

The cardinal and the news media

By James L. Frankin
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In March 1984, at the close of a round of liturgies and receptions celebrating his installation as leader of the sprawling Boston Archdiocese and its nearly two million Catholics, then Archbishop Bernard F. Law delayed the start of a news conference in Lowell.

He waded into the roomful of reporters and warmly congratulated a reporter for the *Globe* on a story that commented on the newly arrived churchman's ability to make his presence felt in the news media and in public appearances.

Then, as always, he took the story personally.

Saturday, when questioned about his church's response to charges that a priest in the neighboring Fall River Diocese had raped or molested dozens of children in the 1960s, Boston's archbishop, now a cardinal, responded just as strongly and personally.

"The news media has covered this story irresponsibly to paint all the clergy in a negative way," Cardinal Law said.

Deploping "relentless" news coverage of the abuse case, involving a man who has since left the priesthood, he asserted that "the good and dedicated people who serve the church deserve better than what they have been getting lay in and day out in the media."

They were impulsive, spontaneous remarks that added much of the good done by his own carefully crafted statements nearly two weeks before.

Then he had denounced the betrayal of trust by a tiny minority of priests who are guilty of abuse, expressed sympathy for victims, and promised a policy in his own archdiocese that would deal with all aspects of such abuse cases - moral, spiritual, psychological and legal.

His own newspaper, *The Pilot*, had run an editorial commenting on the pastoral duties of bishops faced with abuse cases, pointing out that they must care for victims, family, parish, the whole Catholic community - and yes, the perpetrator.

Last week, Bishop Louis Geinzeau of Providence reprinted the *Pilot* editorial, and acknowledged, with unusual frankness, "a rather widespread belief that church leadership, myself included, has over the years tried to hide from this reality."

Reporters yesterday were trying to contrast the Providence stand with Cardinal Law's angry words this weekend, in effect, comparing him unfavorably to his own best intentions.

By falling back on the institutional defensiveness he showed Saturday, Cardinal Law seemed to turn his back on the anguish of victims - some say hundreds - of men and women who charge they were abused as children by James R. Porter, when he was a priest in the Fall River Diocese.

And the cardinal played into the hands of their lawyer, Eric MacLain, who is seeking to involve the weather Boston Archdiocese in the Porter case, possibly as a source of counseling help for the victims, maybe even as a "deep pockets" defendant in a liability suit.

Yet in a case that is being tried first in the court of public opinion, the mercurial Boston archbishop has now made himself the lightning rod for resentment. The Fall River Diocese has no bishop - since the transfer of Bishop Daniel Cronin to be archbishop of Hartford - and Cardinal Law has some jurisdiction as archbishop in a province that includes Fall River and the other dioceses in Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Because he is a metropolitan archbishop, Law plays some limited advisory role to the other dioceses.

But it was even more than the daily stories about priests and pederasty that set the cardinal off. He used a prayer service at the beginning of the "mothers march against violence" Saturday to say: "St. Paul spoke of the immeasurable power at work in those who believe. . . . We call down God's power in our business leaders, and political leaders and community leaders. By all means we call down God's power in the media, particularly the *Globe*."

What agitated him was coverage of plaintiffs by some youth workers and nuns. Following a showing at Morning Star Baptist Church in Mattapan, that Boston churches

have failed city youth.

He called on Boston's media, particularly the *Globe*, to cover the "good story" of Morning Star Baptist Church, which does work with young people, and if Catholic parishes he believes are very much in touch with Boston's youth.

Finally he was also distressed by the absence of coverage of his own stand last week opposing the US decision to turn back Haitian refugees.

"In the name of all that is decent, we cannot turn our backs on poor Haitians willing to take heroic measures in order to escape a hopeless situation," the cardinal said, comparing the policy to the US refusal of aid to Jews fleeing Nazi Germany in the eve of World War II.

It was a stand that put him on a collision course with his friend in the White House, George Bush. It was the kind of card that a religious leader plays carefully, and his stand passed almost completely unnoticed.

As a public figure who has used the news media to get his own message across, both to Catholics and to the general public, Cardinal Law is nevertheless unused to losing the battle for headlines and sound bites.

Having defined his role in such terms, it appears the cardinal will have to pay his role more prominently in a bid to touch the hearts of many who are upset by the abuse cases - victims and sympathizers alike - as well as achieving his goal of leadership in great public issues.

