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Editorial: Philadelphia was a shallow victory

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

Two Philadelphia cardinals in succession, John Krol (head of the archdiocese from 1961 to 1988) and Anthony Bevilacqua (1988-2003), for decades knowingly protected priests who had sexually abused children, sometimes savagely, hiding their actions from civil authorities and from the Catholic community they were supposed to serve.

We are certain of those assertions because a grand jury in Philadelphia managed to subpoena thousands of pages of documentation and to accumulate hundreds of hours of testimony before issuing, in 2005, a stunning report detailing years of sexual abuse of children by priests and cover-up of the abuse by cardinal archbishops.

It was discovered in 2011 that a third cardinal, Justin Rigali, since retired, had essentially disregarded provisions of the bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, ignoring credible claims of abuse against more than a dozen priests and bypassing the archdiocesan review board.

The cardinals were abetted in hiding the crimes by an insider group of clerics that included Msgr. William Lynn, as well as Edward Cullen, who went on to become bishop of Allentown, Pa., and Joseph Cistone, currently bishop of Saginaw, Mich.

The Philadelphia archdiocese was one of the worst examples of high clericalism in the United States and of what the clerical/hierarchical culture could breed in its single-minded determination to hide the crimes of sex abuse and protect itself. In the end, it did neither.

Like many others, we felt that a bit of justice had been done when a jury reached a guilty verdict in the case of Lynn and the court sentenced him to jail. Certainly, the other overseers of the cover-up -- the cardinals and other officials -- escaped prosecution, but Lynn stood as an example to others that

determined prosecutors could find ways to reach into the hierarchical ranks and force accountability even as church authorities refused to do so.

So why question the court's rulings now? Why entertain a kind of counternarrative and pose the disturbing questions that Ralph Cipriano raises in his analysis of the recent trials in Philadelphia?

NCR has a deep investment in seeking the truth of the sex abuse crisis in the church. The first comprehensive national story on the scandal, a detailed look at a disturbing case in Louisiana and the growing national problem, appeared in *NCR's* pages in June 1985. Long before the issue became a big media story in 2002, *NCR* was pursuing the awful truth of this chapter in church history.

That same investment in understanding the truth of this ugly issue compels us to consider the serious questions raised about the legal proceedings that led to Lynn's conviction and sentencing and the convictions of Fr. Charles Engelhardt and Catholic school teacher Bernard Shero.

Years of elaborate deceptions by Catholic leaders are hardly avenged if the response is more cunning deception by civil society.

The discrepancies between Billy Doe's accounts to the archdiocese and later to the grand jury are not minor; they are utterly different versions of reality. We know that privately, members of the district attorney's team found his initial descriptions of brutality and hours of vicious rape simply unbelievable.

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Perhaps the list of potential witnesses that include a sibling, a mother who meticulously kept her child's calendar, and counselors who would question the veracity of Doe's claims will be called on appeal. Why they weren't in the first place is at least deeply puzzling.

Edward Avery's recanting of a guilty plea and his admission under oath that he had taken the plea for the sake of a deal, one that gives him far fewer years in jail than he might have otherwise faced, should raise serious questions.

Finally, Pennsylvanians should demand to know how Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams found a loophole in the state's child endangerment law that allowed his office to take action against Lynn, who had never had direct contact with the children involved, when his predecessor, one of the most determined prosecutors in the country in dealing with sex abuse by priests, said the law did not apply.

Perhaps answers exist for all of these questions, but in months of reporting on his blog about the issues, Cipriano repeatedly sent lists of questions to the district attorney's office. He never received a substantive response to his queries.

It is difficult to come to the defense of a character like Lynn, who is known to have betrayed the trust of the Catholic community, particularly when it means questioning the legitimacy of the vindication so many victims felt when he was convicted. But treating the inadequacy of existing law by bending the law to one's purposes is a shallow victory.

The truth of the matter is important because we also are aware of the eagerness of too many, fantasists in the worst sense of the term, who are convinced that the sex abuse crisis is a manufactured assault by anti-Catholic media, lawyers and anti-religious secular culture. Providing additional fuel for such ignorant denial does no one any favors.

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