January 07 - The Cardinal's Sins, NEW YORK MAGAZINE, by David Gibson

Edward Egan did the dirty job he was hired to do with less pain than anyone thought possible. So why can't his priests wait to get rid of him?

As the Cardinal walked into the front parlor of his St. Patrick's residence, girding for a tense meeting with about 40 leading New York priests, he was painfully aware of the circle that seemed ready to close around him. For nearly seven years, Edward Egan had reigned as cardinal-archbishop of New York-"the archbishop of the capital of the world," as Pope John Paul II once called the job. Yet throughout his time here Egan had never really felt at home, had never become a "real" New Yorker in the identity morph that so many transplanted prelates and politicians manage just by donning a baseball cap. Instead, by choice and by nature, Egan had remained an outsider, a Chicagoan by birth and a Roman cleric by training, who had both an exalted view of a bishop's authority and an anxious sense of how perilous the modern world can be for anything that smacks of monarchy.

As Egan, 74, prepared to retire from the pulpit that he rarely used to great effect, Egan's long-standing fears seemed to be coming true, his history repeating itself with uncanny timing. He'd called the meeting of the Presbyteral Council in response to an anonymous letter, containing a series of blistering attacks on the cardinal, that surfaced on a clerical-gossip blog and subsequently made it into the papers.

The disloyalty he read in the priests' faces this Monday in October reminded Egan of the ugly finale of his own mentor, Chicago's cardinal John Cody. Cody, who died in 1982 under a cloud of scandal and recrimination, was one of those old-school churchmen whose long tenure was marked by a brittle and autocratic style. But then-father Edward Egan, who in the sixties served as personal secretary to Cody, stood by the cardinal to the end. Egan saw Cody as a role model and regularly championed his legacy, a past that was never as present as it was now for Egan as he approached the twilight of his own career.

The letter, signed by an anonymous "Committee of Concerned Clergy," said that the relationship between the priests and a New York archbishop-the mortar that binds the hierarchy-had never "been so fractured and seemingly hopeless as it is now."

The authors, who claimed they had to remain nameless because of "the severely vindictive nature of Cardinal Egan," collated every criticism ever circulated about him-he was "arrogant and cavalier," and especially "cruel and ruthless" toward priests, whom he treated with "dishonesty, deception, disinterest and disregard." Egan had "an unnatural fear of the media" and had abdicated his role as a public figure and leader of the Catholic Church. And it called on the priests to act so that the Vatican would find a better man for the job.

Egan opened the session by reading, in full, an abject apology written to him by Monsignor Howard Calkins, a popular Westchester priest who, the previous day, had given an interview to the Daily News, in which he said that the letter reflected real anger at Egan. That was tantamount to betrayal in Egan's mind, and Calkins, realizing he'd made a mistake, quickly wrote a personal letter to Egan offering to resign as head of the local vicariate, or region, and apologizing again for his "careless and ill-considered comments." After reading Calkins's letter, Egan called over his spokesman, Joseph Zwilling, and ordered him to release it to the media.

According to several accounts from those who were present, Egan went on to claim that his enemies were priests accused of sexual abuse who thought that Egan hadn't adequately defended them. "When I hear stories about what those priests do, I have to do No. 2," he spat in disgust. Then Egan widened his target to the entire priest corps: Of the 2,000 priests and bishops in the archdiocese, he lamented, not one stood up to defend him. "I was loyal to Cardinal Cody to the end," he insisted in the stentorian affect he uses to complement his imposing height and girth. "Let me tell you, that is manliness! That is priestliness! That is Edward M. Egan!"

The room went silent. Egan announced that he needed to go upstairs for physical therapy on his knee,

which still hurt after joint-replacement surgery in September, and then retired to his private quarters while the priests waited. For their part, they just wanted to get through the meeting and get back to their parishes unscathed, and the way Egan had handled Calkins convinced them that any hint of insurrection would be tantamount to clerical suicide. As the meeting stretched on for two hours, the priests agreed to a statement of support for Egan, saying they were "appalled" by the anonymous letter and "upset and dismayed that our Archbishop has been personally vilified in this manner."

Yet Egan was still not ready to let the incident go. Four days later, onFriday, October 20, the cardinal followed up with a letter to all the priests of the archdiocese declaring that those behind the anonymous letter were obviously sexual abusers. "We cannot be left open to all manner of lies, leading to all manner of scandal and damage to the Archdiocese and the Archbishop from people who refuse to take responsibility for their actions," Egan wrote.Then he followed up a week later with a lengthy column in the archdiocesan paper, calling the anonymous letter "a secret, a secret of cowards." (Egan suggested that the author was a layperson, because in his view the letter-writer used the word disinterested incorrectly, a mistake he hoped no priest would commit.) And again, Egan went after Calkins-naming him seven more times and dismissing his apology as "a partial correction" and "a curious protest of loyalty." And he complained that the newspapers used a picture of Calkins "in priestly vestments, kneeling and embracing an African-American girl of six or seven years of age," while he, Egan, was shown "with a twisted expression on my face."

Whatever comity the earlier meeting had achieved quickly ended. On his influential blog, Father Richard John Neuhaus, a prominent conservative and editor of the religio-political journal First Things, wrote that Egan's follow-up letter was "ill-advised and that the approach he has outlined is more likely to exacerbate than to resolve current discontents." Even while criticizing the writers' anonymity, Neuhaus added that their claim of widespread dissatisfaction with Egan contained "a strong measure of truth."

Even after nearly seven years as archbishop, Egan remains a distant figure in Catholic life. In mid-January, he concluded the biggest public project of his tenure when he announced the closing of 21 parishes-a centerpiece of his nearly completed goal of restoring the battered finances of the archdiocese, a plan that also included the closing of nine schools. While Egan managed to spare a third of the institutions initially targeted for closure, mercy will not be what he's remembered for.

Historically, the city's top priest has been a tribal chieftain as much as a spiritual leader-a man who represents the pride of a blue-collar immigrant community that overcame prejudice and hardship to become the most prominent and powerful religious force in the city. Every bishop has a threefold mandate, "to teach, to sanctify, and to govern," and New York churchmen have made full use of those powers, from "Dagger John" Hughes, the fearsome prelate who laid the cornerstone of St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1858, to Francis Spellman, whose influence earned his residence the nickname of "the Powerhouse," to Egan's immediate predecessor, the mediagenic and immensely popular John O'Connor, who clashed with Catholic pols like Mario Cuomo, co-authored a book, His Eminence and Hizzoner, with Ed Koch, and brought the pope to Central Park. Even Cardinal Terence Cooke, who reigned between Spellman and O'Connor, was a man to be reckoned with despite a quiet demeanor.

Not so Egan. From the start, he approached the job more as a private administrator than as a civic leader. He eschewed partisan politics and shunned the media. For many years, O'Connor would talk to reporters after Sunday Mass at St. Patrick's, guaranteeing Monday-morning headlines and helping to make him a player in the life of the city. Egan, a gifted homilist, preferred to preach to the folks in the pews, and generally restricted his media appearances to twice-annual TV interviews, at Christmas and Easter. Even as pastor to a flock of 3 million Catholics who worship in more than 400 parishes from Staten Island to Sullivan County, he tended to be the classic "office priest," operating from behind a desk and making periodic Sunday visits to local parishes.

In fact, from the time he arrived for his first New York stint in 1985, as an auxiliary to O'Connor, Egan has seemed temperamentally ill-suited to the city, a mismatch that in retrospect makes the ragged end of his career almost foreordained. O'Connor had been only recently transferred from Scranton, Pennsylvania,

to take over the New York Archdiocese when Pope John Paul II asked him to take on Egan as a bishop. O'Connor had spent 27 years in the U.S. Navy as a chaplain, rising to the rank of rear admiral, and he would never refuse his higher-ups. But that's not to say he liked the decision, or Egan himself.

The two men could not have been more different: O'Connor, an outgoing, outspoken pastor who was born in a Philadelphia rowhouse to working-class parents, the fourth of five children; and Egan, the opera-loving, piano-playing aesthete from the Roman Curia by way of an upper-middle-class Chicago upbringing. O'Connor would don a Yankees cap and sport a goofy grin; Egan would savor a performance of Otello at the Met and invite Renée Fleming to sing at his installation. "It was a very difficult relationship," says a former Church official who knew both men.

Egan came to the job with a long résumé of academic honors but little experience in parish life. Even as a teenager in a minor seminary in Chicago, he had struck his classmates as unusually formal, with an almost patrician bearing. "It seemed like from the first day of high school he was wearing French cuffs," even if only figuratively, says Robert McClory, a former Chicago priest who spent eight years in the seminary with Ed Egan from the time they were 13 or 14 years old, as was the custom in those days.

Egan didn't pal around or play sports-a bout of childhood polio may have taken its toll on his physical confidence, acquaintances say-but he had plenty of friends. Unlike the rest, he rarely if ever earned a demerit on the card every seminarian had to carry with him, and over the five years of high school he garnered the highest average, winning the title of class prefect. He was also elected class president. As McClory says, "He was the perfect seminarian."

Few were surprised when Egan was tapped to finish his studies in Rome at the Pontifical North American College, the elite seminary for would-be priests on the fast track. Egan eventually, and perhaps inevitably, earned the nickname of "Alpine Ed"-a climber who seemed destined to ascend the hierarchy. And so he did. In 1964, he received a doctorate in canon law from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, often called "the pope's Harvard." He graduated summa cum laude-effectively he was a Church attorney-and returned to Chicago to serve as secretary to the city's newly installed archbishop, the now-notorious Cardinal Cody.

In 1971, Egan went back to Rome to serve as a judge on the Roman Rota, the Church's top court of appeals, and to teach canon law. His big break came in the early eighties as the Vatican was revising the Church's entire Code of Canon Law, the dense compilation of strictures and procedures covering every possible sin or circumstance in Catholic life. Egan was one of six canonists assigned to finish the task, and he sat for many hours with Pope John Paul parsing the complex texts. "That really launched him," says a priest who knows Egan well. The code was finally promulgated in 1983, and as often happened, John Paul wanted to reward Egan by making him an auxiliary, or assistant bishop, to a cardinal in a large diocese. (An archbishop will often have several auxiliaries to help carry the workload.)

Auxiliary bishops are normally among a cardinal's most trusted advisers, yet O'Connor's first assistant bishop was this outsider, and he let everyone know it. At a fête for the new bishop, in front of Egan's family, O'Connor made edgy jokes about Egan and his grand piano and toasted him as "Chicago's revenge." Eventually O'Connor shunted him aside by making him vicar for education, in charge of the archdiocesan school system. By all accounts Egan did the job well enough, and in 1988, he was promoted to a diocese of his own, in Bridgeport.

For more than a decade, Egan ran the show, often in the imperious manner he seemed to perfect in Rome. If Egan didn't have a warm and fuzzy public persona, he at least had a knack for administration. His fund-raising prowess enriched Catholic Charities, which became the largest private social-services agency in Fairfield County, and his reorganization of the schools bolstered enrollment. He cultivated contacts in "Fairchester," the deep-pocketed Catholic crowd of Fairfield and Westchester counties, which included the likes of then General Electric CEO Jack Welch, then PepsiCo CEO Roger Enrico, and Bob Wright, chairman of NBC.In 1999, as O'Connor began to succumb to brain cancer, Egan's name surfaced as a possible replacement. O'Connor was a favorite of John Paul's, and as a sign of his affection, the pope

had kept O'Connor on well past his 75th birthday. But now O'Connor was nearing 80, and his cancer was so advanced that the Vatican had to start thinking about making a move.

Although the process for naming bishops was once quasi democratic, or at least consultative, with local clergy having a say, in the past century the process had become increasingly secretive and byzantine. Even the terna, the list of three candidates traditionally compiled by Church officials for the pope to choose from, is not sacrosanct, and John Paul often picked someone else entirely. The names on the New York terna in early 2000 were reportedly Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, longtime head of Catholic chaplains for the armed forces in the United States; St. Louis archbishop Justin Rigali, a former Vatican diplomat who has since become cardinal in Philadelphia; and Buffalo bishop Henry Mansell, a former auxiliary to O'Connor, who remained close to him.

The infighting became fierce, especially when O'Connor heard that Egan was in the mix as well. Egan fit the profile of appointments during the last fifteen years of John Paul's reign, when the pope overwhelmingly favored company men with a degree from Rome, experience in a Vatican office, and the powerful patrons that such a résumé brings. Egan knew the school system in New York, which needed reforming, and he was a prodigious fund-raiser, which New York needed after O'Connor's profligate generosity. By those standards, Egan, a clerical lifer, was ideal.

But O'Connor thought he'd more than done his duty by taking Egan as an auxiliary years earlier, and he wasn't about to see Egan warm his throne at St. Patrick's. O'Connor wanted to see his friend Henry Mansell take over, to the point that O'Connor halted his chem-otherapy and went to see the pope, ostensibly to plead for Mansell. O'Brien didn't have much pull in the Roman Curia (the pope's mini-government), but Rigali did, and the pope faced an ecclesiastical impasse. Eight days after O'Connor died, the pope appointed Egan.

Following a week's worth of tributes to O'Connor, Egan was introduced to the public. From his first words at the news conference introducing him at the Catholic chancery on First Avenue, his orotund speechifying, in a voice that sounded like Orson Welles (of the Gallo-wine-hawking vintage), made him seem a churchman from another century. There was none of the avuncular warmth that O'Connor broadcast so easily to the public.

Egan was given an impossible task. The landscape of the archdiocese was shifting under the Church's once-solid foundations. For nearly two centuries, New York Catholicism was practically an Irish-run Establishment overseeing a mosaic of stable ethnic enclaves. But now those old-time Catholic communities were spreading out to the suburbs while new, poorer immigrants back-filled city parishes that had fewer priests to staff them and little money to support them. Churches and schools would have to close, creating a sense that after 200 years of surging numbers and clout, New York Catholicism had become a mature industry, religiously speaking, and was facing a discouraging phase of downsizing.

What's more, part of O'Connor's popularity was owed to the fact that he never denied anyone who came begging for a new program or for him to halt the closing of an old parish-and he left the archdiocese with a $20 million-a-year operating deficit and an infrastructure that needed a serious overhaul. During his tenure O'Connor reportedly blew through tens of millions in reserves-"O'Connor spent like a drunken sailor," as one priest said. O'Connor left bureaucracy on top of bureaucracy, with overlapping offices and three or four different accounting programs that made it difficult to figure out exactly how much money there was, and where it was going.

Egan's mandate was clear: Make tough decisions and then retire gracefully.In 2000, John Paul was ailing and knew his time was short, and he was consistently appointing bishops in their late sixties and early seventies who would retire within a few years, thus freeing John Paul's eventual successor-now Pope Benedict XVI, who was elected in April 2005-to remake the hierarchy as he liked.

Egan got right to work, early on displaying the distinct management style that led priests to dub him "Edward Scissorhands." During a March 2001 visit to the archdiocesan seminary in Yonkers, he began

the meeting with the assembled faculty of St. Joseph's Seminary by announcing, according to a witness, "Gentlemen, hard decisions have to be made." He told those gathered that he wanted to restore the intellectual luster of the faculty, then snapped his fingers-"Literally, snapped his fingers," recalls one witness-for an aide to hand him a sheet of paper. The cardinal then proceeded to read, with great formality, a list of faculty names and their titles. When he was done, he paused and announced, "If your name is not on this list, your services will no longer be needed in September.
Questions?"
Those left off the list had been fired in public, and by default. It left several of them devastated emotionally and financially, and many are still angry. "It was done with such duplicity, such a lack of Christian charity," says one professor who was in the room that day. Surely, much needed to be done to bring the archdiocese out of the red, and the cardinal closed or consolidated many chancery offices. Staffers who have worked with Egan say he seemed to want to stay as far removed from the emotional messiness of the budget cuts as possible. He formed few relationships with co-workers and answered those who inquired about the difficulty in cutting back with a simple rejoinder: "Economics 101."

New York's clergy found themselves at arm's length from their new leader in other ways as well. In theological terms, the bishop and priest have a father-son relationship, and priests look to their bishop as their chief protector. But Egan was peremptory when engaged at close quarters and worryingly disconnected from their travails. As opposed to O'Connor, who stayed home every Wednesday to meet with any priest without an appointment, Egan made priests call a secretary. Where O'Connor would meet with his priests several times a year, Egan met with his regional vicars just once in six years. Several other priests recalled how, early in his tenure, Egan went around to the nineteen regional vicariates to meet with the priests in groups of a few dozen at a time. At many of them, he began the session by announcing, "This is a dialogue. But it is a dialogue in the Roman sense-I talk, you listen."

It's not so much that the priests loved O'Connor-a highly controversial figure with enemies inside and outside of the Church. But priests, at least, felt that they could talk to him. They were proud that he was such a public presence and that he was one of them, a priest first and foremost, who would be there when they needed him.

Egan, in contrast, was always something of a loner, and he became more isolated as time passed and the pressures of the job grew. He would call priests late at night to complain about some petty slight, and he tried to have one priest's authority to say Mass in the archdiocese revoked-a stunning maneuver that is tantamount to sacramental castration-because the priest spoke to a grassroots reform group Egan opposed. ("Egan will go after you until he gets you," said one priest who, like most of the dozens of clerics and Church officials interviewed for this article, would speak only on condition that his name not be used.)

Egan managed to anger both sexual-abuse victims and clergy with his response to the nationwide scandal that erupted in 2002, by far the biggest issue for the Catholic Church on Egan's watch. Though he has never been publicly accused of wrongdoing in New York, Connecticut newspapers reported in 2002 that as head of the Bridgeport diocese, he'd shifted pedophile clerics around to different parishes and that he repeatedly cast doubt on the allegations of victims. At first, Egan repeatedly insisted he had done nothing wrong. As the criticism mounted, he responded by issuing a carefully worded statement allowing that "if in hindsight we also discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistance to victims, I am deeply sorry."

As similar cases around the country prompted the Church to reform its procedures-or lack thereof-for adjudicating abuse claims, Egan was an obdurate opponent of those early efforts. In 2002, about 290 fellow bishops from around the country designated a blue-ribbon panel of Catholic laypersons, called the National Review Board, to oversee a new system of prevention and transparency. To Egan the board was tantamount to laypersons' holding authority over a bishop, something he considered to be against Church doctrine. In January 2003, when the board visited New York, Egan refused to say Mass for the group-as other bishops did when the board visited their cities-and made no other bishop available to them.

A year later, a January 2004 audit by the board's new Office of Child and Youth Protection gave New York a failing grade on implementing the Church's new policies. A month later, in the review board's first comprehensive report on the scandal, the lay group singled out for public rebuke four of the 195 archbishops who head dioceses; Egan was one of them.

Since then, he has brought the archdiocese into compliance-and then some. The chief worry now among New York's priests is that, lacking an ally in the archbishop's chair, they'll have nowhere to turn if falsely accused.

Among the many criticisms of Egan, the most potent is that his tenure has been a lost opportunity. In New York, public presence translates into political power, and many Catholics believe that Egan's invisibility has shortchanged any number of items on their agenda, from school vouchers to abortion to anti-poverty programs. At his best, an archbishop can offer comfort in the face of unfathomable loss, restore faith to an institution that has turned its back on children, and defend the rights of believers in a critical world. At a time when Catholic identity is more fractured than ever, Egan has done little to inspire the masses.

And yet, to Egan's credit, he stands to leave the archdiocese in a much better position than it's been in a generation-a Church with enough resources to face its third century in New York. While Egan has never issued a financial statement or balance sheet for the archdiocese, his associates say he intends to have the outstanding debt paid off by the time he leaves. If he succeeds, that would be a monumental accomplishment.

The hardest part has been the "reorganization" of parishes and schools-a euphemism for the inevitable job of closing churches and parochial schools that are draining scarce resources. Many bishops in old-line northeastern and midwestern dioceses have had to downsize to some degree, and most have done it badly-making cuts too quickly and deeply, without sufficient consultation. There's almost no good way to shutter churches and schools-Catholics can retain deep emotional attachments long after they move away from the old neighborhood, and even a rumored closing is enough to bring out protesters.

But Egan took his time with the process, spending three years on a plan and responding to appeals to spare several parishes and schools. "I think fair justice has to be done to him," says Father John McLoughlin, pastor of St. Ursula's in Mount Vernon. "He might not be the most popular archbishop of New York, but from what he has said and what he has presented at the Presbyteral Council, he has done a good job assuring our survivability . I give him a kudo on that one."

Even Egan's harshest critics admit that he's not solely to blame for his shortcomings. In many ways, the system that nurtured Egan also betrayed him. From the age of 14, he had been immured in an ecclesiastical Xanadu, a largely Roman world where bishops are still deferred to like royalty and indulged like dauphins. The problem, say many officials, is that the Vatican pulled him up by the roots and thrust him into a strange land and under a harsh spotlight for which he was unprepared. "It's a problem-and it's not Egan's fault-but this system drops someone in from the outside, and they're lost," says the former Church official.

Several years ago, a small group of priests attended a luncheon hosted by Egan at his St. Patrick's residence for a priest who had turned 75. It was a pleasant afternoon, but what one priest remembers most vividly was that Egan, then about 70, was able to tick off, with apparent anticipation, how many years, months, weeks, and days would pass until he himself would turn 75 and be eligible for retirement.

That day will finally come on April 2, at which point Egan is required by canon law to submit his resignation. Pope Benedict's predecessor, John Paul, tended to keep cardinals in situ well after that threshold-every bishop of the city so far has died with his miter on, so to speak. Until the recent blowup with his priests, Egan was considered a safe bet to remain in place for at least another year, until the conclusion of a yearlong series of events marking the 200th birthday of the New York Archdiocese. If Benedict accepts his resignation anytime before that, Church observers say, it would be viewed as a sign that the pope was no happier with Egan than were the priests of New York. It's hard to

predict exactly what Benedict will do-he likes to keep his own counsel rather than consult widely like John Paul did.

Then, of course, comes the question of Egan's successor. Up to 25 American bishops, including five cardinals, are up for retirement this year, and judging from the pontiff's handful of appointments so far, he is looking for pragmatists rather than crusaders, bishops with the willingness and intellectual chops to promote the faith in the public square, but not publicity hounds-in other words, someone with Egan's restraint and O'Connor's pastoral instincts. Whoever he is, the New York appointment could well determine Benedict's legacy with American Catholics, just as John Paul made his mark with O'Connor in 1984.

As for Egan himself, whenever he leaves, he's likely to return to what he does best, presiding at confirmations and baptisms, with the kind of low-key presence he had before becoming cardinal-archbishop. Rome, of course, is his favorite city. But with Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law biding his time in a luxe Roman sinecure in the city's glossiest basilica, St. Mary Major, there aren't many spots left for retired American cardinals with little to do and no place to do it.

Egan recently hinted that he might spend time in France. Maybe that's where he would finally be at home-far from New York and the shadow of his own history.