‘How can you continue to believe in the face of scandals?’ This question is widely asked, but I shall concentrate on the case of Roman Catholicism, leaving to others the application to their faith, religious or secular. The sexual abuse of children by clergy is shocking in the extreme, but as an intellectual challenge it may be rebutted by noting that the reality of sin is a central Christian doctrine: the Church never claimed that its clergy were holy. The scandal that defeats faith in the Church is not this initial abuse, horrific though that is, but its cover-up and the resulting further wrong to victims.

Although the way scandal defeats faith seems obvious to some, to others it looks like the ad hominem fallacy of criticizing the advocate rather than what is advocated – ‘playing the man not the ball’. I shall argue that scandal undermines faith in the Catholic Church, by rebutting the Church’s claim to holiness. That is no fallacy. We should all distinguish, however, between faith in the Catholic Church and a Catholic faith. The latter, informed by centuries of tradition, may reasonably be maintained or converted to in spite of a heartfelt recognition of the gravity of the scandals, which, to the Church’s shame, are also centuries old.