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Philadelphia and the sexual abuse crisis

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

I have no desire to pile onto the Philadelphia archdiocese nor its archbishop, Cardinal Justin Rigali, with whom I was friendly when we were graduate students together in Rome back in the early 1960s, during the Second Vatican Council.

The news coming out of Philadelphia is sad as well as sordid. That archdiocese is experiencing now what the Archdiocese of Boston experienced following the disclosures in the *Boston Globe* in January, 2002. Those disclosures led eventually to the early resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law, a fate that is not likely to befall Rigali.

However, the same mistakes were made in Philadelphia that had been made in Boston. Denials all around were followed by legal proceedings that uncovered what the archdiocese had tried its best to hide -- always for the good of the priesthood and the reputation of the church.

The Boston archdiocese had been besmirched by the cover-ups and the added abuse of the families of the victims. The families were warned of the harm they would cause for the priests in question and for the damage to the good name of the church.

That warning worked for some families, but eventually the house of cards collapsed.

I had predicted on national television and in the press in those terrible days of 2002 that the crisis was not confined to Boston, that it was national and even international in scope.

The scandal in Philadelphia (about which I'll speak in greater detail below) and the bankruptcies of various dioceses around the country (including Portland, Oregon, and Milwaukee), because of large payments to victims, underscored the national character of the crisis.

The disclosure of similar scandals in Ireland, Poland, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Australia only made the public wonder how many other countries and continents were involved. It was clear that the crisis was worldwide in scope.

Well-informed commentators and shoot-from-the-hip pundits alike had their own theories regarding the root causes of the crisis. For the former group obligatory clerical celibacy was high on the list; for the latter it was the homosexuality of the perpetrators.

I have no intention here of reviewing the arguments on each side. Those arguments have been vetted frequently over the past seven or eight years.

In June of 2002 the U.S. bishops met in Dallas, with the main item on the agenda the need to fashion a national policy to handle allegations against priests.

Some bishops felt that the bishops' conference was treating a delicate problem with a meat axe, but the majority perceived themselves under pressure to do something drastic and the decision was made to adopt a strict, take-no-prisoners policy on the problem of sexual abuse of minors by priests.

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Any priest with a credible allegation against him was to be removed from ministry immediately.

Now back to Philadelphia. After two priests, two ex-priests, and a layman were arrested and cited by a grand jury, Rigali insisted that no priests still serving in the Archdiocese were guilty of such transgressions.

However, the grand jury report excoriated the Archdiocese for its failures to protect the young in this most serious matter.

The previous grand jury report in 2005 dealt harshly with both Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, Rigali's immediate predecessor as Philadelphia's archbishop, and Msgr. William Lynn, Bevilacqua's secretary of the office for clergy from 1992 to 2004 and since then a pastor in Downingtown, accusing them of an "immoral cover-up" in abuse cases generally.

The current grand jury report, which is 124 pages long, flatly stated that even under its new pastoral leadership the archdiocese has not lived up to its promise to protect children by weeding out predatory priests, keeping as many as 41 priests in ministry "despite solid, credible allegations of abuse."

In response to this latest grand jury report, Rigali made an unfortunate mistake in fundamental logic by making a universal negative assertion that could be rebutted by even a single case to the contrary.

Later in the very day that the grand jury report was released, Rigali issued a letter to all 267 parishes in the Archdiocese denying the allegation that there were other abusive priests still at work in the Archdiocese.

"I assure all the faithful that there are no archdiocesan priests in ministry today who have an admitted or established allegation of sexual abuse of a minor against them."

Soon thereafter he removed twenty-one priests from their ministries over this very issue.

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