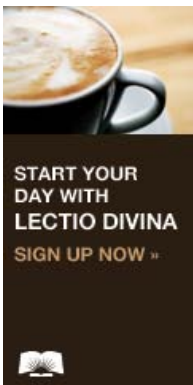
[The Word](#)

[Film](#)

NOTICES

[Retreats](#)

[Find a Job](#)



high ideals and lifelong commitments. In a culture deprived of depth and transcendence, it encourages searching self-examination, ever more inclusive sympathies and attentive receptivity to the mystery of God. Some of the pain of the present crisis comes from the apparent loss of those practices and sensitivities when they were most needed among those from whom they were most expected.

We love the church, too, because, as can be seen in local parishes everywhere, it embraces the full diversity of humanity: the affluent and the poor, the native-born and the undocumented, conservatives and liberals, the simple and the learned. We also love the church because in every age, but particularly since the Second Vatican Council, it is dedicated to the service of the poor and defense of their human rights. Even non-Catholics see in the unselfish service of the poor the palpable holiness of the church. Asked once how he went from being a promoter of the free market to an advocate of the world's poor, the economist Jeffrey Sachs answered, "The sisters—who, in so many places, took me to the back country to meet the very poor."

Chief among the inexhaustible reasons that lead us to love the church is the Eucharist. For when we gather around the table of the Lord, the whole body of Christ in which we partake is made real. We are united with the risen Lord for whom we live, and with one another, not only those around the table but also those around every altar in the world, along with those who have preceded us in faith and those who will follow us, one great communion prefiguring the unity of the one human family in God.

COMMENTS (18 COMMENTS)

- [Write a response to this article \(registration required\)](#)
- [Read responses to this article](#)

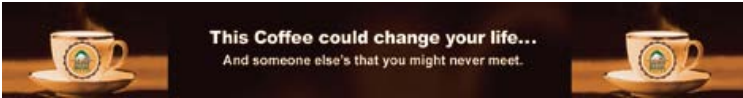
[View Classifieds](#)  
[Post a Job](#)  
[Post a Classified](#)



EMAIL UPDATES

Weekly Magazine  
Catholic Book Club

Enter  
Email:



© 2010 America Press Inc. All Rights reserved  
106 West 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10019 | (212) 581-4640  
[Accessible to the disabled](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [FAQ](#)