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

O'Malley on the sex abuse crisis: 'It's not behind us'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 6, 2012 All Things Catholic

Although you won't find it on any liturgical calendar, Friday marks a monumental milestone for the Catholic church in the United States. It was exactly a decade ago, on Jan. 6, 2002, that the first *Boston Globe* article appeared on a serial predator and former priest named John Geoghan, triggering what we now know as the "sexual abuse crisis."

Within a year, Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston resigned in disgrace, his legacy permanently tainted by perceptions of having presided over the Catholic Watergate. The man tapped to clean up the mess Law left behind -- a humble, self-effacing Capuchin Franciscan named Sean O'Malley -- was already a veteran drawn from the frontlines of the crisis, well before the term even existed.

Back in 1992, O'Malley was quietly serving as a missionary bishop in the Virgin Islands when he was dispatched to the Fall River diocese in Massachusetts, where he was forced to deal with a mushrooming sex abuse scandal involving former priest James Porter. Among other things, that experience occasioned O'Malley's first meetings with abuse victims. A decade later, O'Malley was transferred to Palm Beach, Fla., where another diocese was in disarray after two consecutive bishops had resigned following revelations of abuse.

All that, however, seemed like a gentle shower in comparison to the tsunami that awaited O'Malley in Boston.

As a result of his résumé, O'Malley, now 67, has become the American church's "go-to" guy on the abuse crisis. When Pope Benedict XVI came to the United States in 2008, it was O'Malley who engineered the pontiff's first-ever meeting with sex abuse victims. When the church in Ireland was in meltdown, Benedict sent O'Malley to Dublin to conduct an official review.

In mid-December, O'Malley sat down in his office in Boston's Pastoral Center for an extended interview with *NCR* about the crisis. The conversation was divided into four areas: Boston, the national scene, the international scene and the toll the experience has taken on O'Malley personally.
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The following are excerpts from the interview.

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The situation in Boston

Ten years after the explosion of the crisis, has Boston recovered?
O'Malley: "Recovered" isn't the word I would use. I think we're in a better place, but the trauma and the suffering is something that will mark us for a long time, maybe forever. To say that we've recovered, or that this is behind us, is wrong. It's something we have to live with.

Why do you think you're in a better place?
When I first came, there was such anger, such pain, on the part of the victims, in the parishes and among the priests. In some quarters, there was almost despair. People wanted to know how the church was going to react.

On top of everything else, we were also in financial free-fall. The seminary had emptied out. There was just great, great pain, great anger.

You believe that's diminished?
I feel as though there's much greater peace in our parishes and among our people. So many people have come together to help us respond to the crisis and to try to rebuild trust and to bring healing, to offer outreach to those who were most affected ... the victims, their families and the parishes where they lived.

As a community, we've tried to assure people that we were taking this seriously and we would do everything we could to make sure it didn't happen again. There was a massive education program. Literally thousands of people volunteered to help us with it in the parishes and the schools. Screenings have gone on. The work of the review boards has been invaluable, to have an independent lay voice advising the bishop on these affairs. I think a lot has taken place that has helped to move us beyond the initial crisis stage.

Is there unfinished business in Boston?
Trying to make the victims feel welcomed and understood is always going to be a challenge. We've tried to help our priests to be able to counsel the families and individuals who were most affected, but as time goes on, you discover more people you were unaware of before. One of our ongoing commitments is to provide counseling services to victims of abuse. We have some wonderful people in our outreach office who have done yeoman's work, who have been the merciful face of the church to people in their suffering. They've been instrumental in bringing people for retreats and Masses, and other spiritual events in their lives, to help them with the healing process. That's a continuing challenge, and we can't ever think that it's finished or resolved.

How are you still reaching out to victims?

This Saturday, I'll have a Mass, as I do every Advent, for a group of victims and families. At one point, we had a novena between the feast of the Ascension and Pentecost, stretching over nine days, when we went to what we determined were the nine parishes most affected by the abuse crisis. It was a very moving ceremony. We had the victims give testimony. We had readings, prayers, songs, healing prayers. I invited priests to come with me, and many, many priests came. At one point in the service, we all prostrated on the sanctuary floor. We had literally thousands of people come during the course of that novena. Many people told me it was the first time they'd been back to church, and it really was a turning point in their lives.

Obviously, there are still people who are angry and alienated, but there are others who wanted to find a path back. One of the very tragic aspects of the whole abuse crisis is that many of the children who were abused came from families that were very connected to their parishes and to the church. The sense of betrayal was so great because these were people who had such affection and loyalty for the church. Their path back was all the harder because the break was so dramatic.

Did the crisis hurt Mass attendance?
At least according to our studies, the secularization of this area was already eating away at Mass attendance. There doesn't seem to be a dramatic hit as a result of the crisis.

My theory is that those who were involved in their parishes, who knew their parish priest, for example -- they were saddened and disappointed [by the crisis], but most of those people survived spiritually in the church. The more 'cultural' Catholics, people who come to church a couple of times a year and were sort of at arm's length from the church, are now at two arms' length. They're the ones who are so overwhelmed by the reporting and media attention without having a relationship with the parish that allows them to see another side of the church.

For the people who are connected to their parish, in some ways I think they've become stronger in their faith. The seminary situation may be another example. At the beginning, priests were encouraging me to close the

seminary. Today we're scrambling because we don't have enough room, and the young men who are coming do so with a sense that they want to do something to help the church. They know the church needs them.

What are the numbers?
For the archdiocese, we have over 70, and St. John's Seminary in total has over 100. When I got here, the archdiocese had maybe 15 or 20. ... I think the crisis has caused a lot of Catholics to look into their hearts to see what they could do to help the church, to make themselves more available.

What about money?
As I said, when I came, we were in financial free-fall. We had a $15 million annual operational deficit. We owed $35 million to the Knights of Columbus. The hospitals were losing $40 million a year. The lay pension fund was failing, the priests' pension fund was failing and there were a thousand lawsuits against us. Today the debts are paid and we're in the black. This building [the pastoral center in Braintree] was a gift from an Irish immigrant. People have been contributing a lot to improve the Catholic schools. We've gotten a lot of very generous gifts from Catholics and from people outside the Catholic church, from the Jewish community and others, who have been very supportive.

We can't leave Boston without talking about Cardinal Bernard Law. How much of an obstacle to recovery has Law's visibility in Rome been?
That's very hard for me to measure. I think a lot of the attention given to Cardinal Law is painful for us here, and damaging. Objectively, I think his resignation in Boston was a very dramatic step. Being the archpriest of a basilica in Rome is sort of a sinecure.

Last night [Dec. 13], I had a very interesting experience. The Jewish community in Boston has always had a very close relationship with the Catholic church since the time of Cardinal Cushing, and I was at an Anti-Defamation League dinner. A gentleman was being honored, but he deflected it onto a project concerning the naming of a new bridge. It was supposed to be called the "Bunker Hill Bridge," in Charlestown, which is traditionally a very Irish-Catholic working-class neighborhood. There was a movement to name the bridge for a Jewish activist who was quite a leader in the community named Lenny Zakim. It caused a lot of tension, but the tension was resolved, the Catholic and Jewish communities came together, and it was named the "Lenny Zakim Bunker Hill Memorial Bridge." In the film the ADL showed about this, they highlighted the role of Cardinal Law.

That probably couldn't happen in a Catholic setting.
That's exactly what I said. I told them this wouldn't have happened in a Catholic venue. I thought that was very enlightening. Obviously, any publicity in Boston around Cardinal Law's activities creates a lot of upset.

Do you understand why people find Law's visibility in Rome frustrating?
I do understand why people find it frustrating. On the other hand, looking at it from Rome's side, I'm sure they feel as though the fact that he resigned is a sign of how seriously this was taken. The resignation of a bishop is something in the church that we see as a big deal.

Have you had much communication with Cardinal Law?
When I go to Rome, I often see him over there. I've known Cardinal Law for 40 years. When I was in the Virgin Islands, I would come up and help him with confirmations here in Boston. I was in a neighboring diocese for 10 years. This is a man who's an old friend, somebody with whom I've had an ongoing relationship for years.

Is it painful for you that he's become the poster boy for the crisis?
Very painful, and not just for me, but for our priests and people here too, I think.

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The national scene

Where do you think the U.S. church stands vis-à-vis the crisis?
Once again, I think we're in a much better place. The leadership that Wilton Gregory [now archbishop of Atlanta, who was president of the bishops' conference in 2002] gave in responding quickly, coming up with policies that were clear, was very, very helpful.

What's the work that still needs to be done?
Obviously, the implementation of the policies is very important. Where we've gotten into trouble is where they haven't been followed. I think the audits are very important. If the audits had been working better, I think some of the problems, such as in Philadelphia, could have been avoided.

[Note: In February, a grand jury found that as many as 37 priests in the Philadelphia archdiocese remained active despite facing accusations of abuse.]

It seems those bishops who have worked hardest to implement the policies are those who were the most upset about Philadelphia, because it undercuts the credibility of their efforts. Is that your sense?
Exactly. I think everywhere in the country, there was kind of a gasp. Once again, I think if we would have had a better audit process, there would have been earlier warnings. That's going to be very important going forward, to be able to assure people that we're not walking away from this or becoming complacent. Each year we have to go back and look at what a local church is doing. Where are they falling down? Where do they need to improve?

Certainly, the reporting [of accusations to police and prosecutors] is a no-brainer.

The other recent upheaval has been in Kansas City, which is a watershed moment -- the first criminal indictment of a sitting American bishop. What lessons would you derive from that episode?
The bishops need to be very attentive, and make sure that the people working with the bishop are people he can really trust, who have a commitment to child safety and will work diligently to make sure the policies are scrupulously followed. The bishop needs to be on top of that.

People will ask: Why hasn't Bishop Robert Finn resigned?
I'm not that conversant with exactly what has happened there. Obviously, there can be times when resignation is the best response, as we saw in Boston.

In some quarters, the take-away is that the church now has accountability for priests who abuse, but not for bishops who cover it up. Do you think there's any merit to that criticism?
This is something the church needs to continue to look at. I think most people see there's a difference between failures before the charter and failures after the charter. There was a lot of misunderstanding and even ignorance, [a lack of] awareness of the damage done to the victims, which I think has been the game-changer in all this ... not just for the church, but for society in general. Many organizations in the past didn't handle abuse reports with the seriousness they require, because there wasn't the same awareness. Certainly in the post-charter period, the church needs to have some way of making bishops accountable.

What might that be?
It's going to depend on the Holy See. In the church, because of what a bishop is theologically, [resignation] can only be a decision of the Holy Father in conversation with the bishop himself. However, I think bishops' conferences can discuss [accountability] more.

You know the kinds of comparisons that come up. At Penn State, just days after revelations of sex abuse, a beloved coach and the university president were out of a job. Yet a decade into the Catholic crisis, many bishops never suffered the same consequences. Do you have any thoughts on a new system of

accountability that would convince the world the church is taking this seriously?
That's a hard one. I don't know. In Boston, the archbishop resigned, and there have been bishops elsewhere [who have resigned]. All I can say is that bishops should be accountable, and we have to keep working on it.

There tend to be two schools of thought about the roots of the crisis. One is that there's something unique to the church, or its clerical culture, that produced this mess. The other is that it's more a product of standard institutional dynamics -- the tendency of a professional class to protect its own members, of managers to avoid airing their problems in public and so on. Which do you find more persuasive?
The situation at Penn State and other places shows us that many institutions, historically, have not dealt with the problem in the way they should. It's easier to hide it or to deny it. I think the incidence of sexual abuse in the church is no higher than in other institutions, and it's probably lower. Since we have begun to come to grips with the problem, putting policies in place and trying to be transparent, the incidence of abuse has been reduced dramatically.

To me, the most disappointing thing about the John Jay report is that they went into a lot of speculative stuff. I wish they would have just underlined how the study indicated that once the church began to take this seriously, the incidence [of abuse] dropped off very, very dramatically.

As opposed to news headlines that the bishops blame the 1960s for their problems?
Exactly; or getting into the debate over homosexuality, for instance. It obscured the good news. In Boston, we've had one case [of clerical sex abuse] in the last 10 years.

Here's another element of unfinished business some people would flag: false allegations. There's a view among some observers that at the beginning of the crisis, false allegations were exceedingly rare, but today the percentage is on the rise. Is that your impression?
I think that's true, but I also think that false accusations are still few and far between. I think there's more danger of [false allegations] now, because there are a lot of dead priests who are being accused, and it's often very hard to establish if those allegations have merit.

Some bishops feel trapped because they've got a set of policies that, in their eyes, do not adequately protect the reputations and due process rights of the accused. Is that a frustration you feel?
This is where I think the importance of the independent review board is so great. A good board includes victims, relatives of victims, judges, social workers and so forth. When a group like that looks at a case and says, "This is not a serious accusation," it has credibility.

By that point, a priest has been publicly identified as an accused abuser and removed from ministry.
But when someone is restored to ministry, that's the Good Housekeeping seal of approval.

Is that enough to undo the damage?
I don't think it undoes the damage or the trauma the priest has suffered. I do think, however, that when someone has been exonerated and returned to ministry, our experience is that he's accepted and there have been very few times when there's any pushback.

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The global scene

You were part of the Vatican-sponsored visitation to Ireland. What's your impression of where things stand there?
It's still very, very serious. I'm hopeful about the new nuncio [Archbishop Charles Brown]. He's someone who worked with the Holy Father, and obviously this was the Holy Father's personal choice. It shows the kind of

interest he's placing in the situation, to be personally closer to the Irish church and also perhaps to build some bridges with the government.

Does Ireland today remind you of where Boston was in 2003?
In some ways, yes, but in others, no. When I went there, the similarities were amazing. Of course, some people would say that Boston is a colony of Ireland. The Irish culture is very strong. This is the state with the largest percentage of Irish-Americans, and we have a huge Irish immigrant community here. Our proximity is also a factor, because we're very close to Ireland. So, there are a lot of similarities, but also some things that are different.

If the church in the United States had been running virtually the entire school system and was responsible for every case of sexual abuse [in schools, orphanages, etc.] for the last 50 years, our crisis would have been even more dramatic, and that's the Irish situation.

Last year we saw the explosion of the crisis across Europe, which quickly brought the story to the pope's doorstep. There's been much critical commentary about the pope's role, including his time as archbishop of Munich, then as a Vatican official under John Paul II and as pope himself. What's your own perception about the role he has played in this crisis?
I think the Holy Father, particularly given his experience in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has become painfully aware of the seriousness of the crisis. He's tried continuously to confront it. In Ireland, for instance, he called for the visitation and sent a pastoral letter. I know that in some instances [the letter] was not enthusiastically received, but it was a gesture on his part.

You've been on the frontlines of the crisis for a long time. Have you experienced Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, as an ally?
Yes. Even more recently, the fact that he's calling on bishops' conferences from around the world to come up with a plan and to submit that to the Holy See for their revision is very, very important. I think he's taken it very seriously.

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The personal dimension

Have you ever added up how many hours you've spent meeting victims?
No, but I was meeting with victims 10 years before I came to Boston. In the early 1990s, in my first couple of years in Fall River, a huge amount of my time was spent with victims and their families. In Palm Beach, it was more dealing with parishes. Since coming here, I've spent many, many hours meeting with hundreds of individuals.

Over the arc of your career, are we talking about thousands of hours?
Possibly, when you factor in the other dioceses and the hours in Ireland.

What's the key to reconciling victims with the church?
Quite often, the victims who want to see the bishop are the ones looking for a path to reconnect with God [and] with their faith. Not all of them, but a lot of them are looking for closure. In many cases, when a victim asks to see the bishop, it's because they're looking for a path home.

Does it frustrate you that public conversation is dominated by the victims who are still alienated while we rarely hear from those who have been reconciled?
No, because I think it's very understandable. A lot of the people who have been reconciled are not anxious for the glare of attention. It would be wonderful if people had more awareness, I suppose, but I'm not surprised or

even disappointed, because I think there's a certain interior logic to the situation.

What personal toll has the crisis taken on you?
I think it makes you depend more on God than your own devices, because it's so overwhelming. The hours with the victims, sharing their suffering, is obviously hard, but it's a privileged form of ministry. In the priesthood, I believe that when we're able to minister to those who are suffering, we're able to reflect the presence of the Good Shepherd more than ever. I haven't experienced many people, other than perhaps the families of people who have committed suicide, who have suffered more than families touched by sexual abuse by the clergy.

Has seeing all that suffering ever given you a moment of doubt?
Doubt, no. It makes me more certain of God's mercy. The more we experience evil, there's a greater capacity to experience good. What it has done, I think, is to help me to focus on things that are more essential. When you're in contact with so much pain and suffering, it does help you to put things in perspective. The financial problems and other kinds of things that were weighing on me when I came here don't seem so important. I think it does stretch your heart.

Have these experiences ever tempted you to think there's something wrong with the church that we just can't fix?
Well, the church is very human, and in every generation there are different manifestations of that. I've been close to the church my whole life. I've seen that humanity. Even as a child, I remember we had a priest in the parish who was an alcoholic and had terrible problems with drinking. The pastor would lock the door of the rectory at 8 p.m., and when he would come home drunk, my father and other men in the parish would take care of him. I think it helped me to understand that priests are human.

You never thought, even for a moment, that there's a fatal flaw in the church revealed by the crisis?
I don't think that the Lord is going to abandon his church. We're certainly burdened by our sinfulness, our weakness, and our humanity, but the church is still the sacrament of Christ.

At various points during your time in Boston, some of your friends have been worried about you -- about the toll all this was taking on you, both physically and spiritually. Were those concerns exaggerated?
At the beginning, I don't think so. My family was very concerned. It was daunting.

What was the key to getting through it?
Prayer, friends, family ... all of those things.

You feel better today?
I do.

Have you had to get tougher to do this job?
I hadn't thought about that, but I suppose it's probably true.

To tell you the truth, I haven't had an assignment yet that's been easy. In my first diocese, we had a terrible hurricane and the diocese was destroyed. Then I went to Fall River and all the problems there, and then Palm Beach, where I replaced two bishops who had been removed. There were many very difficult decisions that had to be made over the years. Certainly, Boston has been a new challenge, because of the size and the spotlight here -- as I told people when I arrived, being the archbishop of Boston is like living in a fishbowl made out of a magnifying glass. When they sent my books from Palm Beach in a truck, I found out they were here because the picture was in the newspaper the next day.

Do I have a thicker skin because of all that? I think that with age you grow -- if not stronger, maybe a little bit more philosophical.

You're 67. Do you expect to be in Boston until you're 75?
If I live that long! I've had four dioceses, so I don't think they'll give me any more. I have no reason to think I'll be changed.

Is that a polite way of saying you don't have any interest in a Vatican job -- for instance, running the Congregation for Religious?
No interest! Actually, I was happy when they made an American the No. 2 person [Archbishop Joseph Tobin], because I knew they wouldn't name two Americans in the same office. It meant I was off the hook.

Has your Capuchin spirituality helped you weather the storm?
Oh, yes. If I had not had my religious community and my family, it would have been much more difficult. As a Capuchin, we were always taught in the seminary that the Capuchins were the Marines of the church, meaning that we should be ready to go to the most difficult assignments. I would remind myself of that at certain moments.

The Capuchins who are here in Boston are not my province, but they've been very good to me. The men from Capuchin College, my former provincials, Archbishop Charles [Chaput, of Philadelphia, also a Capuchin] ... many others have been very supportive.

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Breaking news: Pope Benedict XVI on Friday named 22 new cardinals, including two Americans, Archbishops Timothy Dolan and Edwin O'Brien. John Allen's coverage and analysis can be found here:

- Pope names 22 new cardinals, including Dolan and O'Brien [1]
- Five observations on the new cardinals [2]

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR*'s senior correspondent. His email address is **jallen@ncronline.org**.]

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