

BEFORE *SPOTLIGHT* – SOME BACKGROUND MEMORIES

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I have learned over the past 32 years to be skeptical about much that surrounds the constant reality of clergy sex abuse. Much of my skepticism is rooted in the non-stop statements of bishops and popes. Its been mostly hot, foul air created by P.R. consultants and clever writers that bears resemblance to the truth only by default.

I have been overjoyed and grateful that “Spotlight” has been receiving accolades since it came out and was even more so when it was nominated for best picture but I admit that my skepticism got the best of me and I was preparing to be disappointed right up to the moment Morgan Freeman opened the envelope. Then... Whammo! When the “stun” wore off and I realized what had just happened I knew that this crusade so many people have been involved with for over a quarter of a century had just been raised to a whole new level.

My involvement goes way back, eighteen years before the volcanic eruption in Boston on January 6, 2002. I thought of what went on in those intervening years and of all the survivors, attorneys, journalists and supporters who drudged along, many like myself, wondering when or even if the issue of clergy sex abuse would ever get the recognition and attention it demanded. We were up against the institutional Catholic Church. The largest religion in the world and also by no strange coincidence, the largest corporation. It often seemed like we were trying to move Mt. Everest with a bulldozer, and a small one at that.

I thought of Bernard Cardinal Law, thrust into center stage as the arch-villain, overseeing a crew of mini-villains who had been trying to contain the plague that burst forth that Sunday morning.

I was surprised, angered, hurt and bewildered by Bernard Law’s increasingly bizarre responses to the crisis he was unsuccessfully trying to control. Why this cold, bureaucratic reaction? Because eighteen years earlier when the horror of sexual abuse by clerics surfaced in Lafayette Louisiana, Bernard Law was clearly part of the solution.

I was working at the Vatican Embassy at the time and was still a firm believer in the institutional Church and a naïve believer that once the bishops realized the real nature of this nightmare, they would go into high gear and do the right thing....as a group and as individuals. I was dead wrong on both! My job with regard to the Gauthe case from Lafayette was simply to manage the file. I prepared letters for the nuncio's signature and kept him up to date with information. What had started as a series of confidentiality agreements with nine families in exchange for monetary payments -- hush money -- ended up to be the event that blew the lid off the widespread cover up of clergy sex abuse that had existed for decades. One family pulled out of the agreement and sued the diocese. Once that started the District attorney filed criminal charges since the abuse was within statute. That's when things really changed. The media got ahold of the story and in spite of the Church's efforts, the lid was off and it was staying off.

The Vicar General of Lafayette was the man I always communicated with. I'd ask for the bishop and get the VG. I finally gave up and worked with that. He told me they had sent Gauthe to the House of Affirmation which was a useless endeavor. I connected the good monsignor with Fr. Mike Peterson, a psychiatrist who had founded and ran St. Luke Institute. Without getting into too much detail, Mike put me in touch with Ray Mouton, the attorney the diocese was paying to defend Gauthe on the criminal charges. Ray it turned out, was a brilliant lawyer, a Cajun who knew the territory down there but above all a man with principles...and three children. He came to Washington and told me the diocese was hiding about 6 other sex abusers.

As soon as the Gauthe case became public reports of sexual abuse in other areas started to surface. A major case was developing in the Providence R.I. diocese at the time.

My job at the embassy brought me into regular contact with bishops. They all knew what was going on and they were especially shaken by the widespread publicity. One bishop, Dick Keating from Arlington, remarked one day that any time three or four bishops get together the topic of conversation inevitably ends up being clergy abuse. Newsweek published a picture of Gauthe in his jail cell! In my conversations with bishops it became clear many were honestly worried about what to do. What I did NOT know at the time is that there were also more than a few who were worried that the strategy they had been using might blow up in their faces. The common game plan was to admonish the priest and then send him to another parish where generally the same problem would start up again.

Ray, Michael and I decided to put together a memo or “White Paper” for the bishops in an effort to help them deal with cases as they encountered them. Actually this was the result of a suggestion I received from one of the bishops. I presented the idea to several more bishops whom I considered friends and in whom I had trust. They all agreed it was a great idea and offered to help.

My main source of support and the man I went to for guidance more than anyone else was Bernard Cardinal Law. I had met him when I first went to work at the nunciature. He was bishop of Springfield, MO at the time. He was intelligent, personable, down to earth and not at all pompous. He and I hit it off from the start. When we discussed the sex abuse issue, which was fairly often, he recognized the urgency and the need to do something. The other three prelates I relied on for support and guidance were Anthony Bevilacqua who was bishop of Pittsburgh at the time, Cardinal John Krol and Bishop Dick Keating from Arlington.

Ray, Mike and I were conferring daily on what later became known as the “Manual.” We ran every section by the nuncio, Archbishop Laghi, and the four bishops. Law was archbishop of Boston by then but not a cardinal. We were also conferring about the on-going drama in the Lafayette diocese so that I could continue to keep my boss, the Archbishop, abreast of the almost daily developments.

In addition to the manual which was divided into sections and set up in a Q & A format, we also put together an action proposal called a “Crisis Intervention Team.” The idea was to have psychologists, attorneys, experts in insurance and media issues and pastoral care specialists available around the country. If a bishop had a report of sexual abuse by a priest he could immediately call the coordinating office for the intervention program which would be at the bishops’ conference headquarters in Washington and that office could put him together with volunteer experts from his geographic area. The very first move was to reach out to the victim and the victim’s family for pastoral care purposes. We wanted to isolate the abuse and the abuser from the “church” and let the people know that the “church” was concerned first and foremost about them and would do anything to help them. In other words, we wanted the victims and their families to know they they were the Church. I recall in one of our discussions we were trying to figure out who would be the best person to make the initial outreach to the family. We unanimously agreed it was NOT to be a cleric of any kind. The bishop was to be a key player in this stage but his presence to the victims would depend on their level of comfort.

This strategy was to be available to bishops but not in any way mandatory contrary to the misrepresentations of the Conference spokespersons at the time.

We also planned on a special research committee to work with the bishops. It would have bishop-members but also a team of experts who would provide the very best state-of-the-art information on every aspect of sexual abuse from the causes for the abuser's behavior and how to handle him to the effects on the victims and how best to help them.

Cardinal Law was solidly behind the plan and promised to gather support from among the bishops. Likewise, Cardinal Krol and Bishops Bevilacqua and Keating also were solidly behind it. I recall a meeting Mike Peterson and I had with Cardinal Krol at the National Shrine. I had sent him a draft of our "manual." After we sat down and chatted a bit it was time to get down to business. He pulled the manuscript out of his briefcase and held it up and said "*If I had asked a bunch of experts to come up with the best possible plan on this problem, this is exactly what I would expect.*"

By then it was clear that the leadership of the bishops' conference was not supportive of any of our efforts. We had sent copies of the manual over to the USCCB but they told the media there was nothing in it they did not already know. This included, I suspect, our prediction that unless something drastic was done and done soon the lawsuits would multiply and it would cost the U.S. Church one billion dollars in ten years.

Sidebar: I recall an archbishop telling me around that time that I should not get too excited about this problem because "nobody is going to sue the Catholic Church."

Cardinal Law knew about the opposition from the Bishops' Conference. It was not "the bishops" in general who were stone-walling, but the key players in the conference leadership. I always maintained that had there been some strong leaders from the body of bishops who were more concerned about the victims than their image the whole history would have been different.

Ray, Mike and I had planned to meet with then Archbishop Law in May 1985 at a Marriott hotel near Chicago's O'Hare Airport. The purpose was to iron out details with the manual and the action plan. Law was the chairman of the bishops standing committee on Research and Pastoral Practices (I think I recall the name correctly). His plan was to set up a sub committee off the standing

committee and that would be the one that handled the sex abuse issue. Law had just been named a cardinal in May and had to bow out of the meeting at the last minute but sent Bishop William Levada, the committee secretary, in his place. Levada showed up and the four of us had a very cordial and productive session. He was positive about the proposed plan, the proposed budget and the content of the manual. By the time he left that evening we were confident that there would be real action on the part of the bishops.

A couple weeks later I was in Montreal visiting my sister and received a phone call from Bishop Levada. The conversation was short. He told me the plan was shelved. I was stunned and asked why and was told that another committee had been appointed to take care of it and it would not look good if we appeared to be at cross-purposes with them. I was too flabbergasted to argue or debate. I couldn't get ahold of Law or Krol to find out what had happened. A few days later I managed to connect with Bishop Bevilacqua and poured out my frustration on him.

In the meantime, the three of us regrouped. We had a couple hundred copies of the manual printed and took about a dozen to Bishop Quinn in Cleveland and asked him to take them to the planned meeting of all the bishops at Collegeville in June 1985 and try to lobby our plan with them. He agreed but we never found out whether he got anywhere or not or if he even did anything. The collected bishops had a one-day executive session about clergy abuse at which their General Counsel, the auxiliary bishop of providence and a psychologist from Chicago gave presentations. Mike Peterson, Ray Mouton and I were not only not invited and knew very little about the proposed agenda. We were intentionally excluded!

After it was over I spoke with several prelates including Cardinal Krol, Bishop Bevilacqua and Archbishop Laghi. Laghi asked why Peterson and I were not there. Krol and Bevilacqua both said the only worthwhile speech was that given by the psychologist and both said the other two speakers were useless.

By mid-spring I started to really comprehend what was going on. I had noticed at the Nunciature that other than Archbishop Laghi, no one else seemed to be too interested in the Gauthe case or in the other reports that were coming in. A couple of the priests on staff told me that we don't air our dirty laundry in public, an obvious warning which I picked up at the time. The archbishop had a weekly meeting with the secretary general of the bishops' conference and he shared with me one day that whenever he brought up the topic the sec-general was either disinterested or irritated.

The bishops' conference leadership were actively trying to find a way to effectively spin the sex abuse problem into oblivion. I knew there was a resentment towards me and definitely a resentment towards Ray Mouton. They didn't mess much with Mike Peterson because as director of St. Luke's he knew where a lot of the skeletons were hidden. They were engaging in a cover up...THE cover-up. Bishop Bevilacqua told me that contrary to what Levada had told me and contrary to a press release from the Bishops' Conference there *was* no other committee. Nothing was going to happen.

Ray, Mike and I weren't sure where to go now that it was obvious the Bishops' Conference had shut the door. A number of the bishops who recognized the seriousness of the problem engaged us to give seminars and workshops to their priests. We also received some requests from provincials of religious communities.

The Bishops' Conference issued a few statements about sexual abuse of minors starting in 1988 and some were quite good but everything was voluntary and nothing they said or did made the slightest difference. If they had made a difference its doubtful there would have been the flood of lawsuits that was on the way. They told the public that they could not act on our proposals because every bishop is independent. They referred to the Crisis Intervention Team as a "Swat Team" which, besides being incorrect was also ludicrous. They also announced publicly through the office of their General Counsel that the whole plan was a scheme on our part....Ray, Mike and I....to sell our program to the bishops and profit from the growing problem. Besides being a completely libelous assertion it also told us that they were threatened, so much so that they had to resort to slandering the very people who were trying to help them. In their case the truth didn't make them free. It made them mentally constipated.

Cardinal Law and I spoke a few times about the turn of events and he assured me it was beyond his control which I believed then and still believe. Law was on the opposite end of the political spectrum from the Conference leadership at the time. He was also a newly minted cardinal and caught up with all the celebrations at home in Boston. January 1986 came and I left the Nunciature. Mike Peterson, Ray and I continued to collaborate on trying to find newer and better ways to cope with the sex abuse plague which by then was noticeably gaining ground. We were on our own. Several bishops were genuinely interested but the National Bishops' Conference could have cared less in spite of their PR statements to the contrary.

In December 1985 we sent every bishop in the US a personal copy of the Manual which included copies of several articles chosen by Mike Peterson that explained much about the sexual disorder that compelled men to violate children. Cardinal Law had sent us a check to help cover the costs of putting together the final version and sending out the copies.

In November Mike went to Rome to talk to some people in the Vatican about the problem and returned after a week very dejected and discouraged. The people whom he saw, and all were mid-level flunkies, did not take it seriously and blamed our U.S culture. It was our problem and we had to deal with it.

Not long after he returned the bishops had their annual meeting in D.C. Michael rented a suite for a hospitality event to which he invited all the bishops to come and discuss the problem of clerics sexually violating minors. Out of about 300 bishops present, twelve showed up.

My relationship with Cardinal Law drifted into the mist as I expected it would for no other reason than the vast differences in our stations and what he told me were the crushing demands of being the archbishop of Boston. He invited me to Boston to spend a weekend with him which was very enjoyable but included no substantial discussion of clergy sex abuse. We continued to drift apart save for annual Christmas and Easter greetings.

By 1986 I was in the Air Force but I continued to be increasingly involved in the sexual abuse issue and my involvement I am proud to say, was totally supported by my Air Force superiors.

By March of 2001 I knew something was cooking in Boston. Kristen Lombardi, a very bright young journalist it turned out, contacted me and asked for help with a series she was writing about the cover-up of Fr. John Geoghan by the Boston Church establishment, especially Cardinal Law. By then I was beyond being shocked, but what I learned about this horrific debacle and Bernard Law's complicity made me very, very sad. I can say the same about Cardinal Bevilacqua whom I had known longer and much better than Bernard Law. When I saw how he was dealing with sex abuse victims in Philadelphia my emotional response was that he had turned into some kind of red robed monster and was certainly not the man I had admired and trusted.

The next step after Kristen Lombardi's series in the Boston Phoenix was the Globe. The Spotlight Team connected with Dick Sipe because of his book, Sex,

Priests and Power, and he in turn put them on to me. The Phoenix was small and had no clout or power. The Boston Globe was another story altogether. Marty Baron had the prophetic insight to zero right in on the core of the problem.....the system, and he had a team of highly dedicated, competent reporters. I was concerned that the Boston Catholic establishment would stonewall the reporters and put pressure on the Globe's management to back off. The people at the Globe still remembered when Cardinal Law called down the power of God on the Globe because they covered the Fr. Porter mess in Fall River.

As it turned out the divine salvo that Cardinal Law had ordered came alright but the target was the Church and not the Globe.

I had a head's up that the story was coming out on January 6 and I anticipated something big. But I was overwhelmed by what I read. At the same time my cynicism told me that there would be a major flurry of attention for two weeks or maybe even a month and then all would quiet down and we'd be back in the doldrums. After all there had already been major media coverage of a couple other explosions, e.g., the Rudy Kos trial in Dallas and the exposure of widespread sex abuse of minor seminarians at a Capuchin seminary in Wisconsin and a Franciscan seminary in Santa Barbara. None were powerful enough to make a lasting difference. But I was dead wrong about Boston and for that I will be forever grateful to the Higher Power. "Spotlight" unleashed a process that would change the Church in the U.S. and in the world.

I have often thought of my relationship with Bernard Law and Tony Bevilacqua and wondered. I think in the end the three of us changed. I lost my naiveté about what I was seeing in the governing dimension of the Church and with my naiveté I lost the emotional security that came from being a part of that system. I knew I could survive without it. I can't speak for what happened to them but I grieve at what the institutional church and the monarchical clerical culture did to all three of us. It had captivated me for awhile but seeing the sexual abuse nightmare up close and personal blew my trust in the clerical world and the hierarchical government to smithereens. I think it had the opposite effect on Bernard Law. He was so deeply entrenched that he absolutely identified "Church" with hierarchy and faith with power. I think though that the single most important factor in my life was meeting the victims and their families. I will be forever haunted by the stories of unimaginable sexual violation. But the most gut-wrenching and soul-jarring moments were those shared with mothers and fathers, listening as they described what it was like to learn that their little boy or little girl had been sexually violated and if that was not horrific enough, by a priest.

I know Tony Bevilacqua never met with victims. He told a grand jury that it would not be an economic use of his time. Bernard Law met with a few but by then it was way too late. A polite encounter at the archiepiscopal mansion doesn't count for truly meeting the victims on a level playing field. Maybe if Bernard Law had really gotten to know the victims and their families he might have come to see the presence of Christ in them instead of in the archdiocesan bureaucracy.