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Fallout Continues to Rattle Church

By Jessica Trobaugh
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Though now-defrocked priest John J. Geoghan of Boston was convicted in January of just one count of child molestation and will serve a 10-year prison term, the case has created a furor that the Catholic Church has not seen in previous sexual abuse cases.

The heightened reaction stems from the scandal reaching into church hierarchy, says R. Scott Appleby, a religious historian and former director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame.

In attempts to keep Geoghan's improprieties secret, Geoghan's superiors, the late Cardinal Humberto Medeiros and current Archbishop Cardinal Bernard F. Law, habitually shipped him off for counseling and passed him around from one parish to the next for 30 years.

In 1984, Bishop John M. D'Arcy of the Catholic Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, was serving as regional bishop in the Boston archdiocese. That December he wrote a letter to Law, voicing his concern over Geoghan's placement in a parish in Weston, Mass.

"Fr. Geoghan has a history of homosexual involvement with young boys," D'Arcy stated in the letter that is posted on the Boston Globe Web site www.boston.com/globe. "I understand his recent abrupt departure from St. Brendan's, Dorchester, may be related to this problem. ... I wonder if Fr. Geoghan should not be reduced to just weekend work while receiving some kind of therapy."

In February 1985, two months later, D'Arcy was transferred to Fort Wayne-South Bend.

D'Arcy has been all but silent during the recent swarm of current controversy.

On March 25 in the Chrism Mass at St. Matthew Cathedral, D'Arcy referred to the abuse crisis for the first time publicly.

From the pulpit he delivered a message of nontolerance for religious who break their vows of celibacy. The bishop also announced that he will address the issue in a series of editorials to appear in the diocesan newspaper, *Today's Catholic*, this week.

The local diocese has not been immune to instances of sexual misconduct by Catholic clergy.

In 1991 and 1992, two lawsuits were filed against now ex-priest James Blume and the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend.

Both complainants alleged that they were molested by Blume, *The News-Sentinel* of Fort Wayne reported.

One plaintiff claimed he had suffered the abuse from 1982 through 1985, during the priest's assignment in St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in New Haven, Ind.; the other from 1985 through 1987 when Blume was at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Fort Wayne.

The first plaintiff claimed that when he brought the information to D'Arcy in 1989, the bishop

discouraged him from telling anyone outside the church about the abuse, the News-Sentinel reported. D'Arcy denied that accusation.

The bishop refused Blume his request to return to the clergy after he had received therapy and sought and received the priest's resignation in 1989.

The New Haven case was resolved, but the terms of the settlement remain confidential, a South Bend Tribune story noted.

Then, in 1992 and 1993, two men filed civil lawsuits against the diocese and the Rev. Robert Mahoney, The Tribune reported.

The first plaintiff claimed that from 1981 to 1983, while a student at Our Lady of Hungary elementary school in South Bend, he was repeatedly sexually assaulted, battered and raped by Mahoney. A second man accused the priest of similar allegations, claiming they occurred from 1970 to 1972 while he was a student at St. Bavo Catholic School in Mishawaka. Mahoney and the diocese denied the charges.

The suits were dismissed in Dec. 1993 and Feb. 1994. No reason was provided for either dismissal, and both cases were dismissed "with prejudice," which means they cannot be brought back into court again, The Tribune reported.

In the 1980s, more than 20 years earlier, shock waves had rocked the Catholic church with revelations of sexual abuse by Gilbert Gauthe of Louisiana and again in the 1990s with James Porter in Massachusetts.

In fact, in the last two decades, reports the Los Angeles Times, it's estimated that the Catholic Church has paid out hundreds of millions of dollars to abuse victims.

None of these incidents, however, has generated the ire of American Catholics as the most recent scandal in Boston.

Though cases of sexual abuse in the '80s and '90s certainly shook the Catholic population, Appleby says, "the assumption was that the church would address it."

And in some areas of the country it did. The archdiocese of Chicago, for instance, established a professional priest review board during Cardinal Joseph Bernadin's tenure.

And in 1997, when a string of offenses by priests emerged in the Lafayette, Ind., diocese, Bishop William Higi revised the its policies of handling abuse cases by bringing in advisers from the laity.

Though the church and the United States Catholic Conference stressed the necessity of selectivity in priestly ordination and established guidelines for dealing with church sex offenders after the rash of offenses in the '80s and '90s, individual bishops were at liberty to apply these recommendations at their own discretion.

"Bishops could always resist these measures," Appleby says, and some were facing the pressure of severe priest shortages.

And in the midst of the recent turbulence, Appleby thinks the church has suffered some unfairness. "Many of these current charges are decades old and the malfeasances are also decades old."

And in some cases, says Appleby, the bishops were following what they thought was good advice from the psychiatric community at that time.

Nonetheless, he adds, "people are scandalized, angered and embarrassed that the bishops didn't move more dramatically and systematically to root out and to remove from pastoral service any bishop

or priest who had ever been legitimately accused of sexual abuse of minors. ... That's why the outrage today."

That and the church's deliberate secrecy.

It's one thing to take a less proactive approach to weeding out troublesome priests, but quite another to intentionally withhold information from the body of believers who entrust the church with the care and development of its children.

The problem, some say, is systemic of the church's culture of silence and insularity, of a hierarchy which appears to believe it exists beyond the reproach and the reach of society.

Often sexual crimes are not reported to law enforcement, problem priests are quietly sent away for treatment and the victims are paid hush money in the millions of dollars in return for their silence.

Today's issue of Time notes that just last year the Vatican published a directive which states that all allegations of sexual abuse be brought "secretly for judgment to Rome's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith for judgment," keeping the issues strictly in the church's hands. The document makes no mention of reporting allegations to the civil authorities.

And, in a pre-Easter statement, a Vatican representative read from a letter written by Pope John Paul II that defended the church's efforts to settle wrongdoing by its clergy in-house.

These tactics suggest to many Catholics that the church cares more about appearances than it does the victims and the other members of the body it is called to serve.

As a result, many dioceses are attempting to avoid suspicion and distrust by turning over names of alleged abusers to authorities, even though in many states, Indiana and Michigan included, clergy are exempt from having to report to civil authorities child abuse of any kind.

Yet this response, too, troubles many Catholics. The concern is over false accusations and the threat of an anti-Catholic witch hunt.

"There has to be some kind of due process to check out the allegation to see if there is any substance to it. I think that should be done by the bishop first," says the Rev. Leonard Chrobot, who pastors South Bend's St. Patrick and St. Hedwig Catholic churches.

"From my point of view, it's up to the (victim) to go to the authorities," says South Bend resident Brent Jagla, who attends St. Jude Catholic Church in South Bend. "But I would wholeheartedly hope that a (clergy) person would go to their higher-ups so something could be done."

In the case where the victim is a child, Jagla added, he believes the clergy should report the incident to the parents. And if the child reveals the incident in confession, then the priest should strongly encourage the child to go to their parents with the information.

Yet, ultimately, Jagla says, for this specific crisis to be dealt with effectively there needs to be more openness in the church. And maybe a little more compassion.

"I read something where one gentleman commented that he didn't want money from the church, he wanted an apology. I would guess a lot of them feel that way," Jagla says.

And reflecting on how the church emphasized sexual sins during his youth, and how it responded to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Chrobot says, "I do think that the church was not able to speak coherently and understandably to people about sexuality. And I think we're paying the price for that now."

Indeed the church literally is.

As it pays off settlements, sells property to underwrite victim payments and files for insurance claims, parishioners refuse to pay for hierarchical mismanagement and some are holding back on church tithes.

But despite their anguish over recent events, a Boston Globe-WBZ-TV poll released Friday indicated that American Catholics are in no danger of giving up the faith. "This is a time of purification in the church," says RoseAnne Benassi, office manager at St. Hedwig.

Appleby says, "The moral authority and the effectiveness of the church, however, has been weakened and could be severely weakened if the Vatican and the United States bishops do not get their house in order and make the measures to do so transparent to everyone."

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