

**ABOVE THE LAW: Cardinal Law is finally gone. But why didn't he resign a year ago, when the scandal of a century first broke? Deep inside the Vatican's maze of hallowed halls and secret chambers lies the real reason.**

***Boston Magazine, January 2003***

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## **Above the Law**

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**By David Gibson**

The Barbarians were at the gates. It was April and the Vatican was occupied by bloodthirsty journalists who had descended in their television trucks from parts unknown to assist in the sacking of Rome. Pope John Paul II was easy prey. Since January, a clergy-abuse scandal had convulsed the Catholic Church, beginning with the revelations that the Archdiocese of Boston was covering up for serial pedophiles.

Cardinals and archbishops were being threatened with subpoenas if they didn't tell everything they knew, and indictments if they did. It was the greatest crisis in the history of American Catholicism, one that was already being compared to the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. And one man was considered responsible for it all: Cardinal Bernard Law.

Now Law was bringing his troubles to the heart of the Catholic Church. Boston's archbishop had been summoned along with 11 other American cardinals to meet with the Pope and plot a way out of a mess whose magnitude the Vatican only dimly perceived. "They still can't believe it," one Vatican monsignor confided months afterward.

The shock of the invasion was visible on the faces of clerics who peeked out through the blinds of their Vatican offices, staring wide-eyed at the circus in St. Peter's Square. They watched as klieg lights were adjusted in front of well-coifed television correspondents. Reporters grabbed anything in a Roman collar, hoping for a sound bite, while Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls fled into his office whenever he spotted a journo lurking about the Holy See's press department.

Deep inside the Apostolic Palace, in the ancient warren of chambers and halls where the business of the church is conducted, the tumult did not go unnoticed by the one man whose opinion mattered. John Paul was about to celebrate his 82nd birthday, and he wasn't happy about this shadow hanging over the otherwise golden sunset of his papacy. He knew the church was in trouble, and he knew Cardinal Law was the cause of it.

It took some time for the scope of the crisis to filter through the protective curtain papal aides have drawn around John Paul. While the Pope once read newspapers from around the world, these days he is given only a summary of the news from major papers. At first, the *Boston Globe* didn't make that cut. But as the scandal spread and the efforts by Law and his fellow bishops to spin the debacle became more comical (poor record-keeping?), John Paul grew aggrieved at the revelations that kept pouring forth from the *Globe* and other papers. "Geoghan preferred preying on poorer children," read one headline. "Meltdown in the Catholic Church," said another.

Sitting in his simply furnished office above St. Peter's Square, the Pope knew that Cardinal Law — whose job it was to set a moral example for his flock — had become almost universally reviled. He saw the polls demanding Law step down and surveys showing that more than 90 percent of Catholics nationwide thought

bishops who covered for molesters should be disciplined by the Vatican. Even this popular pope couldn't get 9 out of 10 Catholics to agree on anything.

Finally, John Paul called the U.S. cardinals to Rome for a 48-hour sit-down. The media figured the subtext had to be the survival of Bernard Law. Surely, the scandal wouldn't end until someone's head was on a platter.

Yet when the meeting wrapped up, to the utter shock and dismay of Catholics the world over, Law was still archbishop. It was like "Watergate without the Nixon resignation," as the Catholic journalist Tom Fox put it.

Only after new revelations surfaced last month — that Law had protected a priest who was allegedly trading sex for cocaine, and another who convinced teenagers studying to become nuns to engage in sex acts by describing himself as "the second coming of Christ" — would Cardinal Law finally resign his post as archbishop of Boston. By that time, the scandal in the Catholic Church had spiraled for a full eleven months.

How did Law escape the firing line for so long when even priests in his own charge were calling desperately for his resignation? Deep inside the Vatican, there had to be a reason. And, indeed, there was.

The favorite story to emerge after the April meeting was that Law and the Pope were friends. Law was the one man John Paul could trust to return America to Catholic orthodoxy. So the Pope sent his friend back to Boston last spring, the story went, to clean up the mess he had made.

The reality was completely different. "To be close to the Pope you have to be Polish," says John L. Allen Jr., the Rome correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter. This accounts, he says, for the Pope's close relationship with Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida. "You have to share that worldview. The Pope has always trusted Law. But they are not bosom buddies."

You can feel the careful distance in the way the Pope greets his cardinals, calling them by their archdiocese rather than by their name. "Boston," he intoned as he greeted Law in past meetings. "Washington" for Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. And so on (except for Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony, who he calls "Hollywood," which suits the only member of the College of Cardinals who has piloted his own helicopter).

In reality, the Vatican had three reasons why it kept Law in his post for so long, all three connected by the single eminently Christian idea of the one sacrificing for the many. In a sense, Bernard Law hit a trifecta.

First, Rome saw Law as a martyr. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," as the ancient formula has it, and from Jesus to St. Stephen to the subsequent thousands canonized for defending their faith, martyrdom is the surest path to holiness. By the Vatican's standards, Saint Bernie's public vilification easily qualified him. The more Law was persecuted, the greater was his glory, at least until the evidence proving his shocking behavior eventually buried him for good.

Early on in the crisis, Vatican officials showed they were embracing that view by dismissing the scandal as a creature of the media and Western (read: American) culture. "Concerning the problem of sexual abuse and cases of pedophilia, I have only one answer," Cardinal Dario Castrillon-Hoyos, head of the Vatican department in charge of the world's clergy, told reporters. "In today's culture of pansexualism and libertinism created in this world, several priests, being of this culture, have committed the most serious crime of sexual abuse." Western society was evil, in other words, and Cardinal Law was taking the blame.

The National Catholic Reporter's Allen compares the Vatican's view to those of people in Los Angeles during the O. J. Simpson trial. L.A. residents thought O. J. was guilty, Allen says, but they also thought he was framed. "The same view prevailed in the Vatican about Cardinal Law," he says. "I have met no Vatican official who did not believe that Cardinal Law was at the very least spectacularly incompetent, ranging to morally wrong. But they also believed he had been subject to public hostility that was unfair. To them, Law had become a convenient outlet for beating up on the church. They didn't want to capitulate to that."

The second reason Law kept his job for so long: The Vatican believed he carried the God-given mark of his ordination — a seal that cannot be erased by bureaucratic reshuffling to appease unhappy stockholders. "An archbishop is not a corporate executive," Law said at a Mass in February as calls for his resignation grew

louder. "He's not a politician. It's a role of pastor. It's a role of teacher. It's a role of a father. When there are problems in the family, you don't walk away. You work them out together with God's help."

At the time, that argument spun well at the Vatican, where a debate had opened over whether the ailing Pope ought to retire. John Paul and his supporters fend off those suggestions with direct recourse to the "fatherhood" idea. "He thinks of himself as the father of a family. And you don't resign paternity," says the papal biographer, George Weigel. The Pope aims to continue "to the end of the mission given to me," as he put it in October on the 24th anniversary of his election. If Law left for reasons of expedience, that would remove one more of the legs that's holding up the pontiff's throne.

The third element was the most persuasive, at least to the Vatican: It's the Pope who calls the shots in the Catholic Church, not the vox populi. Popes spent too many centuries wresting authority away from laypeople to give it back in the heat of a scandal, especially at a time when the Church's role is diminishing in the culture at large. In 1076 Pope Gregory VII famously forced the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, to kneel in snow for three days and beg for forgiveness for the sin of usurping the Pope's power. Popes have spent centuries since staunchly defending what they consider their divine rights against the wills of secular kings and princes.

Today, the threat to the church's power comes not from monarchs, but from middle-class democracy, a regime in which every man is a king. The potential usurpers of the church's claims are legion. "Basically, the Vatican was afraid it would be a domino effect if Law resigned," says one high-ranking American prelate. "If people thought, 'Oh good, we can get rid of Cardinal Law,' then they could get rid of any bishop." Now that Law's gone, it remains to be seen whether other high-ranking officials will land in the line of fire.

In short, the Pope was willing to leave Cardinal Law in place for so long because John Paul is currently engaged in a bigger battle. Papal loyalists are campaigning to have the pontiff dubbed "John Paul the Great," an honor enjoyed by only three other popes — Leo in the fifth century, Gregory in the sixth, and Nicholas in the ninth. All battled heresies, and all triumphed. John Paul sees himself in a similar struggle, only updated: secularism rather than paganism, Western relativism rather than savagery. Law coasted a long way on those coattails until his ride came to an end.

And so finally also ended one of the most bizarre and, indeed, one of the saddest chapters in the history of Western religion. Until the next set of secret files is unearthed, that is. And the headhunt continues. And the Catholic Church recommences its desperate struggle to retain meaning and authority in the 21st century.

*Originally published in Boston Magazine, January 2003.*