

## **2010: Jason Berry, Freelance and *National Catholic Reporter***

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, “investigative reporting” rose to a level of prominence it hadn’t known since the days of the Muckrakers. Major American newspapers and broadcast news operations competed to marshal teams of reporters, supported by squadrons of lawyers and technical experts, to lay bare the hidden realities of power and corruption. The big journalism of the day mobilized resources to cover big stories, and, along the way, often brought down corrupt mayors, governors and even one president. Yet, the winner of the 2010 Moses Berkman Memorial Journalism Prize earned his reputation as an investigative reporter of the first rank as a kind of throwback, as a freelance in the tradition of Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Ray Stannard Baker. Without the resources and institutional cover provided by large journalistic institutions, Jason Berry does his work in a particularly hard way, with persistence, stamina, and considerable frugality.

In our judgment, the single most important religion story in the history of the United States has been the clerical sexual misconduct crises endured by the Catholic Church over the past three decades. More than any other reporter, Berry laid the foundation for coverage of the scandal, showing not merely patterns of sexual misconduct by priests, but the systematic mishandling of the scandal by Catholic leaders. Already a veteran freelance reporter, in 1984 and 1985 Berry broke the story now regarded as starting point of the great misconduct scandal, the case of a Louisiana priest named Gilbert Gauthier and the cover up of his crimes in the Diocese of Lafayette. Stories in a Louisiana weekly, the *Times of Acadiana*, led to more comprehensive investigative stories in the *National Catholic Reporter*, and eventually to the 1992 book *Lead Us Not Into Temptation* (a book proposed to and rejected by 30 publishers before Doubleday agreed to publish it), which eventually served in many newsrooms as a kind of introductory handbook to covering the Catholic Church.

In 1994, he began to report on allegations of sexual and financial misconduct by Father Marcial Maciel Delgado, the founder of an increasingly influential Catholic religious order founded in Mexico in the 1940s, the Legion of Christ. In 1996, Berry began collaborating on the Maciel story with the late Gerald Renner of the *Hartford Courant*. Together they published a 7,000 word investigative story in *Hartford* in 1997. In 2004, they followed up with the book *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II*. After a long period of silence, in 2006 the Vatican ordered Maciel into “a retired life of prayer and penance” and in 2009 it revealed that Maciel was a bigamist who might have abused more than 100 seminarians, and, possibly, his own children.

Along the way, Berry earned some praise, including two Catholic Press Awards, but was relentlessly criticized by defenders of the church, many of whom have now recanted. The *New Oxford Review*, which criticized Berry as a liberal Catholic, conceded in its review of *Vows of Silence* that Berry and Renner were “seasoned and conscientious” journalists. Father Owen Campion, a Legionary of Christ and editor of the *National Catholic Register*, wrote a column last spring stating that he “regretted that in my defense of Father Maciel I took to task Gerald Renner and Jason Berry, the writers who broke the story and their editors at the *Hartford Courant*. They didn’t get everything about the Legion right, but they were fundamentally correct about Father Maciel’s sexual abuse and I ask forgiveness.” Berry’s central role in uncovering the Catholic scandals was recognized in 2009 by the Voice of the Faithful, which awarded him its Saint Catherine of Siena Distinguished Lay Person Award.

Berry achieved these gradually accumulating results amid the endless scramble of a freelancer's life. He has published often in the *National Catholic Reporter*, *New Orleans* magazine, and the *Gambit*, a New Orleans weekly, but otherwise he appears in an astounding variety of venues, ranging from *Reader's Digest* to the *Nation*. Earlier in this decade, he consulted for ABC News and produced work for National Public Radio. Along the way, Berry has also produced documentary films, published a novel, and written at least one play produced in New Orleans, in addition to books about Medgar Evers and the history of jazz in New Orleans.

Deeply rooted in Louisiana, Berry has also written a flood of journalism on Louisiana and New Orleans politics, on the civil rights movement, on jazz music, and on Louisiana's rich popular culture. His work as a culture critic has received widespread recognition, including a Guggenheim Fellowship for work on jazz funerals in New Orleans. Since the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, he has given careful coverage to the revival of local musical and cultural life. Like Moses Berkman, for whom this prize is named, Jason Berry built a career on covering his home town. And in an age when big journalism seems to be a thing of the past, his career gives us hope that investigative journalism can survive in an age of economic reverses for mainstream journalism.