

# **In the year 2002: Catholic sex abuse and cover-up tops headlines**

News in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

The biggest religion news story of 2002 was a January-to-December drama of distressing proportions. It very well could have been a virtual nonstory, observers say, if the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. had vigorously confronted priestly sexual abuse of minors when the crisis surfaced in the 1980s and simmered in the 1990s.

But in January the cover-up of molestation cases were unveiled publicly in the Boston archdiocese at the trial of a priest, once treated for pedophilia, who was convicted of molesting a boy at a parish to which he was assigned. Cardinal Bernard Law, who knew of John Geoghan's past but approved the transfer, was urged then by many to resign. Only when the crisis worsened did Pope John Paul II accept Law's resignation in Rome December 13.

Vatican concerns for due process forced the U.S. bishops—who were contrite at their spring meeting in Dallas—to trim their reform measures in November. Yet, with district attorneys demanding action and lay Catholics threatening to limit donations, many bishops vowed to suspend accused priests and kick out proven offenders.

In December another shock wave hit as a court-ordered release of more documents from the Boston archdiocese revealed new, hidden offenses amid talk that Law's archdiocese might file for bankruptcy for protection against lawsuits. Some 2,000 pages of church records suggested that Boston church officials continued to assign predator priests to parishes until the late 1990s despite knowledge of abuse allegations. The files of eight priests, released by victims' lawyers, portrayed clergy who used drugs, beat women and sexually assaulted children. Frequently, Law wrote glowing personal letters to the priests.

Lay Catholics became deeply involved in the debate through victims' advocacy groups and Voice of the Faithful, a national body calling for accountability from bishops. A new Office for Child and Youth Protection created by the U.S. bishops to

monitor compliance with new rules and red-flag lax dioceses recruited an outgoing governor, Frank Keating of Oklahoma, to head a high-profile committee advising the office. Recently, another Catholic public servant, Kathleen McChesney, a 24-year veteran at the FBI and the agency's highest-ranking woman ever, was named the office's director.

As 2002 came to a close, it was certain that the Catholic story was hardly over. The same was true with ecumenical Christian objections to plans for a U.S.-led invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which the Bush administration accuses of harboring biological and chemical weapons and of working to acquire nuclear weapons. Whether it was due to the force of religious and secular critics or the concerns of U.S. allies, the Bush administration did turn to the United Nations in seeking to make Iraq acquiesce in renewed weapons inspections.

In ranking the top religion-related stories for the year, editors felt that the Catholic crisis had the biggest news impact, followed in significance by the effort of mainstream religious leaders in the U.S. and abroad to caution against an attack on Iraq without UN agreement and to question whether any preemptive attack is morally justifiable and strategically wise.

### **The other top stories:**

- In devastating exchanges of violence, Palestinian suicide bombers killed Israeli citizens while Israeli military blows wreaked destruction in Palestinian areas. A long standoff at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, where Palestinians sought sanctuary, highlighted the plight of Christians living in the Holy Land.
- U.S. conservative evangelicals, among them Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson, villified Islam in public remarks while the White House took a different approach. Bush reiterated his view of Islam as a peaceful religion, meeting often with U.S. Muslim leaders. Southern Baptist Jerry Vines called the Prophet Muhammad a "demon-possessed pedophile." When Jerry Falwell labeled the prophet Muhammad a "terrorist," the televised remark caused rioting deaths in Pakistan.
- The wording "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance was declared unconstitutional by a U.S. appeals court, while the U.S. Supreme Court narrowly upheld the constitutionality of tuition voucher programs for parents of religious schoolchildren in Cleveland. Those two June decisions marked ongoing divisions on church-state separation, but the outcry over the challenge to the 1950s-edited pledge reflected a

growing conservative trend.

- Congress was stalemated over legislation to bar or limit public funds for research on embryo stem cells. Advocates say such research—costly enough as to require federal money—has the potential to treat major diseases. Critics object to creating human embryos that would be destroyed in the process. Bush appointed a bioethics panel, but it too was divided on that issue.
- Terrorism attacks in Pakistan, Bali and Kenya served as reminders of religion-related violence that often defies measures by an increasingly security-conscious world. Gunmen killed Christians in more than one incident in Pakistan. Suicide bombers in a resort city in Bali were aimed at westerners and suspected to be linked to the al-Qaeda network. Jews at a resort in Kenya also fell victim to suicide bombers.
- A new, inclusive-language New Testament translation, updating the popular New International Version Bible, revived divisions between moderate and conservative evangelicals. Although two other new conservative-sponsored Bibles have updated gender language, the Today's NIV translators were accused of going too far.
- A first-century ossuary, said to have held the bones of James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, was described as the first archaeological evidence ever found for Jesus, since the inscription identifies James as not only the son of Joseph but the brother of Jesus. Because the looted limestone box surfaced belatedly through the antiquities market, some scholars have urged caution regarding its authenticity.
- Muslim-Christian divisions in populous Nigeria contributed to radical Muslims' urging the stoning of a woman for adultery, then disrupting plans to hold the Miss World beauty pageant in the nation. Also, the worsening AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa had religious leaders urging stronger public education on the disease.

**Other stories:** In an Anglican transition, Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey retired and liberal theologian Rowan Williams succeeded him. Missouri Synod Lutherans continued a doctrinal dispute over a district president's part in an interfaith post-9/11 service at Yankee Stadium. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) combatants were back to square one as presbyteries rejected approval of gay clergy.

**Deaths:** Elizabeth R. Achtemeier, a leading evangelical renewal voice in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Philip Berrigan, Catholic ex-priest who led civil

disobedience protests against war; W. A. Criswell, Dallas preacher who inspired the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and '90s; John C. Harper, longtime pastor of St. John's Episcopal Church, the "Church of the Presidents," near the White House; Will L. Herzfeld, first African-American to head a Lutheran church—the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches—in the U.S.; Suzanne Radley Hiatt, architect of the "irregular ordination" of 11 women to the Episcopal priesthood in 1974; Jan H. Kok, a founder of Ecumenical News International and a former president of the World Council of Churches; Carl McIntire, founder of the archconservative and separatist American Council of Churches; Francis X. Murphy, Redemptorist priest noted for his *New Yorker* coverage of Vatican II under the pseudonym Xavier Rynne; Roy C. Nichols, first African-American bishop in the United Methodist Church; Chaim Potok, novelist who wrote about Orthodox Jewish life; J. Randolph Taylor, a leader in reuniting the northern and southern branches of Presbyterianism; Kenneth L. Teegarden, leader in reshaping the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Marvin C. Wilbur, Presbyterian communicator; Gibson Winter, ethics professor, social activist, Episcopal priest and the author of *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*.