NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Penn State and the Catholic church

Richard McBrien | Dec. 5, 2011 Essays in Theology

The sexual abuse scandal at Penn State that toppled the president of the university and iconic football coach Joe Paterno has stimulated many references in the media to a similar problem in the Catholic church.

Although the church's crisis is more widespread and goes back more years than we can count, it is drawn from the same sources: human perversity and its principal enabler, human weakness.

There have been many attempts to link the two scandals, but Penn State's seems to have had more "help" from the civil authorities than did the Catholic church. For example, the judge that reduced the alleged perpetrator's bail served as a volunteer on his foundation that also alerted him to various likely "prospects."

On the other hand, in some respects, Penn State took more decisive action than the Catholic church has taken. Only one bishop, Cardinal Bernard Law, has been forced to resign because of his inept handling of the scandal, while the president of Penn State University was sacked immediately.

Even more dramatically, the longtime football coach, who expressed his intention to retire at the end of the current season, was also immediately fired for not doing enough when he was first informed of a serious problem in 2002, which is, ironically, the same year that the scandal in the Catholic church broke because of an investigative series of articles in *The Boston Globe*.

One would have thought Joe Paterno would have learned something from the fallout to the church's scandal.

In any case, the church, like Penn State, had as its reflex position to protect the institution and its priesthood (at Penn State, it was the university and the football program).

In some respects, Penn State has taken more decisive action than the Catholic church has taken. It fired the president, who is comparable to a bishop, and fired the football coach, who would be comparable to priests who looked the other way.

Penn State also fired the athletic director and a vice president. Both face perjury charges from the civil authorities.

There were rumors that the graduate assistant and former quarterback of the football team, who reported an incident to Joe Paterno in 2002, would be on the field as an assistant coach, then that he would be up in the stands because of threats on his life.

These rumors were proved wrong. Penn State put the assistant coach on leave. Some say they would have fired him, too, except he is being held as a witness in the forthcoming judicial proceedings.

When the Penn State scandal unfolds more completely, the mishandling by the civil authorities will become clearer. It may even outweigh the firing of the president of the university and possibly even the firing of Joe

Paterno.

Some television pundits have called for more severe action by Penn State, including the termination of what remains of the current football season and all of next year's. Since money is the most important commodity in college football, that would send an unmistakable message to the rest of the country.

We know now that Penn State did not suspend its current season, losing to Nebraska on Senior Day in spite of the unfortunate show of support for Joe Paterno by some of the students.

But obviously, Penn State learned something from the Catholic church's grave mishandling of its own scandal that erupted with full force in January 2002. Penn State immediately fired key personnel, from top down. The church, on the other hand, dithered and put the squeeze only on its priests, leaving the bishops scot-free.

Cardinal Law, archbishop of Boston, lost his job only after a group of priests issued a public statement asserting that the cardinal had lost his credibility. Of course, the ongoing discoveries by the civil authorities didn't hurt.

But even at that, the church gave Cardinal Law a Roman position, cardinal-priest of St. Mary Major, one of the four major basilicas in Rome (alongside St. Peter's, the Lateran and St. Paul's Outside the Walls).

Many interpreted that, wrongly, as a promotion of sorts. It was, and is, not. Cardinal-priest of St. Mary Major doesn't compare in prestige and importance with cardinal-archbishop of Boston.

On the other hand, Cardinal Law did retain his various curial posts, including the Congregation for Bishops. He remains influential, even at age 80, in the appointment and promotion of bishops in the United States.

This is where the critics should have aimed their fire rather than at the St. Mary Major post. These curial positions, especially the Congregation for Bishops, is where his real power lies.t

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