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More Than Just A Trial

The trail of Paul Shanley, who was at the epicenter of the clergy sex scandal, bears a heavy burden.

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The trial of Paul R. Shanley that began in Boston this week is only superficially an examination of rape charges against the defrocked priest at the epicenter of the Church's priest sex scandal. But the occasion carries a far heavier burden than the trial of one man in one city.

Despite the huge, \$85 million settlement the Boston Archdiocese made to settle hundreds of clergy sex abuse cases, despite the fact that Cardinal Bernard Law is no longer head of Boston's Catholics, no member of the clergy has gone to prison as the result of this widespread scandal. The victims' pain is real and hasn't gone away. Even if a jury finds Mr. Shanley guilty, it wouldn't be surprising if the feeling in the end, on the part of victims and those outraged at the church, is one of profound emptiness.

Two years ago the court released thousands of documents to the public documenting the Church's actions on these and other cases. To sort through these memos, letters, notes and reports, many on official stationery, is downright hair-raising. Over and over, officials' concern is not for the victims, or the understandable objections of the laity over hurtful and even dangerous acts, but for public relations and reputations, at all costs.

Documents going back to the 1960s show that Church hierarchy knew about Mr. Shanley's sexual deviancy. Even into the 1990s, church officials were more concerned about keeping him somewhere other than Boston than keeping people around him safe. Just one 1995 memo marked "confidential" written to Cardinal Law from the Rev. Brian M. Flatley talked about a possible job for the then-Father Shanley in New York at a Catholic retreat house. The memo talks about the need for strict supervision, discussed Father Shanley's "psychological pathology," and says, "of course, the bottom line is, what do we have to do if he has to leave there? This is probably a better situation than we can come up with."

Those two sentences sum up the Church's mistaken and heart-breaking approach.

The Church would, no doubt, like to put this and other scandals behind it. The only way that will occur is if the American bishops invite far more openness and lay participation. And sadly, no matter what happens to Mr. Shanley, the many church officials who aided and abetted his repulsive career will remain largely unscathed from any human court. ■

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