



## How much 'truth' is too much?

The details of the Catholic sex abuse scandal nearly destroyed my Christian faith. In a painful spiritual epiphany, I learned that the whole truth does not always deliver a greater good. Indeed, full transparency can harm society — and even, perhaps, our souls. But do we always have an alternative?

By Rod Dreher

When the influential Roman Catholic priest and public intellectual [Richard John Neuhaus](#) died a few weeks ago, Michael Sean Winters, a liberal Catholic writer, paid him a great compliment, recalling, "I remember the first time Father Neuhaus attacked me in print: I felt on top of the world."

That's one way to look at it. Father Neuhaus attacked me in print — charitably and reasonably, I hasten to say — in one of his final columns in *First Things*, the journal he founded and edited until his death. His final remarks continued an argument he and I had been having in occasional exchanges, both public and private, for years over the sex abuse scandal involving Catholic priests.

(*Sam Ward / USA TODAY*)

When the scandal broke in early 2002, I wrote a [cover story](#) for *National Review*, where I then worked, critical of the church hierarchy for its handling of abuse. I continued to write and report critically for the magazine and its website. Father Neuhaus thought my writing was out of line, and he said so in several heated phone calls.

As the years passed, I learned through my investigations the truth of a friendly but sobering warning that [Father Tom Doyle](#), the brave advocate for sex abuse victims, had given me at the outset of my work: that if I kept digging, I was going to go to darker places than I could imagine existed.

Father Doyle, alas, was right. The breadth and degree of the corruption within the Catholic hierarchy broke me spiritually. I lost the will to believe and became profoundly spiritually depressed. Leaving Catholicism for Eastern Orthodoxy was like an animal chewing off its own leg to get out of a trap. I don't regret my reporting, nor do I regret my decision to leave Catholicism for Orthodoxy, where God gave me a second chance.

### Better in the dark?

My mistake was to assume that I was strong enough emotionally to put analytical distance between myself and my subject. After I left Rome, I made a deliberate decision not to investigate scandal in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), my new communion. My family and I needed a church more than I needed to crusade against ecclesial iniquity.

I felt, and still do feel, deeply conflicted about this decision. Did Jesus not say, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free"? But the truth that I helped tell about what some in the Catholic hierarchy had done to children did not set me free; in fact, it nearly destroyed my Christian faith. And yet, I could not in good conscience have remained silent. As an Orthodox Christian chastened by experience, am I behaving prudently, or am I being cowardly?

In one of his final columns for *First Things*, Father Neuhaus praised me, faintly, for my decision. He wrote, "There are things (Catholics) really don't want to know about their church." The priest went on to defend his magazine's past refusal to run advertising for an unnamed abuse crisis book, in large part because "we thought there were some things people didn't need to know and didn't want to know, and for good reasons."

Are there things people don't need to know? I do not believe Father Neuhaus was a cynic; he really did believe that there were certain things that ought to be concealed from the public for the greater good. And though it might be heresy for a journalist to say, as a matter of general principle, I agree with him.

Very few of us are purists when it comes to transparency. A society in which all secrets were known would be monstrous. The problem in the Catholic case is that bishops abused their discretion not to shield the innocent, but to protect the guilty. It was only when the details of these sordid cases came to broad public light that the Catholic bishops were shamed into serious action.

Nevertheless, if you reject Father Neuhaus' larger point, then be prepared to welcome the child pornographer and the rogue atom bombmaker to the public square. The question is not whether some knowledge should be suppressed for the public good; it's where to draw the line between what must be public and what must stay private.

It's hard to make a case for the coverup of criminal immorality to save face for a church. Who can plausibly argue that the Catholic Church, or the public, would have been better off had those toxic secrets remained safely locked away, and the bishops been left alone by the courts and the news media to conduct business as usual?

But it's not such a clear-cut issue. The Victorian editor Walter Bagehot, speaking of the importance of veiling the British monarchy in mystery, famously said, "We must not let in daylight upon magic." If people see the monarch as human, the thinking goes, their respect for a necessary institution will fail. That, I think, is what Father Neuhaus was getting at in his column: People need the church too much to know the full truth about her.

That I have chosen not to look into scandals in my new church — which, God knows and so do I, has them — to protect my own faith would appear to vindicate the priest's view.

#### Limits of deception

I don't need to believe that my church is perfect. But I have learned that my personal response to stories of child abuse is so strong that it prevents me from seeing any other truth. As a Catholic, I kept telling myself that the evil of some priests and bishops does not obviate the church's teaching. But the deeper I immersed myself in details of the crimes and the stories of the victims, my grief and fury distorted and overwhelmed logic.

The fault was mine. But any institution — sacred or secular — that has to depend on deception, and the willingness of its people to be deceived, to maintain its legitimacy will not get away with it for long. These days, the attempt to withhold or suppress information doesn't work to protect authority, but rather to undermine it.

When then-Bishop [Jonah Paffhausen](#) of the troubled OCA stood before a church council in November and spoke plainly and humbly what nearly everyone knew to be true — that the past two church patriarchs had been corrupt — the faithful gathered there were so relieved that they helped elect him as the new patriarch. With a single speech, Jonah's humility and honesty restored to the weary church what years of lies by his predecessors had undone.

That story had a happy ending, but I will end on a melancholy point. Societies cannot survive without authoritative institutions. But which authoritative persons or institutions can withstand constant critical scrutiny? In our culture, we are predisposed to see damage done from failing to question authority. We are far less capable of grasping the destruction that can come from delegitimizing authority with corrosive suspicion. How much reality must we choose to ignore for the greater good of our own souls, and society?

I did not agree with the way Father Neuhaus answered that question when faced with the American Catholic Church's worst-ever crisis. But he was not wrong to ask it.

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