

 **NEWS & FEATURES**

## The price of perversity

Reflections on the costs exacted by John Geoghan and Cardinal Law

BY PETER KADZIS

AS SOMEONE WHO was raised a Roman Catholic, I have for years been at odds with many of the Church's policies, especially those that in any way touch upon sexuality: contraception, abortion, a married clergy, the role of women, and the place — or lack thereof — for gays and lesbians within the Church.

At the same time, I must confess to a certain impatience with liberal and progressive friends who are quick to damn the Church and all its works without considering its history of social activism — advocating for the poor, opposing the death penalty, counseling immigrants, and, more recently, working to promote interfaith and interracial harmony.

But like so many others, I have been flabbergasted by the depth and the breadth of the pedophilia scandal.

That the Church is populated by pedophiles comes as no surprise. Years after we graduated, on separate occasions, three high-school friends talked with me of their experiences with priests who made sexual advances toward them. And this was years before the now-defrocked John Geoghan's name appeared in headlines.

Two out of the three appear to have come out of the experience shocked, but unscarred. One said he had made a social visit to a high-school teacher after graduation and found a photo book of nude boys lying visible on the table. When asked by his host if he found that sort of thing interesting, he quickly cut the visit short. Another said that for months he thought he was imagining that a particular priest had an uncommonly intense interest in him. His suspicion was confirmed when the priest groped him. He too made it clear that he had no interest in further contact, physical or otherwise.

But my third friend had a more troubling experience. He went to a priest he thought he could trust, to ask for advice. He had what he then thought was an abnormal attraction to boys, including his classmates. The priest from whom he sought counsel engaged him in several long and probing conversations. In the end, the priest offered resolution to the boy's confusion in the form of a very explicit and aggressive advance. My friend was shocked and devastated. Years after the event, he recalled the nights he spent in tears. His quest for sexual identity ended — temporarily — in months of self-loathing. What sort of pervert was he, my friend wondered, that he would so tempt a priest?

Today, the perversity in question is not only that of the individual priests who preyed on children throughout the archdiocese and throughout the nation. The greater perversity is that of the institution that tolerated and covered up such behavior for so long. Responsibility begins with the pope and the Vatican-based bureaucracy, and travels down through cardinals and bishops to the local administrators who see to the affairs of the Church. All this is particularly chilling when you consider that the five bishops who allowed Geoghan to remain in active parish service have since been promoted and now run their own dioceses.

"American Catholicism may not be a democracy," *New York Times* columnist Bill Keller recently wrote, "but it lives in one. And while the separation of church and state is a precious freedom, the First Amendment was never intended to provide sanctuary for criminals." But that's just how Bernard Cardinal Law and his bishops used it.

Nevertheless, there is no viable criminal charge that can be asserted against the cardinal and his subordinates. Simply put, in order to engage in a criminal conspiracy, you must actively encourage the enterprise. That many believe the Church was passive and duplicitous to the point of recklessness may be damning in the court of public opinion, but it is not enough to support a criminal indictment.

That's one reason I find it disturbing that all 86 cases involving Geoghan's victims are settling with the Archdiocese of Boston out of court. Once again, the Church has purchased the silence of its victims. The settlement, as predicted by many, came days before Cardinal Law was to be questioned under oath about his role in the Geoghan affair. No one can blame those abused and their parents for wanting to bring closure to this chapter of their lives. They deserve what peace they can find.

But the fact that the cardinal will not have to explain his actions in detail underscores the double price exacted by Geoghan's sexual abuse. First there is the psychic and emotional price paid by his victims and his high-ranking clerical enablers. Then there is the price in actual dollars and cents. Newspaper accounts of the settlement suggest that it could reach as high as \$30 million. Add that to the \$15 million already paid to Geoghan's previous victims. Some predict that before this is over the archdiocese will pay out \$100 million to more than 200 other victims who will file claims for abuse alleged to have taken place over the past 10 years. And, it was reported this week, the archdiocese's insurance policies will not cover the settlements, forcing the Church to sell off real estate to foot the bill. Even worse, according to published reports, the scandal has discouraged contributions to the Church's current \$300 million capital campaign, which the archdiocese has now extended in hopes of riding out donors' negative reaction.

Think of the good that could be done with the settlement money. Think of the units of affordable housing that could be built, the schoolteachers who could be hired, the elderly who could be cared for, the hungry who could be fed, the battered women and children who could be sheltered — all of them issues the admirable side of the Church has tended to throughout the last hundred or so years.

That's the added cost and hidden shame embedded in this sorry story.

The court settlement is by no means the final chapter. Across the nation, reports of abuse by Catholic clergy are mounting. I greet the news with a degree of numbness, which should not be mistaken for indifference. Quite the contrary. Just as my feelings used to oscillate between open frustration and quiet pride in the Church into which I was baptized and confirmed, I now maintain a certain clinical calm. I think that if I were to drop that sense of detachment, I would be consumed with rage.

*Peter Kadzis can be reached at [pkadzis@phx.com](mailto:pkadzis@phx.com)*

**Issue Date: March 14 - 21, 2002**

Back to the News & Features [table of contents](#).