

In Philadelphia, a church at the crossroads

Rocco Palmo | Apr. 9, 2012



Protesters stand outside the Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul before an Ash Wednesday Mass in Philadelphia, March 9, 2011. (AP/Matt Rourke)

First Person

In the tumult that followed last year's second grand jury report to allege a staggering history of sex abuse and cover-up in the Philadelphia archdiocese, the most striking response I heard from a reeling faithful came not from any cleric, staffer or abuse survivor, but from my mother.

Over a late-night cup of coffee as the revelations were still sinking in, all Mom could bring herself to say was, "It just feels like there's been a death in the family."

What she was implying seemed clear, but I wanted to be sure. "You mean your trust in the wider church, outside the parish?"

"That's exactly what I meant," she shot back.

If that was how Mom, a South Philly Italian named for a nun, now a lay minister and caretaker for my ailing grandmother -- in other words, a pillar of the faith -- felt at the start of a year whose turns since have read like a surrealist novel, one could forget about finding credibility anywhere else.

It's been a steady stream of "deaths" for this family of 1.2 million since February 2011, when District Attorney Seth Williams (himself a Catholic) stunned the church here and well beyond with the explosive findings of his office's second full-scale investigation of the archdiocese's leadership in five years. Listing the tiers of tumult that have erupted to roil the fold, however, does little to convey the sense of the visceral impact they've had, one many natives have likened to some variation of being "hit by a truck" as each fresh aftershock has surfaced.

One by one, the pieces have quickly fallen into place.

Within weeks of the two-year inquest going public, the core of the local church culture -- a notoriously quiescent clergy -- began to revolt after 21 of their own, among 37 priests alleged by the grand jury to have been kept in ministry despite what the panel termed "improper behavior with minors," were placed on administrative

leave in the largest single banishment of clerics in the history of the American church. (For varying reasons, another 10 priests have since been pulled from the ranks.)

Numerous civil suits quickly followed as victims' attorneys seized upon the new report's evidence as proof of an archdiocesan conspiracy, thus allowing plaintiffs to circumvent Pennsylvania's ironclad statute of limitations.

A January proposal to close or merge 49 schools -- by far, the biggest downsizing of Catholic education ever eyed by a U.S. diocese -- sparked rallies from city streets and suburban fields to demonstrations at cathedral Masses as students, parents and alumni took out their fury on parish priests and diocesan officials alike.

The archdiocese's former chief finance officer, a laywoman, was fired, then arrested on charges of stealing \$900,000 in church funds over several years to pay personal bills and casino trips, and the chancery's in-house lawyer was suddenly removed and replaced over unspecified "legal circumstances."



The Vatican fast-tracked Cardinal Justin Rigali's retirement as archbishop and the

longtime Roman kingmaker headed for the mountains of Tennessee, while his long-retired predecessor, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua -- excoriated by both grand juries, but charged by neither -- died under a cloud of court scrutiny. And in the development looming above it all, Williams' probe levied charges against Msgr. William Lynn, the first church official in the English-speaking world to be indicted for moving priests with substantiated abuse allegations to new assignments, paving the way for the landmark trial that began March 26 before a packed courtroom and under the glare of global interest. The trial is likely to run at least two months.

Though the epic fallout of the 2011 grand jury dominated local media for weeks after its release, coverage of the trial following its first day has quickly retreated to a low boil; despite hours of wrenching daily testimony, each day's digests are garnering 15 second briefs on TV news, while the newspapers run cursory recaps. And as the hearings' second week began, reports from the courtroom said that the sizable crowds who turned out for the early proceedings have dwindled.

The attention is likely to be renewed should some game-changing item emerge or if, as is widely expected, the surviving bishops among Lynn's superiors become the first U.S. prelates to testify in criminal court on their management of allegations.

As *NCR* went to press, advocates for local abuse victims were planning a Good Friday demonstration outside Philadelphia's Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul to rally support for reform and keep their cause in the spotlight.

Surveying the last 14 months, a veteran pastor summed up the broad current of fatigue among Catholics with an exasperated, "What in the world will happen next?" The trial's verdict remains in the balance, yet one significant outcome of the grand jury is already settled: The model of triumphalist clericalism that long defined American Catholicism's "Last Empire" is dead, and something very different is beginning to rise in its place.

That's not to say the new shape of things is clear -- it won't be for some time, especially as the flock faces even

more dramatic days over the weeks and months ahead.

After spending the last year in an investigatory ?limbo,? final decisions on the fates of the 21 removed clerics are expected to emerge. And beyond the Lynn proceedings, a religious priest and lay teacher charged with abuse by the grand jury begin their trials in September, after which the civil litigation against the archdiocese will begin.

A considerable downsizing in bricks and mortar, however, is perhaps the most significant sign of the end of an era. Archbishop Charles Chaput has placed on the market the 13,000-square-foot mansion on nine acres where his predecessors have lived since the 1930s.

Despite the success of several appeals of school closings -- including a last-minute reprieve for four targeted high schools -- June will still bring the shuttering of 36 elementary schools.

And already under way is the first wave of an anticipated three-year process that could see the closing or consolidation of a quarter of the 268 parishes spread across five southeastern Pennsylvania counties.

Seven months on the job, Chaput?s tenure is shaping up as an uphill decade of gutting and rebuilding a 200-year-old apparatus. Like the last year, the road ahead won?t exactly be for the faint of heart.

Accordingly, both sides of my family are still coming to terms with the impending loss of the three schools that educated scores of our clan for the better part of a century. Even so, Mom was a bit more sanguine than before as the trial approached.

?It?s so horrible,? she said. ?But at least it?s getting cleaned up.?

[Rocco Palmo is editor of Whispers in the Loggia, whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com, a church news blog. In March, he was named an at-large member of a new Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, the first such body to be established in Philadelphia.]

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