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Cardinal Says His Handling Of Charges Was Proper

By PAM BELLUCK

BOSTON, May 19 — Boston's embattled archbishop, Cardinal Bernard F. Law, issued a letter today to parishes defending his actions in the handling of sexual abuse cases involving priests, especially the case of the Rev. Paul R. Shanley.

The cardinal responded for the first time to some specific accusations in the Shanley case. They include the charge that the Boston Archdiocese knew of complaints against Father Shanley as early as the 1960's and that church officials nonetheless allowed him to serve in a parish in Newton, Mass., and later in a California parish and a Roman Catholic guest house in Manhattan.

In his three-page letter, Cardinal Law said he had not known about sexual abuse accusations against Father Shanley until 1993, when an charge was "immediately acted upon, and the authorization for him to serve as a priest in California was rescinded."

"I was not aware until these recent months of the allegations against him from as early as 1966," he said.

He also addressed an accusation by a woman in Father Shanley's Newton parish that she had approached the cardinal in 1984 after Mass and told him that Father Shanley had molested a young man she knew.

"I have absolutely no memory of such a conversation," Cardinal Law wrote today, "and those who have worked most closely with me can attest that such a report would have been acted upon. There is no record of that having happened, and furthermore, I had no suspicion about Father Shanley concerning this in the ensuing years."

He added: "I wish I had known in 1984, and I wish I had been aware of the 1966 report. It is only possible to act based on what is known."

In an interview earlier in the year, the woman who complained, Jacqueline Gavreau, had said she approached the cardinal and told him about Father Shanley twice at public church gatherings, in 1986 and 1987.

"He never did anything," Ms. Gavreau said. "He never called me."

Father Shanley, 71, has become a central figure in the sexual abuse scandals. He was arrested this month in San Diego and brought back to Boston to face three charges of child rape. He is accused of pulling a boy out of Catholic education classes at St. John the Evangelist Church in Newton almost weekly and repeatedly molesting him from 1983 to 1989, beginning when the boy was 6.

More than two dozen people have claimed that Father Shanley molested them over his 30-year career as a priest. In lawsuits filed against Father Shanley and the archdiocese, more than 1,600 pages of documents have been released, showing a series of complaints involving either sexual abuse or his public advocacy of sex between men and boys.

The cardinal's letter did not address the complaints about Father Shanley's endorsement of man-boy sex, which were received from the late 1970's to 1985.

It also did not address why the archdiocese supported Father Shanley's move to New York in 1995, when he became the acting director of Leo House, the Catholic guest house. Documents indicate that archdiocesan officials gave New York officials very little information about Father Shanley's background.

The letter also did not explain a 1997 letter that Cardinal Law wrote to Cardinal John O'Connor of New York, supporting Father Shanley's application to be made permanent director of Leo House. The letter was never sent, apparently because Father Shanley had already been turned down for the job.

Roderick MacLeish Jr., a lawyer representing several people who claim Father Shanley abused them, said today: "To accept the cardinal's statement, one would have to believe that the people who were closest to him said nothing to the cardinal" about what they knew about Father Shanley. "You'd have to believe that they did no review of Shanley's file when he was promoted to pastor." In the letter, issued on Pentecost Sunday, the day Catholics believe the disciples received the Holy Spirit, Cardinal Law referred to the clamor of calls for his resignation, saying, "My credibility has been publicly questioned and I have become for some an object of contempt."

He said he was "profoundly sorry that the inadequacy of past policies and flaws in past decisions have contributed to this situation."

"Mistakes have also been made when facts that should have been before me were not," he said. "I often have made decisions based on the best information available to me at the time, only to find that new details later became available which some may argue I should have had previously."