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FROM THE MAGAZINE

Religion

Can the Church Be Saved?

As allegations of sex abuse--and official cover-up--mount, outraged Roman Catholics are urging their leaders to redeem and reform the faith

[BY JOHANNA MCGEARY](#)



Monday, Apr. 01, 2002

Cover

The shock is that so many cases have spilled like stained vestments into public view--not just in Boston but in Los Angeles and St. Louis, Mo., and Philadelphia and Palm Beach, Fla., and Washington and Portland, Maine, and Bridgeport, Conn. The horror is not their singularity but their ghastly similarity: claims of a Roman Catholic priest sexually abusing children, and the church covering it up whether it involves Father Dan or Father Oliver or Father Rocco...

Or Father Brett. Frank Martinelli was an impressionable 14-year-old altar boy who yearned to be a priest. He saw a holy future unfolding when the Rev. Laurence Brett, the charismatic young priest at St. Cecilia's in Stamford, Conn., enrolled him in a select teen group dubbed Brett's Mavericks. It wasn't quite the kind of special relationship with a trusted priest that Martinelli expected. On a Washington field trip, Father Brett allegedly fondled young Frank in a bathroom. Martinelli claims that while Brett was driving him home, the priest urged the boy to give him oral sex, blessing it as a way to receive Holy Communion. Like most youngsters 30 years ago, Frank was too ashamed, too scared, too uncomprehending ever to say a word.

Martinelli, now 54, didn't become a priest after all. He married, had a son and settled in Milwaukee to work as a consultant for nonprofit organizations. His life was marred by inexplicable confusions, anger, depression and lost faith. Not until one night in 1991 did he understand why. He was talking on the phone to an old Connecticut friend when the friend blurted out that he had been abused back in those Maverick days by Father Brett. "I had this rush of feeling," Martinelli told TIME. "I realized, Wow, that's what happened to me." He began seeing a therapist and a year later filed a civil suit in New Haven, Conn., federal court against Brett and the Bridgeport diocese, then led by Bishop Edward Egan.

Church authorities in Bridgeport had discovered

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Brett's proclivities as early as 1964. They did not report him to civil authorities or warn parishioners, and they let him minister at ecclesiastical posts around the country. In 1990 when Egan took over as bishop, he met with Brett and later noted, "All things considered, he made a good impression. In the course of our conversation, the particulars of his case came out in detail and with grace." As a result, Egan let Brett come back to Bridgeport as a priest.

In November 1992 Brett confessed to an indiscretion and later to two more--but stayed in the ministry. Then came Martinelli's allegations, and then another accuser surfaced. A week later, Egan finally told Brett he could no longer serve as a priest. In mid-1997 a jury decided the diocese had breached its duty by not warning Martinelli of the priest's predilections and awarded him nearly \$1 million. An appeals court overturned the award, and the case was later settled for an undisclosed amount.

Today Brett is on the run and still officially a priest, despite pleas to defrock him. Egan, now Cardinal and Archbishop of New York and perhaps the pre-eminent prelate in the U.S., is under heavy fire to explain his handling not just of Brett but of other pending cases of priests whose abuses he allegedly hushed up while in Bridgeport. For Martinelli, there's still no solace. He would, he says, have settled for nothing in cash if he just could have got a public apology.

Thousands of Frank Martinellis and hundreds of Father Bretts cast a dark shadow over the Roman Catholic Church this Eastertide--and so have the U.S. bishops who let the crimes fester. The crisis gathers steam day after day, with perhaps 2,000 priests accused of abuse across the country and hot lines jamming with more victims' calls. It is not just what Boston's Bernard Cardinal Law called "a tragic error" but a spiritual and financial body blow to church authority as well, demoralizing to every man who wears a Roman collar. Lives have been hurt, trust damaged and the credibility of the church to speak on social issues tainted.

How long does it take powerful institutions to learn that it's not just the crime, it's also the cover-up that damns you? The Roman Catholic Church kept silent for decades about the immoral, even criminal betrayal of its children, but in this era of openness, that just won't do. When priests stand in their pulpits this holiest week of the Christian year, what are they going to say to congregations shamed, in pain, frustrated, angry that so much was so hidden for so long? As the Roman Catholic faithful in America are bidden to rejoice that a risen Christ will save their souls, they now want to hear how their church is going to save itself.

After weeks of silence, Pope John Paul II issued a vague Holy Week message, saying, "As priests we are personally and profoundly afflicted by the sins of some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of ordination" and offered "concern" for the victims. But the muted words would not satisfy those looking for a concrete course of action. In a Palm Sunday pastoral letter, Egan reiterated his policy of overseeing abuse allegations himself but urged victims to bring them to the attention of police. And he defended his Bridgeport conduct like a lawyer: every case disclosed had occurred on his predecessor's watch; he took the word of experts when he recycled abusive priests back into the ministry.

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Pedophilia remains a medical mystery

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Culture of Secrecy

Many of us may have just awakened to the stunning extent of priestly pedophilia since January, when the Boston Globe exposed the predations of John Geoghan and the habit the diocese had of systematically concealing them. But the U.S. church has known all about it--how deep sexual misconduct ran, how widespread, how frequent--at least since the first big abuse scandal broke at a Louisiana trial in 1985, when the Rev. Gilbert Gauthé was sentenced to 20 years for molesting dozens of children, who were awarded a combined \$18 million in damages.

In the years that followed, there were more big cases and big financial settlements--an estimated \$1 billion or more--but only halfhearted efforts to adopt firm guidelines on how to handle the problem. Early on, the Rev. Thomas Doyle, then a canon lawyer at the Vatican embassy in Washington, drafted a 100-page report advising that offenders be moved away from kids, that victims be succored and that the public be told the truth. But whenever a fresh case erupted, the church said it was an aberration, an isolated example, one bad apple. Or media bashing by an anti-Catholic press.

Dioceses lapsed into a pattern of denial and deception. They treated sexual pathology as a moral failure and crime as a religious matter. The Roman Catholic Church is a stern hierarchy that has always kept its deliberations secret, policed itself and issued orders from the top. An obedient priest moves up in power by keeping his head down, winning rewards for bureaucratic skills and strict orthodoxy. When Cardinals are created, they take a vow before the Pope to "keep in confidence anything that, if revealed, would cause a scandal or harm to the church." When it came to sex abuse, the Vatican essentially told bishops, You're on your own. But if saving the church from scandal was literally a cardinal virtue, then the bishops of America's 194 dioceses who had direct responsibility for priestly misconduct would make it their first principle. Better by far never to let the public know.

If allegations came to diocese attention, the bishop, a power unto himself who often operated as if ordination gave him a share of the Pope's infallibility, acted as prosecutor, judge, sentencer. Desperate to retain even sinful men, as the number of priests shrank alarmingly, and ever putting the image of the church first, bishops refined the system. Convince the family that publicity would harm the faith. Don't report to the police; don't warn the parish. Treat the priest with confession, time out at a discreet rehab center and Christian forgiveness; then let him resume duties at a new parish, the same way they dealt with whisky priests' alcoholism. For years the bishops believed, or made themselves believe, pedophilia could be "cured," until the serial molestations and multiple victims and repeat offenders proved it wasn't so. Only the most recalcitrant recidivists were eventually "laicized"--forced to give up their priestly vocation--long after they had done their worst. And if a victim finally sued, the strategy was to admit nothing, buy silence, settle out of court and

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