

Meet Jeff Anderson

(A chapter from the book *Double Standard: Abuse Scandals and the Attack on the Catholic Church* by David F. Pierre, Jr. (2010))

“We got a new law passed in California that opens up the statute of limitations for all victims of sexual abuse. It’s something we’ve been trying to do in several states for years. And I’m not waiting for it to click in. I’m suing the sh** out of [the Catholic Church] everywhere: in Sacramento, in Santa Clara, in Santa Rosa, in San Francisco, in Oakland, in L.A., and everyplace else.”

- Attorney Jeff Anderson, April 2003 interview¹

Meet Minneapolis attorney Jeff Anderson.

No single individual has gone after the Catholic Church more than Anderson has. It’s estimated that he’s earned hundreds of millions of dollars suing the Catholic Church.²

How has Anderson prevailed?

In an April 2010 newspaper profile, attorney Jeff Anderson told the *Washington Post*, “I believe Christ was a student of Buddha.”³

What at first blush appears to be an innocuous remark actually tells a lot about Jeff Anderson. He never lets the facts get in the way of what he wants to believe. (There’s not even the slightest shred of evidence, for example, that Jesus was a “student of Buddha.”)

For years, Anderson has been screaming of an “international criminal conspiracy”⁴ by the Vatican to cover up the sex abuse of children. Yet, like with his remark about Jesus and Buddha, there’s never been any support for the claim.

Sadly, many in the media have uncritically eaten up the wild claims by Anderson.

Even the liberal Minneapolis weekly *City Pages* has likened Anderson to a “wisecracking ambulance chaser with a reputation for hunting priests and an advanced degree in self-promotion.”⁵

An early case for Anderson as a lawyer was defending gay activists after police raids of bathhouses. He also defended a homeless man for indecent exposure in a church basement.

In looking back on his early lawsuits against the Church, Anderson’s wife confides, “[I]t was more about the flash and the appearance of it all. He liked to play the part of the scrappy little lawyer, a down-and-dirty sort of asshole. He was an actor on a stage. And he was very good at commanding an audience.”⁶

Anderson’s *modus operandi* is easy to identify: Get out in front of a lot of cameras and make a lot of noise. Say whatever it takes. The facts don’t matter.

And there’s little doubt that newspaper journalists love Jeff Anderson. “He’s everything you want an attorney to be if you’re a reporter,” Matt Carroll, a columnist for the *Boston Globe*, has said. “He has lots of information, he returns

your phone calls, and he has good quotes ... [A]nytime I need big-picture type comments, I give him a call.”⁷

Intimidation also appears to be part of Anderson’s repertoire. Upon filing a lawsuit, Anderson has been known to place a bullying phone call to the accused priest. “They usually don’t answer,” Anderson has said. “But if they don’t, they’ll see it on their caller ID, or get my message. And they’ll know I am on to them.”⁸ One wonders what the Minnesota Office of Lawyers Responsibility Board would say about such a tawdry tactic.

“Innocent until proven guilty” is not a belief that Anderson appears to subscribe to. Joe Maher, president of Opus Bono Sacerdotii, told Minneapolis’ *City Pages* weekly newspaper, “Civil attorneys like Jeff Anderson have a responsibility to look at each individual and make a determination, an authentic determination – to find out whether or not an accusation has merit before they file a suit. And it’s already impossible to do that. They meet with someone for a few minutes, lump allegations together, throw lawsuits at the wall, and see what sticks. In the meantime, men’s lives are being ruined. They don’t care. And if they say they know that everyone they have targeted is guilty, they’re lying to you or to themselves.”⁹

“When attorneys go to the media with this stuff now, everyone they sue is guilty until proven innocent, and that’s neither just nor fair,” said Maher.¹⁰

In June 2007, a priest who says he was falsely accused by a client of Anderson filed a defamation lawsuit against his accuser. An angry Anderson placed a call to Cardinal Francis George and pressed him to get the lawsuit dropped. When the Cardinal refused, Anderson huffed and cooked up his next maneuver. “I want a lawsuit filed Wednesday,” ordered Anderson, “and I want to name Cardinal George personally for his failure to protect these victims.”¹¹ In this case, a simple refusal of his demand was worthy of a fresh, new lawsuit against the Church.

In an interview setting, Anderson is especially frustrating and problematic. When espousing on “canon law” or “Church teaching,” Anderson’s sober demeanor and tone lead people to believe that he is being truthful and actually knowledgeable of what he’s talking about. Usually the interviewer is completely unschooled in Catholic teaching, and the journalist just takes what Anderson says at face value. But the bottom line is that all too often Anderson either flat-out lies to his interviewer or is completely erroneous.

Here is an example of a typical Anderson interview. In April of 2010, Anderson appeared on the left-wing political program *Democracy Now*, hosted by socialist Amy Goodman. When addressing the issue of how the Church handles abusive priests, Anderson said the following:

... [Priests] are required to by their superiors, from the bishop to the Vatican, to keep [abuse] secret. And that’s under protocols and laws developed by the Pontiff, by the Vatican that says “We are required to avoid scandal, to protect the reputation of the church” and in so doing, are embedded with an ethos, a norm that says, we move the priest, avoid scandal, do not report it to anybody outside the clerical culture, and continue to move and protect the priest without regard to the well-being of the children ... [N]othing has really fundamentally changed in the clerical culture. And

that the decision of the Pontiff and at the Vatican, they're fundamentally still operating under the same protocols of secrecy and self-protection that they did 100 years ago.¹²

It cannot be overstated how false Anderson's words are. His claims could not be further from the truth. If Anderson were making his assertions in the year 1960, he might actually have a leg to stand on. But, again, he said this in April of 2010.

The fact is that is the well-established policy in the United States for Church officials to immediately report credible child abuse accusations to civil authorities. Anderson should already know this.

Here is Article Four of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Based on principles and policies from years earlier, the charter was originally written and approved in June of 2002.

ARTICLE 4. Dioceses/eparchies are to report an allegation of sexual abuse of a person who is a minor to the public authorities. Dioceses/ eparchies are to comply with all applicable civil laws with respect to the reporting of allegations of sexual abuse of minors to civil authorities and cooperate in their investigation in accord with the law of the jurisdiction in question.

Dioceses/eparchies are to cooperate with public authorities about reporting cases even when the person is no longer a minor.¹³

Then there's Article Five:

ARTICLE 5. We affirm the words of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, in his Address to the Cardinals of the United States and Conference Officers: "There is no place in the priesthood or religious life for those who would harm the young."

Sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric is a crime in the universal law of the Church (CIC, c. 1395 §2; CCEO, c. 1453 §1). Because of the seriousness of this matter, jurisdiction has been reserved to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (*Motu proprio Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*, AAS 93, 2001).

Sexual abuse of a minor is also a crime in all civil jurisdictions in the United States. Diocesan/eparchial policy is to provide that for even a single act of sexual abuse of a minor —whenever it occurred—which is admitted or established after an appropriate process in accord with canon law, the offending priest or deacon is to be permanently removed from ministry and, if warranted, dismissed from the clerical state.¹⁴

In other words, the policies of United States bishops are the exact opposite of what Anderson claims they are. The *Charter* outlines policy for *all* of the Catholic Church in the United States.

There's no other reasonable conclusion to reach except that Anderson flat-out lied in the interview. The 2002 charter was a well-publicized and transformative measure by the Church to combat child sexual abuse and address the problem of

abusive priests. Many heralded its “zero tolerance” policy to child abuse. Anderson surely heard about all of this.

Conclusion: Honesty is not a quality to find in Jeff Anderson.

(By the way, many of the measures of the 2002 *Charter* were already in practice a decade earlier. In 1992, U.S. bishops publicly endorsed its “five principles” in responding to abuse claims. These principles were articulated five years earlier, in 1987. They included immediately removing an accused priest from ministry and complying with civil laws in promptly reporting abuse to authorities.¹⁵)

In addition, it appears that Anderson’s thirst for “flash and appearance” often pushes aside principles. For example, Anderson proudly trumpets himself as a member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). That anyone who claims to fight for the welfare of children and against child abuse would stand with the ACLU is troubling. The ACLU has adamantly fought efforts to shield children from pornography in public libraries. Its members have argued that distribution and possession of child pornography should not be a crime.¹⁶ Members have also argued against record-keeping requirements for porn film makers to make sure all actors are of legal age.¹⁷

The ACLU has also defended an awful organization called the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). NAMBLA has advocated, among other things, the removal of age of consent laws, and they have argued that children have every right to consent to sex with whomever they want.¹⁸

Anderson champions himself as a “crusader” for children, but he aligns himself with an organization that’s anything but that. Why?

In discussing his practice of suing the Church, Anderson is also yet another litigator who has aired the common line, “It’s not about the money.” Yet his own words and actions suggest otherwise. Anderson has openly admitted that at the start of his career as a public defender, “People would walk into my office and say, ‘I have a problem.’ I’d say, ‘How much money do you have?’”¹⁹

In January of 2010 Anderson launched what he calls his “Child Porn Initiative.” In a press conference to announce the enterprise, Anderson announced that he would be “going after” those who indulge in child pornography. It is a very noble effort, indeed. But how would Anderson do this? By using some of his hundreds of millions of dollars he’s gathered to support the many organizations that successfully combat these awful Internet crimes? By setting up a fund to help needy children who have been so horribly victimized by child pornography?

No. It appears that only the lure of money attracted Anderson to the cause. In announcing the launch of his new pursuit, Anderson said he had “recently learned” of a federal law passed *four years earlier* which allows those depicted in child pornography to sue those who possess or trade their unlawful images. The minimal claim, according to “Masha’s Law,” would be \$150,000 per violation.²⁰ With the 25% to 40% contingency fee that Anderson is estimated to collect, that’s a

minimum of \$37,500 to \$60,000 per violation in his pocket. So it seems that only when Anderson saw an opportunity to profit off the repulsive crime of child pornography did he take a serious interest in pursuing it.

“It’s not about the money”? Judging from Anderson’s own behavior, that seems hard to believe.

NOTES

¹ David Schimke, “True Believer: Paul Attorney Jeff Anderson has already made millions ‘suing the shit’ out of the Catholic Church. Now all he wants is another reformation and a little credit for time served,” *City Pages* (MN), April 16, 2003.

² It has been widely reported that in 2002 Anderson conceded that he had made \$60 million suing the Church. That was before several large, high-profile settlements, including the \$720 million in settlements paid out in Los Angeles in 2006 and 2007.

³ Peter Slevin, “Jeff Anderson, jousting with the Vatican from a small law office in St. Paul,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2010.

⁴ For example: John Brewer, “St. Paul attorney ignites latest priest abuse furor,” *Pioneer Press* (MN), March 25, 2010.

⁵ Schimke.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Kevin Harter, “Jeff Anderson, Man on a Mission,” *Pioneer Press* (MN), January 28, 2007.

⁹ Schimke.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Terry Carter, “Collaring the Clergy: Jeffrey Anderson Goes Global with His Pursuit of Pedophiles,” *ABA Journal* (MN), June 18, 2007.

¹² Segment from *Democracy Now*, “Attorney Uncovers Docs Implicating Vatican in Sexual Abuse Cover-Up,” April 29, 2010. Audio/video available at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/29/attorney_uncovers_docs_implicating_vatican_in

¹³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People: Essential Norms: Statement of Episcopal Commitment,” Revised June 2005.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Address of Dr. Monica Applewhite to the Irish Bishops, March 10, 2009,” The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church (Ireland). Also, Susan Hines-Brigger, “Clergy Sex Abuse: Bishop Joseph Galante Responds,” *St. Anthony Messenger*, June 2003.

¹⁶ Maggie Mulvihill, "ACLU: New child-porn law won't pass court challenge," *Boston Herald*, December 9, 1997. See also: "ACLU Policy to Legalize Child Porn Distribution," *Stop the ACLU* (web site), <http://www.stoptheaclu.com/2005/07/17/aclu-policy-to-legalize-child-porn-distribution/> ACLU

¹⁷ "ACLU Policy to Legalize Child Porn Distribution," *Stop the ACLU* (web site), <http://www.stoptheaclu.com/2005/07/17/aclu-policy-to-legalize-child-porn-distribution/> ACLU Downloaded April 2010.

¹⁸ "ACLU and Nambla: A Match Made in Hell," *Stop the ACLU* (web site), <http://www.stoptheaclu.com/2005/06/17/aclu-and-nambla-a-match-made-in-hell/> Downloaded April 2010.

¹⁹ Schimke.

²⁰ "Child Pornography Initiative – Masha's Law," www.andersonadvocates.com/ViewFile.aspx?ID=472 (Anderson's web site). Viewed February 2010.