

Has the Holy See succumbed to the dictatorship of relativism?

No one will ever know if it does not publish reasons behind the inconsistency in punishments meted out to child abusers

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Pope Benedict XVI often [warned](#) about the “dictatorship of relativism” in Western secular society. He meant by this the [rejection](#) of any objective standard of good and evil, which is then determined by personal whims or particular cultures.

There is evidence that the Holy See may have succumbed to this dictatorship in its dealings with child sexual abuse.

During his pontificate, Pope Francis publicly claimed eight times that the Church practices “zero tolerance” of child sexual abuse by clergy. He also [claimed](#) that he was following the line established by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI.

Merriam-Webster defines zero tolerance as “a policy of giving the most severe punishment possible to every person who commits a crime.”

Zero tolerance in the context of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church seems to be one of those Humpty Dumpty terms that can mean whatever you want it to mean. It could mean that every allegation of child sexual abuse should be investigated (Canon 1717). It could [mean](#) no more than that the punishment must fit the crime. It could [mean](#) that those found guilty of it by a canonical court must be permanently removed from ministry while still remaining priests. It could also mean that they should be dismissed from the priesthood.

In an address in 2002, Pope John Paul II [said](#), “There is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young.”

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, in its 2017 Final Report, quoted these words when it [said](#) that the appropriate punishment for child sexual abuse was dismissal from the priesthood and expulsion from a religious institute. That is true zero tolerance.

The Holy See [responded](#) by saying that its canon law accepts the principles of sentencing in Western civil law: punishment, deterrence, proportionality, and rehabilitation.

The only statistics that the Holy See has [provided](#) in terms of punishments meted out to clergy who have sexually abused children are those produced to the United Nations Committee against Torture on Jan. 17, 2014.

The Holy See’s envoy submitted that between 2005 and 2014, 848 clerics had been dismissed, and disciplinary measures had been applied for the other 2,552 cases. He did not reveal what those disciplinary measures were.

Since 2002, canon law for the United States alone has had a form of zero tolerance. It [provides](#) that every priest found guilty of child sexual abuse will be permanently deprived of ministry. This is not the same as dismissal from the priesthood, as the priest would still be allowed to say Mass privately and would continue to be supported financially by the Church.

In 2024, the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM), set up to advise the popes on child sexual abuse issues, produced its [Universal Guidelines](#) for the protocols of Bishops’ Conferences on the issue. They state three times that zero tolerance, meaning “permanent removal from ministry,” was the appropriate punishment.

However, Clause 4.2.12 says that where an accused has been convicted by a canonical court of sexual abuse, the penalty will be that imposed by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF). It further goes on to say that the punishment “should include that the respondent is to be prohibited from the exercise of ministry.”

The DDF can dismiss a priest or remove him from ministry under Canon 1398 of the new Book of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, but it has no obligation to do so. The PCPM's Guidelines do not change canon law and do not impose such a condition on the DDF.

The PCPM's 2024 *Universal Guidelines* further state that zero-tolerance is to be applied "within the local cultural context," a suggestion that the punishment for child sexual abuse can depend on how particular cultures view it. This seems to reflect the current DDF practice of imposing less strict punishments in those cultures where child sexual abuse is more tolerated. That sounds like relativism.

In 2019, according to *Bishop Accountability*, Father Hilary Ngome in Cameroon continually raped a 13-year-old girl until she showed signs of pregnancy. His public ministry was restricted pending canonical proceedings.

On Aug. 15, 2022, Bishop Michael Miabesue Bibi, prelate of Buéa diocese, [wrote](#) to the faithful explaining that the DDF considered that Ngome's 14-month suspension was sufficient. He was restored to full ministry.

A 2023 UNICEF report [highlights](#) widespread sexual exploitation of children in Cameroon's mining areas. We don't know if the "cultural context" of child sexual exploitation in Cameroon influenced the decision to restore Ngome to ministry, because the DDF does not publish its reasons.

The case of Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo in Timor-Leste is another example. Belo was the joint recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for his role in the Timor-Leste independence struggle.

In 2022, a Dutch newspaper accused Belo of multiple sexual assaults on young boys in the 1980s. The Vatican discreetly moved him to Mozambique and then to Portugal and restricted his contact with minors. In a *Lateline* program on Australian ABC television, a Timor-Leste anthropologist [said](#): "A lot of people do not understand the issue of pedophilia [in Timor-Leste]. It's not like in the West, in Australia or in the UK, if you are a pedophile, it is, you know, really bad."

In contrast to Belo's punishment was the [dismissal](#) from the priesthood of an American missionary in Timor-Leste, Father Richard Daschbach, who admitted to multiple offenses against young girls. He was subsequently [given](#) a 12-year jail sentence by a Timor-Leste court.

Did the Holy See take into account the Timor-Leste "cultural context" in imposing a vastly different punishment on Belo, in contrast to the dismissal from the priesthood of the American priest?

The *Universal Guidelines* and the decisions in these cases seem to indicate that Pope Benedict's "dictatorship of relativism" has infiltrated the application of the Church's canon law. There may be perfectly good reasons why there appears to be such inconsistency in the punishments meted out to child sexual abusers, but no one will ever know while the Holy See does not publish its reasons for decisions.

The 2017 final report of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the 2021 French independent CIASE (Commission Indépendante sur les Abus Sexuels dans l'Eglise) report recommended such publication.

In 2020, Miriam Wijlens, a canon lawyer, and former member of the PCPM, and Neville Owen, a former Western Australian Supreme Court judge and a current member of the PCPM [wrote](#) in a canon law journal that everyone has the right to know that justice is administered fairly and that there is consistency in sentencing.

If sentences appear to be inconsistent, as in the examples above, the reasons for decision would explain that inconsistency. The advice of Wijlens and Owen, like that of the two commissions of inquiry mentioned, has not been adopted by the Holy See. The suspicion remains that the "dictatorship of relativism" has infected the Holy See's treatment of child sexual abuse, and the PCPM's *Universal Guidelines* seem to confirm that.

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