

Struggling to keep the faith

Reverberations from a sex scandal still roil the Catholic Church

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Nearly three years after a series of staggering revelations of sexual abuse by its clergy, the Roman Catholic Church is still working its way through the fallout, with equal amounts of pain and hope. In Boston, where the story first broke, the archdiocese faces financial ruin. More than 80 churches are slated to be closed as church authorities fight a \$10 million annual deficit, brought on by dying parishes and a 50 percent decline in donations since 2002. Yet for all their anger, area Catholics seem to be clinging even more tenaciously to their faith, with many parishioners fighting to have the closings reversed. That would include people like Ian Driscoll of St. Anselm in Sudbury, one of eight parishes staging 24-hour protest vigils. Ian is 12. After school, he goes home to eat, do his homework, and practice the trumpet. Then he goes to the church, where he sleeps every night, usually accompanied by his mother. He made plans to skip a Boy Scout trip last weekend so he could spend the night at the church as part of a celebration marking the vigil's 100th day. "When you have something, you don't care about it as much," he says. "But once you're going to lose it, you like it more."

A lot of American Catholics are reacting like Ian. In Boston, an \$85 million settlement with more than 500 victims exacerbated an existing crisis for an overextended archdiocese in need of an overhaul. A mountain of pending lawsuits has forced three dioceses to declare bankruptcy this year, and in Los Angeles, a record settlement may be in the offing. As a result of the sex scandal, the American Catholic Church is no longer governed solely by all-powerful bishops. Sex-abuse victims, police investigators, attorneys, prosecutors, and insurance companies have forced a new openness in the church and unbolted the door to lay Catholics clamoring to get involved.

For a church that thinks in centuries rather than years, all the change has come as a bolt of lightning. While the scandal was still producing headlines, U.S. bishops convened in Dallas in June 2002 to create codes of church conduct and enacted a "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" that includes a controversial "zero tolerance" policy for priests who commit sexual abuse. Bishops understood that "the priority of the church now is to restore trust and heal hurt," says Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson. After some initial skepticism, Pope John Paul II endorsed the policy. The charter also opened up the church to lay supervision by creating a national review board of prominent Catholics to oversee reforms and an Office of Child and Youth Protection to implement the new "safe environment" program for children. At the local level, review boards are being created while pastoral and finance councils, stocked in large part by lay people, are being rejuvenated. "The Catholic Church is going to be the safest place for children in the country sometime soon," says the Rev. Thomas Reese, editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*.

But while Catholics tend to support their local priests and parishes, the hierarchy of the church is regarded warily. A study this fall by Catholic University sociologist Dean Hoge shows that 72 percent of Catholics believe the bishops' handling of the sex-abuse crisis is more serious than the abuse itself. When bishops in Portland, Tucson, and Spokane declared their dioceses bankrupt this year after being charged in multimillion-dollar lawsuits, enraged victims accused them of cynical attempts to avoid potentially embarrassing trials. Bishops say the bankruptcy process ensures the survival of their dioceses while guaranteeing a fair settlement to victims.

About 20 dioceses have reached major multi-plaintiff settlements since 2002, with some staggering payouts. In early December, the diocese in Orange County, Calif., reportedly reached a \$100 million settlement with 87 abuse victims. After two years of negotiations, the Los Angeles Archdiocese and lawyers for 544 victims are approaching a settlement that could reach \$1 billion. Cardinal Roger Mahony has drawn fire for failing to share with prosecutors documents that he contends would breach the confidentiality of bishops and priests. The case is further complicated by allegations of abuse stretching back to 1931.

Insurance firms have covered some of the cost under broad liability policies, but some dioceses have been squeezed. Boston had to sell property that included the archbishop's mansion. Meanwhile, donations from angry Boston Catholics have plummeted, leaving the archdiocese with an unfunded pension liability of \$80 million.

And abuse victims are unlikely to be mollified. "Settlements are no panacea," says David Clohessy, national director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "No one in authority has paid the price," he says. While at least five high-level Catholic officials have resigned since 2002, none have faced criminal charges. Some priests have been convicted, but most of the abuse appears to have occurred before 1980, meaning many of the accused are dead or protected by a statute of limitations. Tim Ender, who was molested as a teen in the 1970s and was part of the Orange County settlement, is far from satisfied. "I'm not even close to finding closure," he says.

Some 700 priests have been removed from the ministry since 2002, exacerbating a priest shortage. The number of priests nationwide has dropped from 58,632 in 1965 to about 43,304 today. The church ordained only 533 new priests this year, down by about half since 1965.

If there's any good news, it's that the crisis has spurred action by the laity. At St. Anselm, the vigil brings in dozens of people a day. From the church kitchen, Marion Gillis, 40, remarks: "It's like a family now. I've always recognized people's faces. Now I know their names." Last week Boston Archbishop Sean O'Malley reversed the closing of one church and is considering whether to reverse his decision on another. It's a victory for lay Catholics, says Suzanne Morse, spokeswoman for Voice of the Faithful, a Boston-based lay group that has emerged since 2002.

Weekly church attendance, which dropped from 52 percent of Catholics in 2000 to 35 percent in early 2003, rebounded to 49 percent by early December, according to the Gallup Organization. And while donations have dropped dramatically in Boston, they're down only slightly nationwide, according to a recent survey. Bishops say they're willing to do what it takes to regain the trust of their flock. The national review board is a start, as are audits conducted by the Office of Child and Youth Protection that measure diocesan compliance with the safe environment program. But Voice of the Faithful and the Survivors Network say those audits don't go far enough, and they protest the bishops' decision to allow compliant dioceses to audit themselves next year. "A self-audit is no audit at all," Clohessy says. "It's a survey." Financial accountability remains a stumbling block, as bishops continue to exercise great control over diocesan funds. Others argue for tougher charter language on what constitutes sexual abuse or some sort of national directory of abusive priests. "We see an old guard that is unwilling to give up a lot of the power and authority they've had for years and years," Morse says. "Lay Catholics are coming into their own to realize they have a role in the future of the church." Defining that role, however, will continue to be a struggle.