

Cardinal disgraced in sex-abuse scandal plays prominent role in papal funeral rites

Patrick Martin
11 April 2005

Cardinal Bernard F. Law, compelled to step down in disgrace in 2002 as archbishop of Boston because of his role in the cover-up of priests who sexually abused young boys, has been given an honored role in the ceremonies marking the death of Pope John Paul II.

Law is to preside Monday over a memorial mass at the Basilica of St. Mary Major, the second of nine daily masses held between the pope's funeral April 8 and the April 18 opening of the conclave of cardinals that will select a new pope. Only nine of the 180 cardinals are selected to preside over the memorial masses, and Law is the only American to do so. (Of the 180 cardinals, 117, including Law, are eligible to cast votes in the election of the new pope.)

Law resigned as archbishop of Boston after unsealed court records revealed he had allowed priests guilty of abusing children to move among parish assignments, without notifying the public. Pope John Paul II took no punitive action, and last year appointed Law, still a cardinal, to the position of archpriest of the Basilica of St. Mary Major, one of Rome's most prominent churches. It was in that capacity that Law was named to lead one of the papal memorial services.

The cardinal was interviewed on several American television networks and honored by the Bush administration when he joined other American cardinals at a reception with President Bush and his wife, Laura, at the United States Embassy residence in Rome.

This flattering attention has come as a shock to the victims of the sex abuse scandal. According to reports in the American press, "to the astonishment and dismay of many Boston Catholics, Law has returned to the public spotlight" (*Washington Post*). It "reminded American Catholics that their most painful recent chapter barely registered in the Vatican" (*New York Times*).

Law stepped down as archbishop of Boston in December 2002, after a year of unprecedented revelations

about hundreds of cases of sexual abuse of pre-teen and teenage boys by Boston-area priests. For months, victims of sex abuse came forward and told their stories about the predatory actions of John J. Geoghan, Paul R. Shanley and dozens of other priests.

For months, Law, a dogmatic conservative who was appointed by John Paul II, downplayed the seriousness of the charges and accused critics of seeking to undermine the Church. Dozens of priests and thousands of parishioners signed petitions calling on him to resign, but he rejected any suggestion that the Church hierarchy should be accountable to the lower ranks. Ultimately, however, he was compelled to hand over the names and records of 80 pedophile priests to Massachusetts state authorities.

The trigger for his ouster as archbishop was a decision by a Massachusetts judge to compel the Church to release internal documents about its personnel decisions. These documents showed that Law had been aware of repeated allegations of sex abuse against certain priests, and had adopted a policy of transferring them from parish to parish without notifying anyone in the congregations.

This had a twofold effect: it supplied fresh, unwitting victims to the priests; and it prevented these disturbed men from receiving treatment for their condition. (Geoghan, linked to sexual abuse of more than 130 people, was sentenced to 10 years in state prison, where he was murdered by a fellow prisoner.)

If any institution besides the Catholic Church had been involved, the evidence would have led to criminal prosecution, not merely of the individual abusers, but of the senior official who took affirmative action to permit the abuse to continue. Law ignored complaints by abuse victims, refused to report crimes by priests to the police, and even wrote letters of commendation for priests who he knew were involved in abusing children.

A series of investigations concluded that at least 1,000

people were victimized as children in the Boston archdiocese alone. More than 150 priests were found to have a record of abuse. The Church there has paid settlements of more than \$90 million, forcing parish consolidation and the closure of some Catholic schools as a consequence of the resulting financial crisis.

The Boston scandal was far from isolated. The surrounding publicity emboldened thousands of victims of priest sexual abuse to come forward and make accusations. More than 1,000 sexual abuse lawsuits have been filed in the US alone, with multimillion-dollar settlements in Dallas, Portland and other dioceses. Similar charges forced the ouster of priests and bishops in Poland, Ireland, France and Austria.

Pope John Paul II convened an extraordinary meeting in the Vatican on the US sex abuse scandal on April 23-24, 2002, bringing together all of the US cardinals and the leadership of the US Catholic Conference of Bishops, as well as Vatican officials. The meeting produced a statement formally condemning child sex abuse, but making a series of excuses for the priests involved, including the claim “that almost all the cases involved adolescents and therefore were not cases of true pedophilia.” The meeting denied the obvious, declaring that “a link between celibacy and pedophilia cannot be scientifically maintained,” and reaffirmed “the value of priestly celibacy as a gift of God to the Church.”

The pope gave his approval to a “special process for the dismissal from the clerical state of a priest who has become notorious and is guilty of the serial, predatory, sexual abuse of minors.” The language is worth parsing: priests guilty only of occasional or allegedly consensual sexual abuse of minors were not to be subjected to this process.

John Paul II later made this distinction still clearer, when he rejected an effort by the US bishops to establish a “zero-tolerance” policy providing for automatic dismissal of child-abuser priests. The pontiff ruled that such a policy neglected the possibility of repentance and “the power of Christian conversion,” and violated the priests’ rights under canon law.

John Paul II was not so tender in his regard for the rights of priests and even bishops and cardinals who clashed with his vision of the church—notably those associated with the “liberation theology” movement in Latin America, which sought to associate the Church with grass-roots peasant and worker struggles for social justice. Numerous priests were disciplined, removed from parishes, even defrocked for what the anti-communist

pontiff viewed as fraternization with Marxism.

The selection of Cardinal Law to celebrate the memorial mass for John Paul II was greeted with outrage by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, an organization of sex-abuse victims and their families. Representatives of the group said they were flying to Rome to distribute fliers at the Church of St. Mary Major detailing Law’s role in facilitating and covering up the attacks.

In an interview with the press, Mary Grant of Long Beach, California, a board member of the group, said Law should decline the invitation to preside over the ceremony. “Law should have the courtesy, decency, and humility to step aside voluntarily, out of deference to the well-being of clergy sex abuse victims, their loved ones, and the laity in the US,” she said. “If he doesn’t, we can only hope that bishops and cardinals around the world will vehemently object to this hurtful decision and insist that Law be replaced.”

There seems little likelihood of this, however, not least because Cardinal Law is still viewed as highly influential within the Vatican. Bernie McDaid, victimized by a Boston-area priest decades ago, told the *New York Times* he was “infuriated” to learn of Law’s role. “In any other corporation if you lost your rank and left, you’d lose your power and you’d be stripped of your title,” McDaid said. But in Law’s case, “here he is in Rome, still as powerful as he was before.”

Law’s influence in the College of Cardinals means that a proven defender of child abusers will play a key role in the selection of the next pope, not merely as one vote out of 117, but as a leader of the bloc comprising the most conservative and doctrinaire “princes of the church.” That fact tells more about the real nature of this reactionary and repressive institution than all the hours of fawning coverage the US media devoted to the funeral of the pope.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact