

# Author Probes Dark Side of Catholic Church (AP)

Posted Wednesday, November 24, 2004, 2:00 pm

By *CAIN BURDEAU*, Associated Press Writer

NEW ORLEANS - The stories, and faces, of molested altar boys and abused seminarians seem to dart and flicker like lightning bugs on a summer's night on the broad face of Jason Berry — the reluctant muckraker who took on the Vatican ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) and his own faith.

It all started 20 years ago when Berry, a freelance journalist, became one of the first writers to yank the cloak off one of the Roman Catholic Church's darkest secrets: That there were pedophiles in the ranks of priests.

But despite the awards, TV appearances, talks at universities, praise and accolades heaped on his work, Berry is a victim of his success, of his journalistic scoops.

"I would have been just as happy never to have written a word about the Catholic church," he said in a recent interview at his New Orleans home, a tidy place filled with African and New Orleans art work and books.

"And I think in some ways I might have been — I don't want to say happier, but maybe an easier person," he added, thoughtfully.

He calls himself "a reluctant muckraker." Investigative journalism was not his first choice. "I am much more interested in the life of the mind," he said. And culture is his passion. He's written extensively on jazz and jazz funerals, the blues, Louisiana writers, the civil rights movement, Mardi Gras Indians and on New Orleans' spiritual life. He writes book reviews and essays on a regular basis.

Also to his name is a drama, "Earl Long in Purgatory," about the maverick and erratic former Louisiana governor. And if that were not enough, Berry is turning his attention to making documentaries.

But Berry cannot escape the faces of abused altar boys and seminarians, and the minds of sexual predators.

It began 20 years ago, when he was 35, a time before the doubt and stories of abuse, a time when Berry was an unquestioning Catholic. An unusual story bubbled up in the backwaters of Cajun country. A village pastor, Father Gilbert Gauthe, was accused of molesting a string of boys at his rectory and on overnight trips to the quiet Louisiana marsh.

Berry got on the phone and thought he had a killer story. But his proposals got turned down by such news outlets as The New York Times Magazine, The Washington Post, The Nation, Mother Jones and even the local newspaper, The Daily Advertiser of Lafayette.

Finally, he turned to the editor at The Times of Acadiana, a small Lafayette weekly, who ran his stories.

"Once I stumbled on this material in the '80s, in the beginning I was, I suppose, morbidly curious, but as I began to see the outlines of a truly vast cover-up, I kept wanting to understand it, I wanted to understand why it happened," Berry said.

The same impulse for truth led Berry, as a boy, to ask his father about the shoe box full of photographs of cadavers he'd stumbled across stored away at his home. His father told him about Dachau and the extermination of Jews in World War II. He told his son about his war

experiences as one of the first Americans to step into that concentration camp.

And Berry's desire to understand Gauthe took him deep into a maze of lies and secrets.

"I've had priests and nuns who've called me for years; survivors, attorneys, other journalists," he said. "Maybe that's why I listen to so much music, to not think about the secrets."

After first hearing about Gauthe, Berry spent eight years studying pedophilia, church and court documents and conducting countless interviews. Finally, in 1992, he finished his work about the "Catholic Church's sexual Watergate."

The book, "Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children," broke new ground, estimating that between 1984 and 1992 about 400 priests in North America were accused of molesting children. Today, studies estimate that since 1950 about 4 percent of American clerics — 4,392 of them — have been accused of abuse. And only 2 percent of abusers went to prison, according to a recent church report.

"'Lead Us Not Into Temptation' was the first hole in the dike, so to speak," said David Clohessy, who runs the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"It showed that the problem was wide and deeper than a few bad apple priests. For those who read it, it was a myth-shattering, sobering revelation."

Berry did not approach his subject matter as a detached reporter. As a Catholic himself, the story had personal meaning.

"He would get very passionate about it. We had a lot of discussions about it," recalled Anthony Fontana, a lawyer who represented many of the children abused by Gauthe, who in 1985, pleaded guilty to molestation charges involving 11 boys. (In 1998, the Diocese of Lafayette disclosed that it paid at least \$18 million to families of children molested by Gauthe.)

"Jason was really important for all of us involved in these cases in the early stages. He had the same anger we had. He was able to communicate that to the public, and we got a much faster educational process. The public finally understood that these children were not telling lies, but that something very, very wrong was happening here."

"For nearly a year I had journeyed through the dark channels of an institution whose decay became more appalling as I plunged deeper into the story," Berry wrote in his book. "What did it mean to be a loving critic of the church?"

In an essay entitled "Morals of a Muckraker," Berry unearthed a "shadow-church that most Catholics rarely encounter, an ecclesiastical culture honeycombed with sexual secrecy, dripping lies and more lies."

Because of his discovery, his "faith went into a free-fall" and he turned to French novelist, agnostic and political philosopher Albert Camus' notions of "resisting evil, in search for an ethos of personal responsibility," he wrote in that essay.

At 55 and four books later, Berry has become one of the strongest voices advocating change in the church. This year, Berry and Gerald Renner, a former reporter with The Hartford Courant, published a book that goes after Pope John Paul ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) II.

They accuse the pope of ignoring the alleged sexual abuse of seminarians by Father Marcial Maciel, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, a growing ultra-traditional religious order. The

charges have been denied.

Maciel, whose two uncles were Mexican bishops, has long been in the "good graces" of the pope despite a series of allegations of systematically raping seminarians and abusing drugs, the authors claim in "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II." The book is based on victims' stories.

The book takes aim at the pope and church leaders for shuffling abusive priests from one diocese to another, for stonewalling and paying settlements to keep victims hushed.

"I just keep thinking about the facade of dignity that bishops convey and what is behind that facade are these contorted rationalizations about lying to cover up sexual behavior," he said.

"The problem in the church is structural mendacity, institutionalized lying.

"I mean, you preach the sanctity of life in the womb and play musical chairs with men who molest children — that is a staggering double standard."

Berry and other critics contend that the church's crisis, in part, stems from its unwillingness to let priests marry and women enter the priesthood. He also traces an increase in homosexuals within the clergy and its ramifications.

William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, one of Berry's most frequent critics, acknowledges Berry as a pioneer in his reportage, but takes issue with his conclusions and picture of the church as a dark, conspiratorial institution.

"He constantly talks about the pedophilia problem in the Catholic church, but the problem is a homosexual problem," Donohue said. "It's a homosexual problem that Jason doesn't want to talk about because it would make him appear anti-homosexual."

"There is a part of me that grieves for what I've learned, for the suffering," he said. "This is not a pleasant time to be a member of the church, and I think that's one reason why I insist on remaining one."