

Spotlight: A telling exposé of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church

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Directed by Tom McCarthy; screenplay by McCarthy and Josh Singer

Tom McCarthy's *Spotlight* is a taut, quasi-political thriller that chronicles the *Boston Globe*'s landmark 2002 exposure of widespread child sexual abuse by Catholic priests in the Boston area.

The 'Spotlight' in the title refers to the newspaper's four-person investigative unit that brought to light the long-term, systematic cover-up by Church officials of the abuse carried out by more than 70 local clergy. The *Globe*, having been recently acquired by the *New York Times*, won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for the story.

In McCarthy's movie, the Spotlight team consists of its blunt editor Walter "Robby" Robinson (Michael Keaton), reporters Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams) and Michael Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo), and researcher Matt Carroll (Brian d'Arcy James).

Spotlight opens with a brief sequence in which Father John Geoghan, a serial pedophile whose history of abuse was a factor in triggering the investigation, is walking out of a Boston police station a free man. (In his 30-year career, Geoghan molested at least 130 children.) The *Globe*'s new editor-in-chief Marty Baron (Liev Schreiber)—non-Bostonian and non-Catholic—pushes the Spotlight team to start looking into sexual abuse by priests.

A resistant managing editor Ben Bradlee Jr. (John Slattery) points out that 53 percent of the newspaper's subscribers are Catholic. Furthermore, the Archdiocese is a powerful Boston institution run by the formidable Cardinal Bernard Law (Len Cariou).

But there are other "outsiders" besides Baron. One of them is the class-action attorney of Armenian descent, Mitchell Garabedian (Stanley Tucci), who has been struggling unsuccessfully to bring the clergy abusers to justice ("This city ... Yankees, Irish, making the rest of

us feel like we don't belong. They're no better than us. Look how they treat their children. Mark my words, Mr. Rezendes, if it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.")

There is no shortage of individuals willing to apologize for and protect the Church within the Boston establishment. Jim Sullivan (Jamey Sheridan), one of Robby's golfing partners, is a Church consigliere, and another close associate, Peter Conley (played by Paul Guilfoyle), is a goodwill ambassador for the institution. The latter says to the Spotlight chief: "Marty Baron is a Jew with an agenda of his own. He's not from here and can leave anytime. You, on the other hand ..." Sensitive public documents routinely go missing from government files.

The *Globe*'s original January 2002 exposé took note of the Church's desperate cover-up: "In interviews over the last several months, lawyers who were involved in the private [settlement] cases said the church's primary objective was clear—to avoid public scandal at whatever cost.

"One attorney who was privy to the church's strategy said the archdiocese was so eager to keep victims from going public or taking claims to court that it even paid some dubious claims."

In addition to the obstacles created by the stonewalling and evasions of Church officials and their supporters, the events of 9/11 temporarily put the team's research on the back burner.

Eventually, the journalists prevail with the help of victims from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) ("When a priest pays attention to you, it's a big deal," says one of its members. "How do you say no to God?").

Also rendering the investigators valuable assistance is Richard Sipe (the telephone voice of Richard Jenkins),

a former priest, now a psychotherapist. He is an expert on predator clergy and explains that they tend to search for victims among the poor and vulnerable. Sipe shocks the journalists when he states that his research indicates that at least six percent of the Church's priests are offenders ("A recognizable psychiatric phenomenon").

The depth and extent of the Church's corruption and wrongdoings overcome any initial reluctance on the part of the *Globe* and its Spotlight writers, many of them lapsed Catholics, to unearth the truth.

McCarthy's *Spotlight* is a compelling work with non-stop momentum, in the tradition of *All the President's Men* (1976), about the Watergate scandal, and *The Insider* (1999), the exposé of the tobacco industry. This is something that the American film industry does well. The appearance of *Spotlight* suggests that Hollywood's muckraking capabilities have not been entirely discarded or forgotten.

The director, whose previous valuable works include *The Station Agent* (2003), *The Visitor* (2007) and *Win Win* (2011), is a sensitive craftsman who has brought together a tight-knit ensemble cast obviously committed to the project. Keaton and Ruffalo are riveting and Tucci is particularly outstanding as a noble, self-sacrificing, relentless exposé of the Church's human collateral damage.

An actor-turned-filmmaker, McCarthy is not a great visual stylist, and *Spotlight* has a somewhat unexciting, monochromatic look. It is, above all, the performances and the chemistry between the actors that make the film effective. Moreover, an intelligent movie like *Spotlight* stands out in an industry dominated by cartoons and special effects.

One of the film's strengths is that it shows the Catholic hierarchy as an essential component of Boston's political and social superstructure. The Church functions as one of the ideological linchpins in the subjugation and oppression of the working class population.

The sexual abuse scandal is hardly unique to the Boston area. The movie's postscript provides a list of hundreds of cities all over the US and the globe in which sexual abuse by priests has been uncovered.

Regarding the systemic character of the abuse, the WSWS wrote in 2002: "The crisis over sexual abuse by members of the priesthood underscores the profoundly reactionary and anachronistic character of the Catholic

Church as an institution. Its corrupt and hypocritical officials, living like kings, preach against sin and vice, oppose birth control and abortion, inveigh against homosexuality, enthusiastically advocate censorship and intellectual repression, universally ally themselves with the powers that be and generally make life miserable for tens of millions of people.

"Every aspect of the sexual abuse crisis—the pain and suffering of the victims, the misery and sexual dysfunction of the priests, the callousness of Church officials—suggests a diseased institution whose practices and beliefs run counter to elementary human needs and inevitably breed the unhealthiest of psycho-sexual climates. The Catholic Church's essential being flies in the face of modern society."

The *Boston Globe* had a good day with its report on the Catholic Church. In several interviews, director McCarthy laments the ongoing demise of newspapers and the accompanying rise of the Internet.

In his old-fashioned liberalism, the filmmaker leaves several things out of account. If McCarthy wants to know why the population and especially younger people are turning away from such outlets as the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*, he need only consider the media coverage of the "other" significant event touched upon in *Spotlight*, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and related developments. The American media refused to seriously investigate the 9/11 suicide attacks and has ceaselessly justified the wars in the Middle East and elsewhere, the vast NSA spying, police killings and every conspiracy and attack on the population. The major newspapers and television channels have effectively become extensions of the Pentagon and the CIA.

Incorruptible reporters are few and far between at the leading media outlets, and not generally sent to work on the most politically sensitive stories. Regardless, *Spotlight* is straightforward, entertaining and propelled by captivating performances.



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