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A deep look into Philly's clerical culture

Tom Roberts | Feb. 28, 2012 NCR Today

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia, with its roots deep in the soil of a secretive, authoritarian, Irish Catholicism, produced a tightly wound clerical culture unparalleled in this country for its loyalty to itself.

When it comes to clericalism, with its unwritten but clearly understood code of the bishop as prince with the power to bend the culture to his will through the distribution of benefices and punishments, with the means to exact unfailing loyalty, ?Philly? was always in a league of its own.

The culture is unraveling there, and has been since District Attorney Lynne Abraham decided in 2003 to impanel a grand jury, even though the statutes of limitation would probably prevent her from bringing charges, to look into the matter of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests.

The resultant history is well known ? an unprecedented documentation of inner church workings, of unimaginable crimes against children, of cover up and shuffling of abusive priests from parish to parish with no warning to the affected congregations.

The culture is unraveling at a faster rate today, say those in the know, because of the arrival of Archbishop Charles Chaput. Some who knew him in his former spot in Denver and others who are closely following his actions in Philadelphia ? including some who may disagree with him on a range of theological and cultural issues ? say he has little tolerance for the kind of inbred clericalism that characterized the church of Philadelphia.

If that?s the case, the people of the archdiocese are the ultimate winners. But first, it looks as if they?ll have to bear the further burden of seeing that old culture exposed to an even greater extent in court as the trial of Msgr. William J. Lynn gets underway.

One of the early indications of how ugly this might get came by way of a document showing that in 1994 Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua ordered the destruction of a memo that listed 35 Philadelphia priests suspected of molesting children.

According to attorneys for Lynn, the first church administrator to face trial on charges stemming from the abuse crisis, a copy of the memo written by Lynn was preserved in a private safe by his superior, Msgr. James Molloy, the assistant vicar for administration at the time, who oversaw much of the documentation of abuse cases.

Bevilacqua died Jan. 31, shortly after Judge M. Teresa Sarmina ruled that he was capable of testifying. Molloy, who gave NCR extensive interviews for a 2006 story on the grand jury report that resulted from Abraham?s investigation, died that same year just weeks before the story appeared.

It is unlikely that Molloy?s name will surface with any prominence as the trial moves on, but he was a fascinating character who wanted the entire story to be known at the time and who was in apparent conflict between what he felt was his obligation to the truth and the overriding obligation and loyalty he felt toward his

cardinal.

In a sense, he tried to serve both, keeping elaborate records and apparently stashing them away for the time when they might be necessary to bring light to previously hidden matters, while simultaneously doing all he was asked by Bevilacqua.

Molloy figures prominently in the April 28, 2006 story reported and written by Michael Newall, [1] a graduate of Catholic University and now a reporter for The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Newall was a freelance writer at the time and one of the most dogged and unflagging reporters I?ve ever worked with, and a polished story teller. What he produced is still, to my reading, one of the the most detailed and deeply insightful look into the clerical culture ever reported. It shows how profoundly, in its excesses, the demands of that culture can distort the perspective and judgment of otherwise good and well-intentioned men.

It?s a long story and some of the characters who are in today?s reports on the trial -- Lynn, Bevilacqua, Bishop Edward Cullen, now the retired bishop of the Diocese of Allentown --- are discussed.

I?ll pick up here about a thousand words into Newall?s piece, where he begins to write about Molloy:

From: Shining light on a cover up

Indeed, most church officials sought -- or agreed to at the archdiocese?s urging -- legal representation from the Philadelphia law firm Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young. One name conspicuously not on the list is Msgr. James Molloy, who was the third-highest ranking archdiocesan official in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It?s Molloy?s signature that appears at the bottom of many of the files investigators were poring over.

Molloy left the archdiocese?s central administration offices in 1993 and until his death from a heart attack in early March of this year, most recently was the pastor of St. Agnes Parish in Sellersville, a small town 45 miles northwest of Philadelphia. It is one of the most distant parishes to which a Philadelphia priest can be assigned and still remain within archdiocesan boundaries (or as one priest puts it, ?a quaint little Siberia?). The modern church and small brick rectory stand just off Sellersville?s elm- and sycamore-lined North Main Street.

Molloy, at 60 a reserved-looking man with graying light brown hair and a placid demeanor, sat in his rectory office waiting for the investigators to arrive.
?What took you so long?? he had asked, with a nervous laugh, when they first phoned him two days earlier.

Molloy had expected to be one of the first called to testify in front of the grand jury. More surprising, he had yet to hear from the archdiocese. He had assumed they?d want him under their legal supervision and offer representation, but their call never came. Along with later developments, the snub confirmed his suspicions that his superiors and their lawyers were concerned first and foremost with protecting themselves and not the functionaries who had carried out their orders.

Friends and confidants warned Molloy that it was foolish to be without counsel and advised him to request a court-appointed attorney. He decided against getting a lawyer. He had nothing to hide, no fear of telling the truth, he said.
Molloy was confident that the records he had so dutifully kept would protect him and would demonstrate for the court that he was never responsible for harming any children. At worst, he thought they would paint him as a naive underling.

He understood there were risks involved in cooperating. The archdiocese was going to be unhappy.

?But the truth is the truth,? he recalled reasoning when making his decision to cooperate, ?and anyone who sincerely seeks out the truth is engaged in the building of God?s kingdom in some fashion.?

Spade and another prosecutor arrived at St. Agnes sometime before noon, carrying documents bearing Molloy?s signature. They waited in the rectory vestibule, worried that Molloy had decided to retain a lawyer.

Molloy invited them into his office to sit down.

?How can I help you?? he asked. ?What would you like to know??

[Will] Spade [a lawyer in the prosecutor?s office at the time] answered: ?We want to know the truth of how this all happened.?

* * *

The son of an oil refinery worker, Molloy grew up in East Lansdowne, a small, working-class neighborhood in Delaware County, Pa. The parish priests impressed him as being ?pretty good guys,? and he entered St. Charles Borromeo Seminary immediately after graduating from high school in 1964.

He was ordained by Krol.

?Do you promise respect and obedience to me and my successors?? asked Krol, taking Molloy?s hands in his, at one point in the ceremony.

?I do.?

?May God, who has begun the good work in you, now bring it to fulfillment.?

After some quiet years of parish work in South Philadelphia, Molloy decided to continue his studies, earning a degree in sociology at The Catholic University of America in Washington. Not long after returning to Philadelphia, he was assigned to the archdiocese?s Family Life Office, coordinating marriage preparation services. He enjoyed the administrative aspects of the assignment but had little ambition or desire to move up the central administration ladder, he said. He wanted to return to full-time parish work.

?I wanted a peaceful little parish somewhere,? he said during one of a half-dozen interviews with this writer, totaling close to two-dozen hours. ?And maybe one day to become a pastor.?

By 1987, Krol?s failing health had brought an end to his nearly three-decade reign over the Philadelphia church. His successor, Bevilacqua, a charismatic, conservative-minded canon lawyer and civil lawyer, immediately went about reorganizing the archdiocese, breaking it into six regions, each overseen by an administrator known as a vicar. Bevilacqua appointed the highly respected Msgr. Edward Cullen as his vicar for administration. Status reports were demanded from all department heads. Molloy suspected the highly nuanced organizational charts included in his reports from the Family Life Office might have been what got him appointed assistant vicar for administration, answerable only to Cullen and Bevilacqua.

Molloy became the day-to-day operator of the archdiocese?s ?Central Tower.? It was his job to ensure that all administrative paperwork heading for Bevilacqua and Cullen was ?ready for primetime.? He excelled at his new position. In his first week alone, he prepared 120 memos outlining proposed construction projects.

Originally, sexual abuse complaints were processed by the Office of the Secretariat for Clergy, which handled all priestly personnel issues. (By canon law, the archdiocese was required to keep a written record of both the

victim?s claims and the accused priest?s response.) But as accusations began to pile up in the late 1980s, the responsibility was shifted to Molloy, he suspected, because of his administrative prowess.

?It was a matter of happenstance,? he said. ?They needed someone with my talent for drudgery.?

Molloy met victims in a small office on the 12th floor of the archdiocese?s Center City headquarters, which was located across the hall from the cardinal?s large office and a few doors down from the ?Secret Archive? records room. The secretary for clergy, Msgr. Bill Lynn, was also present. One of the men would take notes while the other conducted the interview. To avoid giving the impression that the accused priest might be guilty, Molloy said he and Lynn were instructed not to treat complainants with excessive sympathy or compassion.

?We were functionaries, auditors,? said Molloy. ?Our job was to interview the victim and the accused priest, then write up a report for the archbishop. We didn?t have marching orders to do anything other than that.?

It was an exhausting and time-consuming job, Molloy said.

?I did all my own typing,? he said. ?Because of the required confidentiality, I didn?t have secretarial assistance.?

All victims were offered counseling paid for by the archdiocese. ?But none of them ever came in looking for money,? he said. ?They were there because they wanted the priest reported and removed.?

The accused priest was called in separately -- ?Most times they?d lie and deny it,? said Molloy -- and no other witnesses were interviewed.

Accused priests were sent to the archdiocesan-owned St. John Vianney Medical Center in nearby Downingtown, where they would undergo ?multidisciplinary? evaluations. A doctor there almost always ruled out pedophilia, a finding that, under canon law, would have required that the priest be removed from ministry. But in nearly every case, the priest was reassigned to a different parish.

?To determine if a priest was a pedophile,? reads the grand jury report, ?the ?treatment? facility often simply asked the priest. Not surprisingly, the priest often said no.?

The shuffling of abusive priests troubled Molloy from the very beginning. ?But,? he wrote in one of the many e-mails this reporter exchanged with him during the final two months of his life, ?I was in no position to question the authority of my bishop. As a canon lawyer, the cardinal was much more knowledgeable than I when it came to the requirements of canon law. As a civil attorney, the cardinal was much more knowledgeable than I when it came to the requirements of civil law. And as the archbishop he was entitled to a presumption on my part (as his subordinate of goodwill) that he was doing the right things as best he knew how. He was, by his office, entitled to a commitment of reverential trust on my part.?

Molloy was rarely privy to the discussions concerning reassignments. (The authority to reassign priests belonged solely to the cardinals, Krol and Bevilacqua. Cullen acted as his consultant.) ?Anyhow it would be uncharacteristic of me to be combative to my superiors,? said Molloy. ?Even if I disagreed, I did not see it as my role to make a big deal out of it.?

* * *

One of the earlier cases Molloy handled was that of Fr. Nicholas Cudemo. Molloy would later tell the grand jury that Cudemo ?was one of the sickest people I ever knew.? According to the grand jury?s report, Cudemo ?raped an 11-year-old girl, molested a fifth grader in the confessional, invoked God to seduce and shame his victims, and maintained sexually abusive relationships simultaneously with several girls from the Catholic school where

he was a teacher.? His own family sued him for molesting a cousin.

?He exemplified all of the character traits common to pedophiles,? recalled Molloy. ?He was egocentric, narcissistic, histrionic, impulsive and lacked self-control. He annoyed me very much. I couldn?t understand why he was being given such latitude.?

Cudemo already had numerous allegations and subsequent reassignments on his record. Molloy told the latest victim that although he still had to talk with Cudemo, he had ?no reason not? to believe her. He assured the victim the cardinal would suspend Cudemo if he contacted her family. Upon learning of his remarks, Molloy said, Cullen verbally reprimanded him for ?overreaching.?

(According to the grand jury report, Cullen, who is now bishop of Allentown, Pa., told Molloy ?never to tell victims that he believed them.? The report continues, ?Doing so would have made evident the church official?s knowledge of other criminal acts and made later denials difficult.?)

Cudemo was ordered to report to St. John Vianney Hospital for an evaluation. ?But he balked at having to go,? recalled Molloy. ?He was worried that if he went other priests would know that something was wrong.?

The archdiocese consented to his protests and agreed to send him to Saint Luke?s Hospital in Maryland, where he was diagnosed as a pedophile. The doctors thought Cudemo had probably committed more abuse than he was admitting and, in all likelihood, would continue to abuse.

?Of course Cudemo was very unhappy with this diagnosis,? said Molloy. ?So, he asks for a second opinion conducted by a psychiatrist of his own choosing.?
Again, the archdiocese consented.

?And wouldn?t you know,? said Molloy, ?this new doctor came back with a much sunnier diagnosis.?

Bevilacqua allowed Cudemo to remain in active ministry.

Cudemo was eventually removed from his pastorate after a victim threatened to file a lawsuit. When the lawsuit was dropped, Bevilacqua gave Cudemo a celebret, which declared him ?a retired priest in good standing in the archdiocese of Philadelphia.? A celebret, which attests to the bearer?s being free of canonical censure, is needed to gain permission to say Mass in another diocese.

?The Cudemo case was when I truly realized that I couldn?t be sure that I could trust my superiors to do the right thing,? said Molloy. ?So I decided to operate in a manner that would eliminate the need to trust anybody.?

Molloy said he then went into ?hyper-documentation? mode, taking great pains to make his files to Bevilacqua and Cullen as detailed as possible.

At the time, he said, it was the best contribution he felt he could make to the situation, to history. If it all blew up one day -- and he was pretty confident it would -- he wanted as detailed a record as possible to exist. If his superiors were making the correct decisions in handling the abusers, they would be happy to have his reports. If his superiors were making the incorrect decisions, then his reports would help explain what went wrong.

?I wanted my memos to be there,? he said, ?if the archdiocese?s decisions were eventually put on the judicial scales.?

He was also motivated by self-protection.

?This way anyone could come along in the future and say this was right or this wrong,? said Molloy. ?But they

could never say it wasn?t all written down. No one could ever say I shaded or hid any info.?

Molloy said he never contemplated calling the press, alerting parishioners or contacting the authorities.

?The archbishop was still the archbishop,? he said. ?He deserved the benefit of the doubt.?

One of the final cases Molloy handled was that of Fr. Stanley Gana. Ordained in 1970, he was one of the most prolific abusers detailed in the grand jury?s report. ?Fr. Gana sexually abused countless boys in a succession of Philadelphia archdiocesan parishes,? reads the report. ?He was known to kiss, fondle, anally sodomize, and impose oral sex on his victims.?

Two of Gana?s victims informed the archdiocese of their abuse in the early 1990s. At around the same time, Molloy said, he was ordered to investigate a young seminarian that was believed to be engaging in homosexual relationships. The seminarian told Molloy that Gana had abused him as a child for five years beginning when he was 13 years old. The seminarian provided the names of two other boys whom Gana had also molested. In filing his report to Bevilacqua, Molloy strayed from his usual recitation of the facts and injected his own bit of advice, suggesting to the cardinal that a ?forensic psychiatrist? examine Gana. In Molloy?s eyes, offering this common sense suggestion was some type of bold, defiant course of action. He was, he said, a ?frustrated messenger.?

?By suggesting a forensic psychiatrist, I was saying this is serious business,? said Molloy. ?That this man could still be abusing kids and should be investigated by the authorities.?

Molloy?s advice was ignored. The seminarian was expelled from the seminary. According to the report, archdiocesan officials instructed Gana to keep a ?low profile.? He was allowed to remain in active ministry. For his part, Molloy was informed that he was being reassigned from central administration. He had not requested a reassignment -- to do so, he said, would have been openly insubordinate and disrespectful of the bishop -- but he was grateful to be leaving his post. The secrecy surrounding the complaints had become too much for him. ?It had gotten to the point where I felt like I was working for the CIA instead of the church,? he said.

He suspected his new position at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, where he was rector from 1994 to 1999, resulted from his superior?s displeasure with his handling of the Gana case. ?Was I the best man for the job?? he asked of his reassignment. ?Or were they getting uncomfortable with how I was doing things? I don?t know.?

In his final act as assistant vicar for administration, Molloy requested the alarm code to the records room be reprogrammed and that all the locks and combinations to the filing cabinets and safes be changed. He wanted to make sure no one could ever accuse him of coming back to steal or alter the reports he had written.

?I washed my hands of the place,? he said, ?and just prayed and tried to have faith that they?d do the right thing in future cases.?

There's lots more to the story, before this section and after it. To read the entire piece, click here [1].

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