The child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church has heated up again, with calls for massive reforms, repeal of celibacy, marriage for priests and resignations of bishops and even the Pope.

These angry proposals won't help solve the problem, even if they play to many people's sense of justice, for they show little actual understanding of how the Church works. The Vatican is the world's oldest government and at different times the Church has withstood military conquest, hatred by the world's most powerful leaders, Nazism and Communism -- much worse than angry editorials in the newspapers.

There are no magic bullets that will end the scandal or stop the sinful and criminal acts against children that is causing it. It is a complex issue than needs thoughtful consideration, carefully crafted proposals, and follow through. The proposals, whatever they are, need to take into account the nature of Catholicism and its organization, for that nature provides the context in which the problem arose.

The Catholic Church is governed by the world's oldest, continuous monarchy. Officially founded by Emperor Constantine in 325 A.D., its roots reach back into the first century, to Jesus and Peter as well as the other apostles. As Rome, along with its bishop and its adherents in the western Roman Empire, became more independent of the eastern Empire, it took on even more monarchical characteristics, lacking perhaps only official heredity.

For more than a millennium, this monarchy existed in a world of monarchies. Over this time, a succession of these monarchies supported and were allied with the Church. This is not surprising, since one of the explanatory rules of religious studies is that successful religious organizations (from Christianity and Judaism to Zoroastrianism and Hinduism) tend to be supported by the dominant political and economic power(s) of a society.

The support which these monarchies gave the Catholic Church was perceived as reciprocal. If a king upheld the Church in its interests, the king also expected the Church to support his concerns and priorities.

This interchange of course takes place in a delicate dance between the powers; history shows the balance between the two was sometimes violated and could result in friction, violence, murder or war. But in general, religious and civil reciprocity took place often.

In the modern period, since the 16th century, the character of most Christian societies has changed. Political and economic power shifted from monarchies to the middle class. Countries where a king or queen ruled their subjects became nations where the citizens elected their governments and often got rid of monarchs altogether.

In many regions and countries, Christianity followed suit. Take the Anglican Church, for instance. In most countries, bishops are now elected by the laity, including the Presiding Bishop. In many Baptist churches, the lay members of each church constitute its governing council, with the power to do everything from cutting the heating budget to firing the minister.

Since the power of these churches now resides in the laity, the "middle class," it is not surprising that the ministers, priests, and hierarchy have learned to be responsive to them. This responsiveness occurs not in the area of theology or doctrine so much as in matters of administration. The churches' members made it clear they wanted the ministerial class to look after them.

The world's largest religious organization, the Catholic Church, did not make this change. Despite increasing adherence to democracy in politics, the parishioners continued to believe that the priests and the bishops would look after their interests. In most cases this belief has been correct. But the actions taken by bishops that have allowed predatory priests to prey again and again on the people in the pews and their children has caused many to realize that in this case the leaders they trusted to look after them did not. The representatives of the monarchy failed the middle class.

What will happen now? I do not know. It is up to the Catholic Church, the hierarchy and the laity, to work that out. What is at stake, however, is nothing less than the Church's future.