

## **The sins of the fathers**

The sex abuse scandal comes to Showtime

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Since the 1990s, our examination of the sexual abuse scandal has gone through the phases from cover-up, to investigative journalism's exposure, to the reports of national committees, to the response of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, to the commentaries on the responses.

This last year the artists have come forward. On Broadway, the play "Doubt" has pitted a zealous nun against a parish priest in the early 1960s. Clint Eastwood's "Mystic River" and Pedro Almodóvar's "Bad Education" place boy-abusing priests in the dark basements of their plots.

Now prime-time cable TV, which may reach more viewers than Broadway and art films combined, gives us "Our Fathers," based on David France's critically admired book *Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal*. By "church" we mean Boston in 2002, the church of Cardinal Bernard Law.

Showtime, sensitive to critics from both the right, which might accuse it of prejudiced church-bashing, and victims' groups quick to pound a speaker who sticks up for priests' rights, has been careful in script, casting, photography and tone to do this right. Within the limitations of its two-hour format, it has produced a work that gives everyone who cares about the church a lot to think about.

The story is familiar to anyone who has followed religious news over the past three years. But the director (Dan Curtis), writer (Thomas Michael Donnelly) and cast present it so effectively that in key scenes we sometimes feel that we are confronting the scandal for the first time. Except for two composite characters -- victim Angelo DeFranco (Daniel Baldwin) and Mary Ryan (Ellen Burstyn), the single mother of seven abused boys, who wrote a powerful letter to the cardinal in 1984 -- the names are real. Even Pope John Paul II (Jan Rubes) and Bishop Wilton Gregory (Julian Christopher) appear. And an unnamed Vatican cardinal with gray hair, steely eyes and a German accent, listed as "The Pope's Cardinal," informs Law that the majority of American bishops want him to quit "the sooner the better."

Boston lawyer Mitchell Garabedian (Ted Danson), pursuing the case of several abused young men, discovers when The Boston Globe investigative spotlight team breaks the story in 2002 that what had seemed an isolated case is really "the tip of the iceberg." (In fact, NCR had been hammering on that iceberg for 20 years.) The Boston situation quickly assumes extraordinary dimensions, as if modeled on Watergate and All the President's Men, as investigators trudge through neighborhoods knocking on doors, prelates in wood-paneled studies mutter about the "sensational press" and editors cluster around the morning conference table and ask, "But what if we're wrong?"

Young working-class men in their 20s and 30s -- their lives ruined by drugs, depression, booze and broken marriages -- linger in pubs over beers, watch the arrests of Frs. John Geoghan and Paul Shanley on the TV screen and feel those knots tightening in their stomachs. Their old wounds erupt; they call their classmates and discover hundreds of fellow victims; they organize support groups and join the suit.

We center on three cases: those of Patrick McSorley, now jobless, homeless and addicted to drugs after being victimized by Fr. Geoghan; Tom Blanchette, who had carried on a long, willing series of encounters (condensed in the script) with Fr. Joseph Birmingham before breaking away; and Olan Horne, another Birmingham victim, who organized the survivors into a Joseph Birmingham Support Group. Fr. Birmingham, not as nationally notorious as Frs. Geoghan and

Shanley, seems to have had the sexual appetite of an alley cat, seducing hundreds of boys and summoning Tony Blanchette to his bed a hundred times in all, sometimes two or three times a day.

In a strong subplot, the blunt Fr. Dominic Spagnolia (Brian Dennehy) joins the chorus of critics of the church's power structure and uses the F-word almost as often as Tony Soprano, until his old gay lover, from a relationship he had while he was on a leave of absence from the priesthood, goes public and the cardinal forces Fr. Spagnolia to leave the active ministry.

The evening before I viewed the film I had dinner with friends on Long Island in the diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y. -- friends disenchanted with the leadership of their bishop, William Murphy, one of several bishops from the Boston archdiocese who ran into trouble on their next assignments. Bishop Murphy will not enjoy this film: He is portrayed as constantly at Cardinal Law's side, as if a co-conspirator in the Boston archdiocese's maneuvers to shirk full responsibility for the scandal.

Bernard Law himself must thank Almighty God and Showtime that the great Christopher Plummer was chosen to portray him, for Mr. Plummer brings to the role a dignity, an ambiguity, a vulnerability that the public, as far as I know, has never perceived in Cardinal Law himself. Mr. Plummer is blessed with a mobile face, any part of which he can twitch or shudder to wordlessly convey a variety of emotions. His voice is so rich that he can simply listen silently to a bad news phone call and utter two words, "I see," hang up, and thus convey the content of the call.

In one powerful scene, Olan Horne breaks in on Cardinal Law, calls him "Bernie" and convinces him to meet with his support group. Confronted with this crowd of men and women who have every reason to despise him but who have agreed to be respectful, Mr. Plummer's Cardinal Law is not haughty but visibly humbled. The viewer feels for him. Since I had never heard of this event before, I bought the book to check its authenticity. It happened, all right, but three months after Mr. Horne's invitation.

Even more compelling is Mr. Blanchette's visit to Fr. Birmingham's deathbed, where, bursting into tears, the young man asks the barely conscious priest to forgive him for the hatred he had felt.

In Rome, Cardinal Law kneels before John Paul and reluctantly volunteers to resign. The pope sends him home to work on the scandal. There the courts have ordered Mr. Garabedian and the diocese to settle, and both Voice of the Faithful and 58 priests call for Cardinal Law's resignation. The cardinal sits alone watching himself lambasted on TV, clicking from channel to channel in a vain attempt to escape his public humiliation.

Finally he finds rest in a movie channel: It is the climax of Richard Burton's 1964 "Becket," where King Henry II's knights have arrived at the cathedral where Archbishop Thomas à Becket stands in his miter and golden vestments. The knights raise their swords and strike him down. Cardinal Law's lips seem to twist in a knowing smile.

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*Ed, Note: "Our Fathers" will be aired on the Showtime channel this Saturday, May 21, at 8:00 pm.*