



Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church

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AN INVESTIGATION OF EPIC FINANCIAL INTRIGUE, RENDER UNTO ROME EXPOSES THE SECRECY AND DECEIT THAT RUN COUNTER TO THE VALUES OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

The Sunday collection in every Catholic church throughout the world is as familiar a part of the Mass as the homily and even Communion. There is no doubt that historically the Catholic Church has been one of the great engines of charity in history. But once a dollar is dropped in that basket, where does it go? How are weekly cash contributions that can amount to tens of thousands of dollars accounted for? Where does the money go when a diocese sells a church property for tens of millions of dollars? And what happens when hundreds of millions of dollars are turned over to officials at the highest ranks, no questions asked, for their discretionary use? The Roman Catholic Church is the largest organization in the world. The Vatican has never revealed its net worth, but the value of its works of art, great churches, property in Rome, and stocks held through its bank easily run into the tens of billions. Yet the Holy See as a sovereign state covers a mere 108 acres and has a small annual budget of about \$280 million.

No major book has examined the church's financial underpinnings and practices with such journalistic force. Today the church bears scrutiny by virtue of the vast amounts of money (nearly \$2 billion in the United States alone) paid out to victims of clergy abuse. Amid mounting diocesan bankruptcies, bishops have been selling off whole pieces of the infrastructure—churches, schools, commercial properties—while the nephew of one of the Vatican's most powerful cardinals engaged in a lucrative scheme to profiteer off the enormous downsizing of American church wealth.

Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church Details

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Frank says

Before reading this book, I thought it was going to be about the way money moves around the Catholic Church in general. Getting into the book, I realized that unfortunately the great majority of this focused on the priest abuse scandal. A lot has been said about this and it's no surprise that the church has spent lots of money on the scandal and the repercussions of it, such as closing of parishes. I feel like this topic has been reported many times and isn't all that secret.

The book contained some good information about the way money moves around the church and the secretive nature of how funds move. It also talks about how money can disappear from weekly collections in some churches. The structure and style of the book was poor. There is a lot of bouncing around on themes, places, people which makes it hard to follow at times (and frankly boring). To go along with the boring theme, the author provides biographical sketches of all sorts of people without giving much reason to care as in a few pages we've moved on to another topic. Overall, while there's some good information in it, there was a lot of other stuff to wade through to get to some interesting tidbits.

Loki says

A meticulously researched book that defeats itself by lurching back and forth between times and dates and people, often repeating explanations with minor variations. It's a worthy book but not a worthwhile one, a work whose better qualities are obscured by the frustrating easter egg hunt necessary to find them. Badly needed the services of an editor before it saw publication - unfortunately, all its good work is undone by how poorly that work is presented.

Duncan says

One of those "wish I hadn't bothered to read it " books. Straight to the charity shop.

Susan Olesen says

There is so much information here, I don't know what to say. It is a difficult read, partly because of the repetition of subject matter, year after year, time after time, location after location, and partly because of the author's circuitous, overly detailed narrative style, but the information is sound. I am not Catholic, but I truly feel sorry for anyone who is, because they are being betrayed by a system who sees them as nothing but peasantry, a cash cow for the 80% graft rate of a cash-based economy of the Vatican, and the money rolls up hill. The graft, acceptance, and entrenched disbelief that anyone would say a word against them is insane. It is a world of absolute unaccountability, no accounting at all. It is a deeply disturbing book, and one that people of ALL faiths should read.

Harry Allagree says

Upon finishing this book, I feel as though I ought to take a shower! As a former Roman Catholic priest, I had some idea that things in the Church were rarely as squeaky clean as they appeared to be or as they have been reported to be. Mirroring the state of the U.S. Congress, unfortunately, the leadership structure of the RC Church, it appears, has become so corrupt, greedy, untruthful, hypocritical, and actually destructive of the very purpose for which it exists that it will inevitably implode. I have no idea how the necessary massive systemic change could be implemented...or even if it's possible in the present circumstances. Something radical must, & inevitably will, change, hopefully for the better. Catholic leadership from the top echelons on down to the parish level is squandering the Church's immense power for good and justice in the world. It will be interesting to see how the process of choosing a new Pope unfolds, and what, if any, serious change comes in future years.

Jeff Gillenkirk says

I call this book "ALL THE POPE'S MEN" -- an inside account of the corruption, blindness and insensitivity of the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. Investigative writer Jason Berry takes us where few people have gone, inside the gilded halls of Vatican, and details the impact of the ongoing pederast priest scandal on the finances of the worldwide church. Told through the eyes of courageous activists trying to save parishes in Los Angeles, Cleveland, Boston and other U.S. locales, there are far more villains than good guys, a formula for a very emotional read.

Greg says

This story is not for the faint of heart (or faith). The games by the hierarchy of the Church are ugly, but for those who want reform this is a must-read. Some parts of the book get a little choppy with all the characters, but otherwise a good read.

Wanda says

This was OK. Just OK. I had higher expectations. First (and a petty point) it is no secret that there is a secret life of money in the CC. Others have written about this issue in the past. So the title is a misnomer. I am not sure that there was anything particularly revelatory about this book. I knew about the mess that Law left in Boston, although I did not know about the mess that his successor continued in Boston and then perpetuated in Cleaveland.

Incompetence is rewarded in the CC by promotion and absolute loyalty to the Vatican -- not to the laity. Second, for what should have been a fascinating exposee, this was actually quite boring. While Berry seems to have done a good job of researching and interviewing, he has several annoying and repetitive conventions involving taking tangents in the middle of a narrative to tell us where someone was born, to whom, where he or she went to school and their background. While this may make for good context, to do so over and over and over with relatively minor players just seemed like padding a 400 page book that could have been a 200 page book. Moreover the book did not explain the flow of money from parish accounts to the bishop's "corporation sole" onwards to various departments of the curia in Rome. Berry did, though, do a great job in

exposing the mess that is Peter's Pence and how Catholics contributions to what is supposed to be a fund for charitable work, winds up almost everywhere but to charity.

I was particularly disappointed at the chapter on Father Maciel, which should have been fascinating, but was so disjointed as to be incoherent. I will have to find another book that tells the sordid tale of the Legion of Christ.

Finally, the book was in serious need of good editing. Berry is a writer for goodness sakes, how can he write the following: "The cardinal who adored opera courted donors at small fund raisers by playing the piano."

Huh?? Did he adore opera courted donors, or did he adore opera? I know that we are in the age of Twitter, but there is a reason for punctuation. If Berry did not catch this, then his editors should have done so with this and other poorly written sentences.

Bottom line: Don't waste your time.

Martha says

Se imagina uno qué hay muchos secretos en esta vida intrigante del sacerdocio pero nunca tiene una idea hasta donde puede llegar, es increíble que haya tanta pudrición en el mundo. La investigación es muy completa y compleja, la encontré complicada de seguir, te lleva y te regresa en diferentes épocas, piensa uno que ya termino una secuencia cuando en otro capítulo regresa otra vez al tema ya terminado, un poco desesperante, pero una gran investigación y muchísimo trabajo!

Eric says

I suppose I should expect it to be dry and loaded with fact - after all it is a book that intends to document the handling of money in the church I was raised to attend.

And... I suppose that since so many of this documentary/history genre are so poorly written I should give Jason at least a 3 - OK, after this saves I will give him a three.

The problem with this book is the problem that Jason himself describes. There is a vast realm of activities under the umbrella of Rome that is not documented or concealed that Jason cannot report. This problem in and of itself makes it hard for Jason to pull the information together in a cohesive story.

While I am completely and utterly sympathetic with Jason's obvious abhorrence of sexual misconduct by priests and I easily match his clear disgust by the supposedly 'good' priests who fail to expose their fallen brethren, I find that Jason far too often delves so deep into sexual misconduct of priests that the very premise of the book is in question. Perhaps the book should be renamed... "Money and Sex in the Catholic Church".

Jason's writing style favours those with a memory for holding a lot of names, places and data in their head until the writer pulls them all together at the end of a passage. I prefer writers who tell me where they are going and then bridge that path to the destination.

To his great credit Jason has told the story somewhat through the eyes of a faithful catholic trying to make the Holy See bend to the needs and wants of the laity that supplies the money that they in turn misuse.

I found him authoritative and credible. His conclusions do not seem to exceed the data available.

Nadine says

Jason Berry has delved into the corruption of the R.C. church from the Pope down to the local parish priest. He blames the corruption on the unnatural life of celibacy which essentially denies priests an outlet for their sexual inclinations and tends to encourage a gay subculture and opportunities for molestation of the young. This situation resulted in the prosecution of many malefactors among the clergy since 1980 and the loss of millions in civil cases. Special attention is given to Pope John Paul's favorite Mexican born priest, Maciel, who was able to produce huge donations for the Pope and himself but who left behind a horrible heap of corruption. Whatever you thought when you picked the book up, you end up knowing it's worse than you ever thought possible. It helps to have a background in the Catholic religion to know the specifics but anyone can follow the story. It's clearly written although very complex.

Cathy says

Hard to keep track of the players

Interesting read. I'm not sure what I expected, but not so much about the abuse and more about finances. Still I learned a lot and want to know more about how things are proceeding under Pope Francis.

Charles says

How also the world might end.

Donna says

I know a lot about this topic and still it was hard for me to follow in this book. When you are dealing with such a huge topic as priest child abuse, litigation and settlements for the victims, and finding the money to pay those settlements, you need to find a strong narrative line. This book jumps across time periods and continents until often you cannot figure out who is promising what to whom. I THINK the major thesis of the book is the exposition of lousy (sometimes criminal) financial habits of the Catholic Church and her leaders--said exposition brought on by the need to raise money for the abuse settlements. But if I, who understood a lot of these things going in, could not always follow the story line, I pity those with less prior knowledge. This book needs an editor. As it stands, I can only recommend it to plaintiffs' attorneys who should know what they are getting into when filing cases against Holy Mother Church.

So my main gripe is with presentation. As to content, I think this book includes important information that all donating Catholics should gravely consider. I have no problem with demanding fiscal transparency from parish, diocese or Rome. Can we not retain a hierarchical church and at the same time respect the People of God and their need for good, holy priests and responsible, honest financial managers?

Maddi Hausmann says

An excellent reporting job of further problems within the Catholic Church. While fallout from the abuse scandals still continues, here Jason Berry (who has already written two books on the abuse scandals) follows the money. Or at least he tries to follow the money, because Mother Church is just as determined to keep how the money flows in or out private from their own members. The same problems that led to the sexual abuse of minors leads to fiscal abuse: discouraging questions, hiding problems rather than confronting them, and never, ever, ever admitting a mistake, especially if made by a higher-up such as a cardinal or bishop.

The only reason I don't give this penetrating study five stars instead of four was Berry's text tends to jump around a lot. Now, I can follow a complex story, but here I think he just needed a stronger editor. He had so much powerful material and didn't settle on how he was going to construct each narrative to get the facts out. Hence he keeps coming back to the same incidents within the same chapter, or another chapter, as if he had never discussed it before, even though I knew I had read it. I assume this is again due to rewrites that needed a good continuity check. Other than that one complaint I found the stories harrowing, the people he introduces us to intriguing, or admirable, or frightening, and the issues disturbing.

How the Catholic Church can continue on its present path is a mystery. The people in the pews we meet who want to save their parishes clearly value what the Church is to them. There's such a disconnect between these committed members who maintain vigils to stop the diocese from selling their church (to pay for the abuse scandal settlements, or past debt never disclosed), and the hierarchy who considers any criticism of their evil actions an attack on the Church. I finished the book wondering if Berry is nailing his theses to the cathedral door, and when the next schism will occur. Given these fundamental problems and the leadership's intransigence, it's "when" not "if."
