

# nacla

REPORTING on the AMERICAS SINCE 1967

Published on NACLA (<https://nacla.org>)

[Home](#) > A Tale of Two Popes

## A Tale of Two Popes [1]

Pope Francis is beloved around the world as a progressive social reformer for the Catholic Church. Yet he has vociferously denied demands to fire a Chilean bishop who protected a serial sexual abuser in the 1980s.

Tweet [2]

Nancy Scheper-Hughes



Pope Francis in 2014 (Flickr/Church of England and Wales)

“The day they bring me proof against Bishop Barros, I’ll speak. There is not one shred of proof against him. It’s all slander. Is that clear?” So said Pope Francis [3] to a Chilean reporter in Santiago, on the last day of his visit to Chile in January 2018. He was responding to the victims of child sexual abuse by the Chilean Friar Fernando Karadima, something his protégé, newly-instated Bishop Juan Barros Madrid, had helped cover up in the 1980s. The Vatican has condemned Karadima to a lifetime of penance and prayer for his crimes, but he was never convicted in a court of law due to the statute of limitations nor was he defrocked as a priest.

Bishop Barros’ alleged role as protector of Father Karadima during and after his serial child sexual abuses during the 1980s is well documented. To this day, Barros denies Karadima’s child sexual abuse crimes that were confirmed in 2011 by a special Vatican committee of canon law specialists. Juan Carlos Cruz [4], one of Karadima’s victims, sent a letter to the Pope via Cardinal Seán O’Malley in April 2015. He wrote that “Barros was in the room when [Fr. Fernando] Karadima touched the genitals and put his tongue in the mouth of me and other victims.” Pope Francis installed Barros as Bishop of Osorno, Chile in January 2015, despite fierce opposition by thousands of protesters who interrupted his confirmation ceremony.

A gasp went round the Catholic world when Pope Francis derided Barros’ accusers as “slanderers.” It’s important to note that the actual term Francis used, however, was *calumny*, from the Latin, *calumnia*, meaning trickery, subterfuge, or misrepresentation. Calumny is considered a great sin against social justice, a value that is particularly dear to the Pope. This is a much stronger term than the more familiar Church term “false witness,” which refers to the attribution of evil faults to an innocent individual through gossip, rash judgment, lying, or the violation of secrets that may be true. Many Catholics were stunned by these words coming from a Pope, who is beloved around the world as a reformer and a powerful advocate of peace making, protecting refugees, and promoting social and environmental justice. The Vatican under Pope Francis has confirmed climate warming as a scientific fact [5] despite fierce arguments by climate deniers at Pontifical Institute conferences convened on the topic.

While the Pope is a progressive in so many ways, he is obviously torn between his pastoral and his administrative roles. These contradictions allow his followers to project *their* beliefs onto the Pope’s often ambiguous pronouncements. For example, when Pope Francis famously said, with respect to Catholic Church’s views of homosexual relations among priests, “Who am I to judge?” there was a sigh of relief in leftist cosmopolitan circles. But the Pope was not so much embracing or even accepting homosexuality as he was defending the rights of priests who were accused of homosexual relations, not implicitly accepting homosexuality. The Pope’s political missteps in Chile reinforced some of these contradictions.

Pope Francis has also stumbled over the question of treating women and children as spiritual equals to men. In a 2017 meeting [6] with members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, several of whom are prominent defenders of the pro-life and anti-abortion movement such as Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus and Cardinal Willem Eijk, Archbishop of Utrecht, Pope Francis criticized [7] “so called ‘gender theory’ as “a recently introduced hypothesis” that neutralizes the “sexual differences between men and women that is simply not fair!” The Pope’s definition of “women’s equality” is based on a theory of sexual complementarity similar to the Jim Crow theory of race differences: separate but equal. He told the Academy for Life members that “The biologic and psychological manipulation of sexual difference, which biomedical technology allows one to see as open to free choice—which it is not!—is thus likely to

dismantle the source of energy that nourishes the alliance of man and woman and makes it creative and faithful.”

Similarly, Pope Francis has not adequately responded to the victims of clerical sexual abuse and cover-ups by their Bishops. Even Cardinal O'Malley <sup>[8]</sup> said that he could not fathom why Francis “chose the particular words he used” in Chile. “What I *do* know,” he said <sup>[9]</sup>, “is that Pope Francis fully recognizes the egregious failures of the Church and its clergy who abused children and the devastating impact those crimes have had on survivors and their loved ones.”

## The Pope's Apology

The Pope, then, is caught between two worlds—that of the “lefties,” as Francis described the Chilean women who were “slandering” Bishop Barros, and the Vatican “conservatives,” who seem to have a stronger impact on Francis than what progressive Catholics may have thought. Rather than continuing his path of “conversion” toward openness to the social realities of the world and the planet, the Pope’s comments aligned more closely with the closed and secretive fraternity of the Vatican. This ambivalent pastoral dexterity comes into fuller clarity by considering his actions around the Barros case.

In mid-April 2015 two conventions took place simultaneously in the Vatican: a Pontifical Academy plenary session called “Human Trafficking: Issues Beyond Criminalization” initiated by Pope Francis, and a smaller and more private conference of the Vatican Commission for the Protection of Minors led by Cardinal Seán O’Malley of Boston. Pope Francis had chosen O’Malley to lead the Vatican Commission dedicated to eradicating clerical sexual abuse and exploitation and those Church leaders who overlooked or protected it. That April, its members had come to Rome to present a letter to the Cardinal by a Chilean man named Juan Carlos Cruz. The letter described grotesque sexual abuse and rape at the hands of Father Fernando Karadima for years in the 1980s in detail. He also accused the priest’s protégé, Juan Bastro Madrid, of protecting and even participating in the abuses. At the time, Cruz and his peers were pious followers of the charismatic priest who sexually exploited and betrayed them. Cruz had tried for years to get the attention of the Vatican and of Pope Francis, and was told the best way was through the Vatican Commission.

In his letter, Cruz described the sense of shame and betrayal had brought him to the edge of suicide decades after the sexual and psychological assaults on his body that destroyed his basic trust in the Church as an institution. He wrote: “Holy Father, I write you this letter because I’m tired of fighting, of crying and suffering...Our story is well known and there’s no need to repeat it, except to tell you of the horror of having lived this abuse and how I wanted to kill myself.” Cardinal O’Malley delivered the letter to Pope Francis.

During the same week in April 2015 a Pontifical Academy plenary session on human trafficking and slavery took place, to which I was invited as a participant. I was specifically asked to present my research on the harms of global organ trafficking amidst twenty-two other scholars who were experts in labor and sex trafficking.

When I received the invitation, I thought it was a mistake. Following the unexpected election of Pope Francis in 2013 I published an article in *CounterPunch* called, “Can God Forgive Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” where I reviewed the well-documented history of Bergoglio’s timid, and at

times even conciliatory relationship with, the Argentine Dirty War generals when he was a young and conservative Jesuit Provincial. I was particularly concerned that he had failed to protect liberation theologian women catechists and missionary nuns from kidnapping and death under the Argentina terror. Nonetheless, I arrived in the Vatican on April 15th for the trafficking plenary.

I was the first to arrive, and went downstairs to the dining room for the midday meal. I was out of place among a sea of men, some in flowing black, white, and brown robes. I tried to make myself invisible, concentrating on the meal. When I looked up I saw Pope Francis himself in a corner table for two, chatting intensely with Boston's Cardinal O'Malley. Perhaps they were discussing Juan Carlos Cruz's letter, which O'Malley had hand-delivered to the Pope.

Yet three years later, Pope Francis denied knowing anything about the Cruz case.

The Cruz letter was one of dozens of filed accusations against Karadima and his protégé Ferdinand Barros that reached the Pope in January 2018 when he faced the wall of protest against his ordination of Barros in the Osorno Cathedral in Chile. So why did the reviled Bishop Barros insist on appearing next to Pope Francis throughout his visit to Chile? Wherever Francis went during his visit, Barros was nearby. At the end of the trip he gave the Bishop an especially warm hug despite loud pleas of the demonstrators. Why would the Bishop put Francis in such an awkward political situation? And why did Pope Francis react so strongly to the allegations? He might have been jetlagged, forgetful, or fed up with those who would not let up on the topic of clerical sexual abuse. Or perhaps the pope was naïve and thought that Barros would repent upon seeing the Pope shamed and ridiculed for his association and bad faith in Barros's innocence. Or perhaps the Bishop's situation reminded Francis of his own experience of being shunned by his Society of Jesuits following the end of the Argentine Dirty War when he was sent to Germany and then to Córdoba, Argentina to reflect in a kind of solitary confinement on his failings before he was called to be the vigorous archbishop of Buenos Aires.

Whatever the explanation for his strange behavior, Pope Francis was caught by surprise when the negative reaction to his support of Barros in Chile went viral. He began to reassess the situation and by the time he arrived in Peru, Pope Francis made several apologies about the event. He became once again the extraordinary pastoral Pope, focusing on the pain he had afflicted to the victims and their supporters whom he had dismissed as slanderers. Although Pope Francis has made small blunders and quickly corrected them in the past, this one was going to stick, as it occurred at a time when sexual abuse and assault is on the mind of women and the media worldwide.

Francis apologized, saying that his demand for "proof" and "evidence" of child sexual abuse claims was wrong. For a moment he had become an advocate for the rights of the accused clerics rather than a moral leader. He spoke as if he were talking to himself, as if confessing his own sins: "I must apologize for what the abused feel. The word 'proof' has hurt many of them. They say: Do I have to go look for a certification? I apologize to them if I hurt them without realizing it, I didn't mean to. And it causes me so much pain, because I meet them.... In every trip, there is always a chance to meet the victims.... To hear that the Pope tells them: 'bring me a letter with proof, is a slap' I realize that my expression didn't come out very well, and I understand, as Peter writes in one of his letters, that the fire has risen. That's what I can honestly say."

The Pope's apology was deep and heartfelt and yet, after decades of investigative reporting and criminal cases that followed them, he does not seem to understand the gravity of the situation. Again, one can only speculate. Perhaps it is because he believes that child sexual assault by "fallen priests" is a sin that can and that must be forgiven, or perhaps he sees sexual abuse as part of the human genome, part of human nature, the tendency toward evil that Roman Catholics call concupiscence.

On returning to Rome, Pope Francis sent the Vatican's leading specialist on clerical sexual abuse, Archbishop Charles Scicluna, to Chile to investigate the sexual abuse accusations. Scicluna was hospitalized on arrival for a serious gall bladder attack that nonetheless allowed him more time and more privacy to extend his research. His report, which has not yet been related to the public, goes far beyond the Bishop Barros case and includes testimonies of clerical child sexual abuse in the Marist Brothers, Salesian and Franciscan orders. On Scicluna's return he confirmed that the Chilean Church has a huge problem on its hands, which had been handled poorly. Meanwhile, the conservative hierarchy in Chile issued a letter <sup>[10]</sup> to Latin American bishops' conferences stating that the Pope's visit to Chile was a great success and marred by inept journalists and the media.

### **Child Trafficking Within the Church Itself**

Meanwhile, the Vatican Plenary on Human Trafficking and Slavery was drawing up its recommendations for Pope Francis on combatting human trafficking, including sex trafficking. Our recommendations opened by saying, "Human Trafficking, entailing forced labour, prostitution, organ harvesting, domestic servitude and other forms of modern slavery, fails to respect that all people share the same freedom and human dignity and that trafficking should thus be recognized as a Crime against Humanity. The effective application of criminal law is a necessary condition for its abolition but it is not a sufficient condition for remedying the consequences for the victims and society."

Pope Francis approved our recommendations and blessed the work we had done. Mission accomplished, or so we thought. In his introduction to the Vatican published Proceedings of our Plenary Session on Human Trafficking Pope Francis wrote : "We must raise awareness of this new evil [human trafficking] which in the world at large, wants to be hidden since it is scandalous and 'politically incorrect... No one likes to know that in one's own city, even in one's neighborhood, in one's region, or nation there are new forms of slavery, while we know that this plagues almost all countries...We must seek the most suitable modalities to punish those who become complicit in this inhumane trade. We are called to improve the means of redress and the social inclusion of victims...Civil authorities must be increasingly aware of the seriousness of this tragedy...And so often --- so many times---these new forms of slavery are protected by the institutions which should be protecting the population from these crimes."

Thus, I left the Vatican hoping that the recommendations we'd presented on human trafficking, including sex trafficking, would inspire Pope Francis to look beyond his understanding and passionate concern with global trafficking and modern day slavery to look at a form of child trafficking within the Church itself. The Pope might begin with an institutional self-analysis of its handling of clerical child sexual abuse scandals. There needs to be a full and transparent acknowledgment of the damage to the betrayed bodies, minds, spirits of the young victims that destroyed their ontological security and basic trust in the world. Financial reparations are not the

answer, and can make the survivors feel even worse. Some have committed suicide. Others are stuck in a recurring trauma that has denied them a positive view of their sexuality and their adult bodies. The survivors deserve much more. They trusted an institution and its priests and bishops who claim a genealogy to Jesus and the disciples.

Pope Francis and the Vatican might remember during the Easter season that Jesus of Nazareth was not a male supremacist or a segregationist, but a man who displayed respect and love for his female disciples, including Mary Magdalene, sometimes described by Catholics as a “prostitute,” a grievous slander against a disciple who gave up her possessions and followed Jesus to his death. The Scriptures state that Mary Magdalene was among the first to announce that Jesus had truly risen from the dead. The Eastern Orthodox Church honors Mary Magdalene as the “apostle to the apostles,” drawing on the Gospel of John.

The Holy Father is not only a pastoral ‘father’ to his priests, bishops, and cardinals, but to the children whose bodies are not yet safe in church. Perhaps Francis could think outside the box about the 3,000 clerical [child sex abusers](#) <sup>[11]</sup> identified by the Vatican’s own investigator, Bishop Charles Scicluna during 2001-2010. What if the pope applied his understanding of global human trafficking to the clerical “sex trafficking” within the Catholic Church itself?

*Nancy Scheper-Hughes is Chancellor’s Professor Emerita at the University of California Berkeley. She is the author of several books and edited volumes dealing with child survival, and co-editor of Small Wars: the Cultural Politics of Childhood (University of California Press, 1998), and author of Death without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil (University of California Press, 1989). She is co-author of “Priestly Celibacy and Child Sexual Abuse” with John Devine, and co-author of “The Final Conversion of Francis, The First Latin American Pope and the Women He Needs,” with Jennifer S. Hughes, in Global Latin America: Into the Twenty First Century (University of California Press, 2016)*

**Tags:** [Pope Francis](#) <sup>[12]</sup>  
[Catholic Church](#) <sup>[13]</sup>  
[sexual abuse](#) <sup>[14]</sup>  
[Bishop Juan Barros Madrid](#) <sup>[15]</sup>  
[Friar Fernando Karadima](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

n

▼ INFO

- [About](#)
- [Staff & Board](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Contact](#)

▼ SUPPORT US

- [Donate](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Become a Member](#)

## ▼ MAGAZINE

- [Advertise](#)
- [Archives](#)

## ▼ CONNECT

- [NACLA newsletter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)

NACLA | c/o NYU CLACS, 53 WASHINGTON SQ. SOUTH FL. 4W, NEW YORK, NY 10012 |  
TEL: (212) 992-6965

[Sitemap](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Copyright NACLA 2014](#)

The North American Congress on Latin America is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization.

**Source URL:** <https://nacla.org/news/2018/04/03/tale-two-popes>

**Links:**

[1] <https://nacla.org/news/2018/04/03/tale-two-popes>

[2] <http://twitter.com/share>

[3] <http://www.cnnchile.com/noticia/2018/01/18/ultimo-dia-del-papa-francisco-en-chile>

[4] <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-wednesday-edition-1.4491266/why-this-chilean-abuse-survivor-refuses-to-accept-pope-francis-apology-1.4491284>

[5] [https://c-fam.org/turtle\\_bay/president-of-pontifical-academy-responds-to-critics-of-vatican-conference-on-climate-change/](https://c-fam.org/turtle_bay/president-of-pontifical-academy-responds-to-critics-of-vatican-conference-on-climate-change/)

[6] <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/10/05/pope-defends-malefemale-differences-well-womens-equality>

[7] <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/10/05/pope-defends-malefemale-differences-well-womens-equality/>

[8] <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/01/20/cardinal-malley-speaks-out-against-pope-comment-sex-abuse-victims-chile/QoT3LunUSDUUgFQvrp2UjL/story.html>

[9] <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/cardinal-omalley-popes-words-a-source-of-great-pain-for-abuse-survivors-99063>

[10] <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/cardinal-blames-bad-press-during-popes-chile-visit-interviews-barros>

[11] [http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources\\_mons-sciicluna-2010\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_mons-sciicluna-2010_en.html)

[12] <https://nacla.org/tags/pope-francis>

[13] <https://nacla.org/tags/catholic-church>

[14] <https://nacla.org/tags/sexual-abuse>

[15] <https://nacla.org/tags/bishop-juan-barros-madrid>

[16] <https://nacla.org/tags/friar-fernando-karadima>