



IN MY OPINION
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Abuse scandal: Vatican still doesn't get it

As the world's cardinals begin huddling in secret to pick a new pope, many American Catholics are still trying to figure out why Bernard Law was allowed to say a public funeral Mass for John Paul II.

The answer seems obvious: The Vatican still doesn't believe that sex abuse by priests is a serious problem. The old guys running the show still don't get it.

As archbishop of Boston, Law specialized in spiriting predator priests from one parish to another without informing either the cops or parishioners, some of whose children were later targeted for abuse.

So far, more than 600 persons in the Boston archdiocese have said they were victimized by church clerics, and more than \$90 million in settlements has been paid out. As a result, the archdiocese is teetering on financial ruin.

Initially, Law refused to step down. Then a judge unsealed commendation letters written by Law praising priests that he knew had been accused of molesting children.

When the cardinal finally left the archdiocese in 2002, he received no punishment from the Vatican. On the contrary, he was brought to Rome, installed in a beautiful apartment and named archpriest of the Basilica of St. Mary Major.

That's a lot better than being locked away in a Massachusetts prison for covering up multiple felonies, which is what should have happened to Law.

Thanks to him, sex-criminal priests were allowed to continue preying on the youth of the Catholic Church, splintering lives as well as the faith.

In most modern, media-savvy bureaucracies, Law would be the sort of high-profile embarrassment who

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would be whisked away to some obscure outpost and ordered to lay low.

But the Vatican is neither modern nor keenly attuned to its image problems. Plainly it couldn't care less about the feelings of all those damaged families in Boston and scores of other cities.

Because there was Cardinal Law, three days after the pope's death, delivering the center-stage homily in a globally televised mourning mass.

Regardless of whether he was chosen out of institutional arrogance or blind tradition (archpriests in the basilica have presided at past papal funerals), Law's prominence in Rome outraged many Catholics, disturbed many church leaders and reignited the sex-abuse furor.

That's not a bad thing, especially after the marathon funeral extravaganza for John Paul II.

Fueled by unprecedented TV coverage, the emotional tide of grieving for the beloved pope was a public-relations tonic for the church. Most media were content to focus on the goodness of the man, and to only sparingly mention the scandal that marred his papacy and threatens the future of the priesthood.

The uproar over Cardinal Law's appearance is a needed dose of cold reality. According to a report published last year by a panel of Catholic lay leaders, almost 11,000 persons — mostly boys between 11 and 14 — said they were sexually abused by U.S. priests over a 50-year span.

Many accusations were known to local bishops and in some cases passed along to the Vatican, which did virtually nothing until forced by the accumulating weight of lawsuits and sordid headlines.

Finally, after an eternity of silence, the pope acknowledged the problem and issued a terse condemnation.

Discipline, however, remained spotty. And prosecutors in pursuit of child-molesting priests still had to battle to pry evidence from the church.

Even today, as some Catholic scholars have noted, the leadership in Rome is floundering in denial.

A leading contender for the papacy, Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez of Honduras, says that the sex-abuse controversy was manufactured by the American news media. In particular, the cardinal has singled out Ted Turner, the former CNN chairman, for being "openly anti-Catholic."

Blaming Turner is not only inane but insulting to every abuse victim. That Rodríguez is sticking with his conspiracy theory suggests that as pope, he would be less than aggressive about purging predators from the priesthood.

Fortunately, some cardinals seem to grasp the seriousness of the crisis. German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a confidant of John Paul and another possible candidate for pope, recently decried the "filth" in the church, "even among those" who are priests.

Still, a culture of cover-up prevails in the Vatican hierarchy. The Dallas Morning News has reported that several priests accused of sexual abuse were quietly moved from their home countries to others, where they continued to work with the public in church settings.

The newspaper also revealed that numerous priests who'd admitted molesting minors — and in some cases were facing criminal charges in the United States — had been hustled all the way to Rome, out of the law's immediate grasp.

No wonder Cardinal Law was treated so warmly there after leaving the Boston archdiocese in shambles. By protecting those dangerous priests, Law was merely following a long-standing Vatican strategy of evasion and obstruction.

This week he'll be casting his vote for a new pope. Catholics can only pray that whoever is chosen will show more courage and rectitude than the exiled cardinal, who looked the other way while the children of his flock were being raped.