

Can Cardinals Turn the Tide Of Criticism?

BY LARRY WITHAM

The child sex-abuse scandal rocking the Catholic Church has left the American faithful confused but defiant.

American Catholics are taking in the daily headlines about sexual abuse in their church with stoic patience, waiting to see what action the hierarchy takes and worrying about the reputation of good priests. In dioceses where the scandal is bubbling, some Catholics are calling for resignations. In others, they are marching in support.

"Many Catholics are feeling they have to answer the embarrassing questions of friends and neighbors, and they don't want to," says James Davidson of Purdue University, a researcher on Catholic demographics and opinion. "There are dioceses that have had no sexual-abuse episodes. There are others that have had many."

The scandal shows Americans just how decentralized the Catholic Church is, according to Davidson, and how even the meeting of U.S. cardinals in Rome does not guarantee a quick, top-down cleanup of the problem. "We are realizing how independent each diocese is," he says.

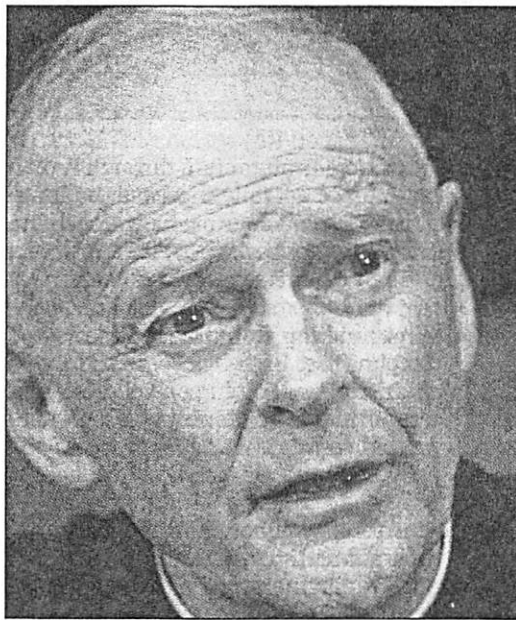
In the nation's capital, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who met with Pope John Paul II before the April 23 summit, says the pontiff is concerned that American Catholics are "losing their confidence; they are being scandalized." He emphasized that just 35 priests out of 21,000 who have served in the Boston area in the last 50 years had "credibly been accused of this crime." This is a low rate of wrongdoing for any profession. "We can all do the math," he said.

Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony, whose archdiocese suffered only a small number of accusations, has become a national voice, while Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston is besieged.

Some 3,000 Catholics marched through downtown Los Angeles in support of their church.

In June, the bishops will assemble in Dallas for their midyear meeting and consider whether a national policy may be necessary, even though each diocese is independent and beholden only to the Holy See in Rome. Some Catholics are waiting to see how the bishops deal with their own complicity in covering up some abuse cases.

"In my own experience, we view this with deep sorrow and shame," says Rebecca Teti, who with her husband, Dennis, and three children attend St. Jerome parish in Hyattsville, Md. Their anguish is typical of Catholics across the country. "Every day, practically, there's another headline and more people asking questions," she says. "The onslaught feels perpetual." Informed Catholics, she says, know that their faith



McCarrick: *The pope is concerned that Catholics are losing confidence.*

is in more than an institution, and that even greater scandals have rocked Catholicism over history when a small segment of priests behaved badly. "Since such a tiny percentage are involved, at our parish we feel even closer to our pastor; we feel something good will come of this," she says. "Certain crimes do cry out to heaven. But day after day, the news stories don't seem fair."

Opinion polls taken in recent weeks show that American Catholics, who in majorities long have shown openness to the idea of married priests, are particularly hard on their leadership for the present crisis.

In a *Newsweek* poll, for example, 74

percent of Catholics said the church has been "too lenient" with sexually abusive priests.

A Harris poll for *Time/CNN* found that 60 percent of Catholics said the church leadership handled the cases either "fairly" poorly or "very" poorly. While half of Catholics said the abuse problem was "isolated," four in 10 said it was "part of a pattern of abuse" in the priesthood. What is more, 86 percent told the Harris poll that bishops who covered up the abuse or allowed it to continue "should step down."

A poll released by the *Boston Globe* and WBZ-TV in mid-April showed that 65 percent of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Boston, the center of the sex-abuse scandal in the American church, want Law to resign. Seven in 10 believe he has "done a poor job" in handling the crisis.

Boston court papers showed in January that Law knew of a pedophile priest who was moved from parish to parish after complaints were made. He gave authorities 80 names of clerics who were the subjects of abuse complaints. But the cardinal returned from Rome recently determined not to step down. "My desire is to serve the archdiocese and the whole church with every fiber of my being," he said.

Catholic commentators have noted that, while the headlines have been massive since mid-January, the cases in question date primarily from the 1960s and 1970s. By 1985, the bishops began to crack down on the problem, and in 1992 established guidelines to screen candidates for the priesthood, to monitor priests with complaints

lodged against them and to work with police.

Meanwhile, the more polarized traditionalists and liberals in the church are pointing to the abuse problem as evidence of their prescriptions of recent decades. "The conservatives are saying, 'This is an indication that we should limit access to the priesthood by homosexuals,'" says Davidson. "The left says, 'This shows that celibacy should go and we need a married priesthood.'"

Even when the legal cases are settled and abusive priests purged, the issue will linger for these vying groups in American Catholicism. Adds Davidson, "This means the issue is not going to go away soon."

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