

Dueling notions on priest scandal

An honor for Cardinal Law reopened a wound in the U.S. from cases the Vatican sees as over.

By Ken Dilanian

Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Writer

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ROME - The Vatican's decision to have Cardinal Bernard Law preside at a high-profile mourning Mass for Pope John Paul II on Monday is the latest example of the disconnect between senior church officials and many U.S. Catholics on the priest-abuse scandal.

While the Pope and other senior Vatican officials repeatedly condemned child sex abuse by priests and endorsed efforts by American bishops to combat it, they never saw the revelations of recent years as the enormous, confidence-shattering event that many Americans did, Vatican-watchers say.

"For Americans..., it takes a very small thing to kind of reopen a wound," said the Rev. Thomas Williams, the American dean of the school of theology at Regina Apostolorum Pontifical University in Rome. "Here in Rome, it's considered basically over and done with."

Of 11 American cardinals, only Philadelphia's Justin Rigali, who spent 33 years working in the Vatican, attended the Monday Mass. Rigali's spokeswoman said she was unable to reach him in Rome for comment last night.

Aides of three American cardinals denied their absence from the Mass was a snub, and said no conclusion should be drawn. Spokesmen for the others did not respond to requests for comment.

Most cardinals from other countries also skipped the Mass on a rainy afternoon, but their reasons were unclear.

Law was forced to resign as Boston archbishop in 2002 after it emerged that he knowingly shuffled abuser-priests among parishes without informing parishes or criminal authorities. After a sabbatical, he was given the job of archpriest of St. Mary Major, one of Rome's four "patriarchal basilicas." In that role, he was tapped to preside over the mourning Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, one of nine during the official period of papal mourning.

A handful of Americans protested in St. Peter's Square on Monday, and Law's role continued to draw rebukes yesterday from some key Catholic voices in the United States.

"I thought it was very foolish of the hierarchy to ask him, and I thought it was foolish and not gracious for him to accept," said Washington lawyer Robert S. Bennett. As a member of the U.S. bishops' lay National Review Board, Bennett wrote a groundbreaking report last year that was published along with a study showing that nearly 11,000 children were sexually abused by Catholic priests in the United States over the last five decades.

That report came after some senior church officials - including Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Mariadaga, who is considered a strong papal candidate - continually questioned whether the American media were blowing the matter out of proportion as the scandal mushroomed in 2002. He stood by his remarks a year later.

"We all know that Ted Turner is openly anti-Catholic, and he is the owner not just of CNN but of Time-Warner," Rodriguez said inaccurately in May 2002, in a broadside accusing the former CNN chairman and other U.S. news outlets of "persecuting" the church. He suggested it was because of the Vatican's pro-Palestinian outlook.

Such comments led many Americans watching the issue to wonder whether the hierarchy grasped that the scandal was not just about clergy abuse but about an institutional cover-up.

The role given to Law this week raised those questions anew. Many had come to see Law as the symbol of church negligence.

Nicholas P. Cafardi, who chairs the National Review Board, which monitors how the church responds to priest abuse, said he did not think Vatican officials understood how wounded U.S. Catholics might feel over Law's role.

"It makes them look insensitive, and that's not what we need right now," the Duquesne University Law School dean said.

The dissonance between the Vatican and American Catholics over the priest-abuse scandal is about more than one man's role, and it is deeply felt by U.S. theologians and other Americans who closely follow the church in Rome.

One of them, National Catholic Reporter correspondent John L. Allen Jr., devoted an 89-page chapter in his latest book, *All the Pope's Men*, to examining how and why each side viewed the priest scandal differently - and misunderstood each other.

According to Allen, Vatican officials were stunned that litigants could win multimillion-dollar judgments against the Catholic Church under the American civil justice system. Many of them come from societies that lack the awareness of sexual abuse that Americans have, Allen said, and did not understand that for Americans, the cover-up by a trusted yet secretive, unaccountable institution was as outrageous as the individual crimes.

Allen, theologian Williams and others also contend that Latin cultures, including Italy and the Vatican bureaucracy, tend to emphasize forgiveness and redemption, while Americans construe that as arrogance or insensitivity to victims.

"What Americans call 'sheltering,' church officials in other parts of the world often think of as 'giving a second chance,'" Allen said yesterday by e-mail.

Those competing notions came into focus in 2002, when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted a zero-tolerance standard that called for removing priests credibly accused of a single act of sexual abuse. The Vatican said it could not accept that policy, and released its own standard that included a narrower definition of sexual abuse and an insistence that before a priest could be removed, he must be tried through the slow proceedings of Roman canon law.

The Vatican policy allowed for the possibility that a priest who had abused a child could remain a priest.

Some advocates for victims of priest abuse insist that the Vatican has never taken priest abuse seriously except as a public-relations debacle.

"You can't get around the fact that the Vatican has ignored the problem, and has tried to stonewall and deny it under this papacy," said the Rev. Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer who warned the Vatican about priest abuse in 1985.

Illinois Appeals Court Justice Anne Burke, who chaired the National Review Board before Cafardi, said that when she and Bennett twice traveled to Rome to meet with senior Vatican cardinals, they were pleasantly surprised by the officials' probing questions and apparent interest in hearing the findings of their far-reaching investigation into the priest-abuse problem.

However, Burke said, "it doesn't appear that they have paid much attention" to the failings of the hierarchy.

David Clohessy, director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, called the Vatican's reaction to the scandal "belated, begrudging and blaming, and with a real contradiction between word and deed."

He added: "On the one hand, the Pope says there is no place in the church for someone who would harm the young. And yet very few who abused have been defrocked and none of the enablers, not one, has experienced one iota of consequence from Rome."

The scandal is not over, he argued, noting that the Dallas Morning News, in an ongoing series, has tracked down dozens of priests who had been accused or convicted of child sex abuse in one country, often the United States, and yet were ministering in another, often in the developing world. Reporters found several of the priests working in Rome.

As is its custom, the Vatican declined to respond to the newspaper's findings.