

## OBITUARIES

# Bernard Law, Powerful Cardinal Disgraced by Priest Abuse Scandal, Dies at 86

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN DEC. 19, 2017

Cardinal Bernard F. Law, whose stature as archbishop of Boston and America's senior Roman Catholic prelate was shattered in a maelstrom of scandal, acrimony and resignation in 2002 after it was revealed that he had protected abusive priests for years, died on Wednesday in Rome. He was 86.

The Vatican confirmed the death in a news release.

Cardinal Law was a staunch defender of church orthodoxy, a Harvard-educated advocate of social justice for immigrants and the poor who had campaigned for civil rights in the segregated South. And when he arrived in Boston in 1984 as Pope John Paul II's new archbishop, he was welcomed like a favorite son.

Over the next 17 years, he became one of the nation's most influential churchmen, a protégé and confidant of the pope, a friend of presidents, a force in politics who traveled widely, conferred with foreign leaders and nurtured Catholic relations with Protestants, Jews and others. Admirers thought he might become the first American pope.

His popularity was hardly universal. Some of his own clergymen called him arrogant and autocratic. To critics, and even to many Catholics who questioned

4

ARTICLES REMAINING

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Subscriber login

hierarchy that rigidly opposed abortion, birth control, the ordination of women and changes in the traditional celibacy of an all-male priesthood.

In Boston — perhaps the emotional heart of the church in America, but a city with a history of racial troubles — Cardinal Law was a voice for tolerance, and he became part of the city's political and social fabric. His annual garden party drew leaders in government, business, the arts and society. In 2001, Boston magazine put him fourth on its “power list,” just behind Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

In January 2002, however, the scandal of child molestation by priests that had been gathering across America for years hit Boston like an explosion. It erupted when a judge released documents in the case of the Rev. John J. Geoghan, a defrocked priest who had been shifted among a half-dozen parishes amid accusations of abusing 130 boys over 30 years.

The cardinal, who had once acknowledged transferring Father Geoghan to another parish, apologized, saying he had relied on flawed psychiatric assessments.

In the ensuing months, hundreds of people came forward to say that they had been molested by priests in the archdiocese. Lawsuits and criminal investigations began. In response, 25 priests were removed, and the cardinal gave prosecutors the names of 80 priests accused of abuse over decades. But when the authorities sought further details, they said he became vague and reticent, citing sketchy records.

Abundant information was found, though, in a personnel file on the Rev. Paul R. Shanley, disclosed by a plaintiff's lawyer. It said Cardinal Law and his predecessor, Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, knew of dozens of pedophilia accusations against Father Shanley but allowed his continued contacts with children.

Voice of the Faithful, a lay Catholic group formed in response to the crisis, questioned Cardinal Law's role. As the scandal widened, demands for his resignation grew. They peaked in December 2002, when church documents released by plaintiffs' lawyers showed that Cardinal Law had for years transferred abusive priests without telling parishioners or law-enforcement officials, and that he had been more protective of the priests, and less of their victims, than he had allowed.

Nearly 60 priests signed a letter asking him to resign. Polls showed that three-quarters of the churchgoers in an archdiocese of millions believed that cases of pedophile priests had been covered up. Cardinal Law, his credibility in tatters, flew to Rome, and on Dec. 13 the pope accepted his resignation.

The scandal became the subject of the Academy Award-winning 2015 movie “Spotlight,” which depicted how a team of journalists from The Boston Globe uncovered the way church leaders had shifted molesters from parish to parish. (Len Cariou played Cardinal Law.)

While Cardinal Law kept that title after his resignation, he left an archdiocese in turmoil, facing 500 lawsuits, \$100 million in damage claims and probable bankruptcy. As the highest-ranking American prelate deposed in the scandal, he became a focus of anger and feelings of betrayal among many American Catholics.

The cardinal testified before a grand jury and gave depositions in civil cases, but he was not charged with a crime or held liable for damages. In 2003, he was castigated by the Massachusetts attorney general, Thomas F. Reilly, who said that as many as 1,000 children had been sexually abused by 250 priests in the Boston archdiocese over 40 years, and that Cardinal Law had known of the problem even before he arrived in 1984 and had tried to suppress any publicity about it to save the church from disgrace.

The cardinal, who initially retreated to a convent in Maryland, was appointed in 2004 as high priest of one of Rome’s four most prestigious churches, the Basilica of St. Mary Major. After Pope John Paul died in 2005, Cardinal Law was one of nine prelates who presided at the funeral Masses and among the 115 cardinals who elected Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as the successor, Pope Benedict XVI.

In exile in Rome, Cardinal Law was permitted to keep the powerful role he had played for years as a kingmaker of American bishops, serving on the Vatican committee charged with advising the pope on bishops’ assignments. In this position, he helped shape the American church’s hierarchy for a generation. Many of his favored candidates are still leading American dioceses.

The cardinal also played a part in encouraging the Vatican to open an investigation of American nuns, by fanning suspicions that some communities of nuns had abandoned Catholic doctrine and replaced it with radical feminism. The investigation, begun under Pope Benedict XVI, shocked the sisters and set off a backlash among American Catholics sympathetic to the nuns. It was ended by Pope Francis.

In Boston, in a statement released after the death, Cardinal Law's successor, Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley, said it was "a sad reality that for many, Cardinal Law's life and ministry is identified with one overwhelming reality, the crisis of sexual abuse by priests."

"This fact carries a note of sadness," he added, "because his pastoral legacy has many other dimensions."

He also said: "I am particularly cognizant of all who experienced the trauma of sexual abuse by clergy, whose lives were so seriously impacted by those crimes, and their families and loved ones. To those men and women, I offer my sincere apologies for the harm they suffered, my continued prayers and my promise that the Archdiocese will support them in their effort to achieve healing."

Bernard Francis Law was born in Torreón, Mexico, on Nov. 4, 1931, the only child of Bernard A. and Helen Stubblefield Law. His father was an Army Air Corps officer (and later a commercial airline pilot), and the boy grew up on military bases in the United States and Latin America. He graduated from high school in Charlotte Amalie, in St. Thomas, V.I.

At Harvard, where he majored in medieval history, classmates said he had already decided to become a priest. After graduation in 1953, he studied for two years at St. Joseph Seminary in St. Benedict, La., and from 1955 to 1961 at the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio.

He was ordained a priest in 1961 in the diocese of Natchez-Jackson, Miss. He served two years as a parish priest in Vicksburg, then became editor of The Mississippi Register, the diocesan newspaper in Jackson. He joined civil rights

marches and editorialized against segregation and racial violence. He received death threats, and his newspaper lost many subscribers.

Developing ties with Protestant and Jewish leaders, he helped to create religious and social-welfare groups of mixed denominations and races and won national attention for ecumenical work. From 1968 to 1971, he directed a national committee of Catholic bishops on ecumenical and interreligious affairs.

After two years as vicar general of the Natchez-Jackson diocese, he was named a bishop in 1973 for the diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Mo., where he pressed his social agenda for 11 years. From 1980 to 1982, he also led a program in which Episcopal priests, some married, joined the Catholic priesthood.

In 1984, the pope named him archbishop of Boston, then the nation's third-largest diocese, with two million Catholics. His investiture came days after that of John J. O'Connor as archbishop of New York. Frequently called "Law and Order" by the secular press, the two politically savvy prelates denounced Representative Geraldine A. Ferraro, a Catholic and the Democratic vice-presidential nominee in 1984, for supporting abortion rights. She and Walter F. Mondale lost in a landslide to President Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

Both archbishops were named cardinals in 1985 and became national Catholic leaders. Cardinal Law conferred at times with President Reagan and often with President Bush, with whom he was especially close. The cardinal spoke to Mr. Bush as often as once a month, rode with him on Air Force One and was invited to the Oval Office and the president's summer home in Kennebunkport, Me.

Cardinal Law traveled to Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. Fluent in Spanish, he went to Cuba several times, meeting Fidel Castro in 1990 and leading delegations of Bostonians during Pope John Paul's visit to Havana in 1998 and of bishops in 2000. He met President Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua in 1986, and in 1989 was a go-between for President Bush and the papal nuncio in Panama, who helped arrange the surrender of Panama's dictator, Manuel Noriega, during an American military incursion.

In Boston, he made the rounds of fraternal clubs and political dinners, his familiar Irish face beaming at St. Patrick's Day parades. He was a suave master of ceremonies and often appeared on television talk shows. He wrote columns for the diocesan newspaper, toured hospital wards and attended the funerals of his diocesan priests, whose ranks during his tenure dwindled from 1,000 to 500.

His death elicited a letter of condolences from Pope Francis to the dean of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, The Associated Press reported. The letter made no mention of Cardinal Law's role as the former archbishop of Boston or the scandal there, The A.P. said, and referred only to the cardinal's position as archpriest of the St. Mary Major basilica.

The Vatican announced that the pope would preside over funeral rites on Thursday morning in St. Peter's Basilica, an honor accorded to all cardinals based in Rome

***Correction: December 21, 2017***

An earlier version of this obituary misidentified the branch of the military in which Cardinal Law's father served. It was the Army Air Corps — not the Air Force, which did not exist at the time. (It was established in 1947.)

Laurie Goodstein, Jason Horowitz and Diego Ribadeneira contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on December 21, 2017, on Page B14 of the New York edition with the headline: Cardinal Bernard F. Law, 86, Disgraced After Protecting Abusers, Dies.

---

**The New York Times**

**Our best to you this season.**

Give yourself unlimited access to expert reporting on politics, business, tech and culture. Enjoy 50% off for one year when you subscribe now.

Are you a student? Special rates here.

**Basic**

\$15 \$8/month

**GET BASIC**

see details

\* Billed as \$8 every 30 days for one year.

**All Access**

\$27 ~~\$13~~/month

**GET ALL ACCESS**

see details

\* Billed as \$13 every 30 days for one year.

**Home Delivery +  
All Access**

As low as ~~\$9.00~~ \$4.50/week\*

**GET HOME DELIVERY**

see details

\* Billed as \$18 every 28 days for one year. Home Delivery price based on Saturday/Sunday delivery in the New York metropolitan area. Prices vary based on delivery location and frequency.

© 2017 The New York Times Company