

After Shanley

A pedophile priest's conviction can't wash away the crimes of his protectors in the Church hierarchy

EDITORIAL

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THE CONVICTION and imprisonment of defrocked priest Paul Shanley brings a four-year saga to a symbolic close. Shanley, at one time a street-level priest admired for his work with runaways, had become the public face of the Catholic Church's child-sexual-abuse scandal, accused of repeatedly taking advantage of children who had been entrusted to his care. As such, the verdict in Middlesex Superior Court this past Monday — finding him guilty of raping and fondling a Sunday-school student some 20 years ago — was anticlimactic, especially given the now-27-year-old victim's reluctant testimony, based in part on the controversial notion of recovered memory.

But the sad truth is that this story never should have been about Shanley, the late ex-priest John Geoghan, and other rapists in Roman collars. Because the real story was always about the people in power — from the late Humberto Cardinal Medeiros, who privately mocked Shanley's blackmail threats against the Boston archdiocese even while continuing to give him new assignments, to Bernard Cardinal Law, who resigned his position as archbishop in 2002 after the extent to which he had coddled Shanley and others became known.

The legal case against the perpetrators was never as strong, as compelling, or as important as the moral case against their protectors. It is the Catholic Church's shameful legacy — in Boston, across the nation, and worldwide — that the worst of its priests were simply shifted about from place to place, free to continue ruining young lives for years, even decades. That's an important fact to keep in mind now that the shock of the past four years is finally beginning to fade.

The truth about pedophile priests would never have come to light were it not for the courage of the victims and the willingness of the news media to stand up to a powerful institution. Although sex abuse within the Church had been an off-and-on scandal since the 1980s, the hierarchy itself hadn't been implicated until March 2001, when the Boston Phoenix — in a groundbreaking series of articles by Kristen Lombardi — reported on Cardinal Law's possible role in covering up Geoghan's crimes. (An archive of the Phoenix's reporting on this subject is online at www.bostonphoenix.com/pages/cardinal.asp.) Then, in 2002, the Boston Globe began its massive, relentless investigation into the hierarchy's role in enabling abusive priests. It was the Globe that first detailed the sordid career of Paul Shanley. Within months, Law was gone.

The Church's lack of responsiveness in dealing with this evil in its midst is important to keep in mind, because it suggests what might happen should such a horror arise once more. Law's successor, Archbishop Seán O'Malley, deserves credit for acting swiftly to settle with dozens of remaining victims, and for moving out of the inappropriately palatial estate in Brighton. But O'Malley has handled church closings with the sort of arrogance and high-handedness that calls to mind Cardinal Law.

More broadly, the recent illness of Pope John Paul II is a reminder that there is little hope for change at the top of the hierarchy, either. The pope has treated the pedophile-priest scandal as though it were strictly an American problem, barely worth his attention. And the cardinals who will choose his successor were largely appointed by him, all but guaranteeing that the next pope will be a conservative who believes in the same sorts of policies that may have contributed to the scandal in the first place. Not to oversimplify, but a greater role for the laity, the ordination of female and married priests, and the acceptance of homosexuality are all things that could help prevent the depredations of future John Geoghans and Paul Shanleys. The grassroots reforms advocated by Voice of the Faithful would go a long way toward empowering ordinary Catholics, and thus preventing the conspiracy of silence in which

pedophile priests were able to flourish. Unfortunately, none of those changes is likely to come to pass for many years.

Perhaps Paul Shanley, now in prison, is reflecting on his crimes. But what of Cardinal Law, now ensconced in a cushy position at the Vatican? What of other bishops and archbishops and cardinals, all of whom conspired to make the crimes of Shanley and others possible? There can be no accountability unless those at the top admit to their own crimes. For all the truth that has been told during the past four years, that still hasn't happened. Until it does, this saga cannot genuinely be said to have ended.