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Cardinal Bernard Law, archbishop of Boston, has come under increasing pressure to resign since the latest crisis erupted in Boston in January. He has acknowledged that he allowed priests to remain in active ministry even though he knew of sexual misconduct allegations against them.

A BETRAYAL of TRUST

With each new allegation of sexual abuse, the Catholic church is lurching closer to crisis. Both conservatives and liberals speak of the matter in historic terms, as a potentially pivotal crossroads for the church in this country.

By FRANK BRUNI
The New York Times

For more than a decade, Catholic leaders insisted that child sexual abuse by priests was an aberrant horror, expertly quelling any significant protest among American Catholics and containing a debate about the need to reform church traditions. Cases of priests preying on children came and went, and while some of them badly embarrassed the church, none ultimately shook it.

Over the past several weeks, however, that seems to have changed. With each newly revealed example of a priest's crimes, a prelate's complicity and the church's failure to protect its most vulnerable charges, the sexual abuse problem has moved from the realm of fleeting scandal to the category of genuine crisis. More and more leading Catholics, both conservatives and liberals, are beginning to speak of it in historic terms, as a potentially pivotal crossroads for the church in this country.

"I don't know of anything that has affected the whole church so much in the United States," said Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, one of the church's liberal voices.

That assessment drew agreement from William Donohue, president of the Catholic League, a conservative group, who also looked back over the church's history in this country and said, "There is nothing that would rival this."

But it is not at all clear yet what the fallout will be. A growing chorus of Catholics is calling for a re-examination of everything from the celibate, all-male priesthood to the limited role of laity in the governance of parishes and dioceses, and some American bishops and cardinals seem willing to listen.

But on many of these issues, Rome has the final say. And across the centuries, it often has responded to unrest among American Catholics with a refusal to budge, standing its ground and holding fast to traditions and practices even as some

American Catholics put greater distance between themselves and the institutional church or walked away.

"This calls into question such a fundamental trust," said Susan Secker, a moral theologian at Seattle University who was a member of a Catholic study group in 1993 that made recommendations to bishops on how to handle child sexual abuse by priests.

"It's not easy to compare it — it's not like you disagree with teachings or with a position," Secker said. "This is a betrayal of trust, with people trying to understand how men of God who were helping them with their faith could be involved in this. I think it's fundamentally shattering."

Because of that, the repercussions of the current crisis could go beyond the quiet and private disaffection of Catholic parishioners, and many leading Catholics believe it will.

They maintain that the wound to the church is so grave that it compels a dramatic show of action, possibly including an end to mandatory celibacy for priests, which some believe to be one of the aggravating factors in the crisis, and permission for priests to marry.

They cite recent comments by Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles as evidence that such a movement is gathering force. Although Mahony is not generally regarded as a liberal, he told reporters: "The Eastern Catholic Churches have always had a married priesthood, and it works out fine. I think it should be discussed."

The Rev. Richard McBrien, a liberal theologian at Notre Dame University, said: "Obligatory celibacy is dead; it's just a matter of time. It's like those old comedy movies where someone is dead and they touch the body and say, 'Joe, how are you?' And all of a sudden the body falls forward."

"That doesn't mean," McBrien added, "that the funeral will be held immediately."

So far, the signals from the Vatican suggest that it never will be. The Vatican and its American emissaries weathered an earlier spasm of intense attention to child sexual abuse by priests in 1992, touched off

by the case of the Rev. James Porter, who molested scores of children in Massachusetts. After that journalists moved on to different subjects, advocates for change labored in relative silence, and the church went about its usual ways.

There are differences now. In many cities and states, law enforcement officials are scrutinizing the church more aggressively than they did then, prompting church leaders in some dioceses to release the names and files of priests accused of child sexual abuse. Journalists and lawyers seem more intent on connecting the dots of the crisis in a way that leads to the highest levels of the church in the United States.

"It's an entirely new era," said A.W. Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine monk and the author of several books on the sexual behavior of priests. "The hierarchy has never been challenged this way in the United States before."

Sipe predicted, based on his regular conversations with reporters and lawyers around the country, that the series of disclosures since the beginning of the year has just begun.

He even alluded to what was arguably Catholicism's greatest crisis over the past five centuries, the Reformation, when there also was a widespread belief in the corruption of church leaders.

That analogy does not quite fit. The Reformation, which gave birth to Protestantism, also hinged on theological questions, and few experts foresee American Catholics leaving the church in organized droves.

But many suspect that the way the church operates in this country — with bishops and cardinals moving priests from parish to parish at their unchallenged will — is under siege. They see an unavoidable need for what David Tracy, a professor of theology at the University of Chicago, called "a democratization of the present structure."

"The situation is so grave that only some kinds of serious moves, both symbolically and practically, can really address it," Tracy said.

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