

New mindset is necessary for Catholics

By JIM KETCHUM

The Times Herald

Saturday, February 12, 2005

<http://www.thetimesherald.com/news/stories/20050212/localnews/1983875.html>

These have to be tough times for American Catholics.

The church many have known their entire lives, the church they love, the church that plays a major spiritual role in their daily lives, remains in trouble.

Its spiritual leader, the beloved Pope John Paul II, has been fighting for his life in a Rome hospital. When you are 84 and have other chronic health problems, you do not come down with "just the flu."

While American Catholics, and many Protestants as well, pray for the pope, they also must be wondering about the future of the U.S. Catholic Church.

They were reminded last week of the clergy sex-abuse scandal that has rocked the American church since it broke into the open three years ago. A jury in Cambridge, Mass, convicted defrocked priest Paul Shanley of raping and fondling a boy at his church in the 1980s.

Shanley, 74, will be sentenced next week. Any sentence likely will turn into life in prison.

For his victims, the sentence must bring some relief, some closure, some vindication. For the victims of other priests who similarly violated their office, the verdict must bring a sense of hope that they, too, may one day get something amounting to justice.

But for the overwhelming number of Catholics who try to live by their church's precepts, who worship, who serve in their communities, who genuinely attempt to put their faith into action, there must be a sense of anguish, sorrow and disgust.

Anguish for the victims, sorrow for the church they love and disgust at its leadership. Those who ran the American church then, and some who still run it now, thrived on a climate of secrecy, of operating behind thoroughly closed doors. It must have been easier to move pedophile priests than to admit they existed and prosecute them.

American Catholics must also be wondering whether those who looked the other way ever will face justice. Cardinal Bernard Law, who ran the Boston Archdiocese where Shanley served and who later resigned in disgrace because of the scandal, faces no criminal trial, at least not yet.

Neither do other subordinates or other archbishops or cardinals. The buck appears to be stopping much farther down the line.

Maybe church leaders are getting the message, but I wonder. The Boston Archdiocese again issued a formal apology for its past sins the day Shanley was convicted. The words are nice, but words without deeds don't mean much.

Not only do the Paul Shanleys need to pay for the unspeakable crimes they committed, but those who condoned them or turned a blind eye to them also need to be brought to book.

The hierarchy's closed doors need to be not just opened but bulldozed. It's not the 15th century anymore.

Ultimately, a whole new mindset of openness needs to take hold. Proud, genuinely good American Catholics deserve nothing less.