

Philadelphia trial revives Catholic Church sex abuse scandal

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c. 2012 USA Today (RNS) Ten years ago, the Roman Catholic sex abuse scandal dominated the headlines with horrific stories of priests preying on vulnerable youths and a church hierarchy more concerned with protecting clergy instead of kids.

Now, it's back. A Philadelphia jury is deliberating whether, for the first time, a high-ranking church official will be held criminally accountable. However the jury rules, the case carries symbolic freight far heavier than the grim details in the trial of Monsignor William Lynn, former secretary for the clergy in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. It revives the breadth and depth of the abuse crisis, its extraordinary costs and unending frustrations.

Lynn's trial brings the ugly mess to mind "like it was yesterday," said Mary Jane Doerr, associate director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection. "It's still shocking, the degree of damage a handful of priests have done. When will the numbers ever stop?" The statistics are staggering:

* More than 6,100 accused priests since 1950, Doerr said. She draws the number from two reports: a 2011 analysis by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City and the latest annual report by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, which tracks U.S. Catholic statistics.

* More than 16,000 victims, chiefly teenage boys, since 1950. However, "since there is no national database tracking clergy abuse, we may never really know how many victims there are across all the dioceses and across time," said Mary Gautier, senior researcher for CARA.

* \$2.5 billion in settlements and therapy bills for victims, attorneys' fees, and costs to care for priests pulled out of ministry from 2004 to 2011, according to the CARA report released in April.

The Lynn trial brings up all the worst aspects of a scandal rooted decades before, when victims were ignored -- or blamed -- and accused priests were quietly shuffled to unsuspecting parishes across town or across the country.

During Lynn's 10-week trial on charges of child endangerment and conspiracy, prosecutors dialed back to 1994. That's when Lynn said he compiled a list of 35 then-active priests who had been either convicted or accused of sexual abuse of minors.

He buried the list after his boss, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, a fierce traditionalist and canon lawyer, ordered it destroyed. Nothing was done and the priests remained in their posts.

If convicted, Lynn, 61, could face a sentence of 10 to 21 years.

The defense calls Lynn an obliging minor player, without the power to remove priests, who was cowed into silence by the now-deceased Bevilacqua. It was a time when "there were no heroes," said political scientist Thomas Reese, a Jesuit priest and senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

"No one said to his bishop. 'No, you can't transfer this priest to another parish. If you do that, I resign. Get yourself another priest personnel director,'" Reese said.

In 1992, seven years after a multimillion dollar settlement in a Louisiana abuse case, the bishops issued voluntary guidelines for dealing with allegations of abuse. "Some bishops 'got it' faster than others. Some never did," Reese said.

The most glaring example of the latter was Cardinal Bernard Law, then-archbishop of Boston. In January 2002, The Boston Globe began its coverage of defrocked priest John Geoghan, a serial abuser of 138 children who was on trial for molesting a 10-year-old boy. (Geoghan, who was convicted, was murdered in prison in 2003 by a fellow inmate.)

The Globe used his case to launch an investigation into clergy sex abuse cases and invited victims to come forward. Reaction was volcanic. Within months of the Globe series, victims by the thousands were revealed in city after city.

The overwhelming majority of bishops who served between 1950 and 2002 have died or retired.

There's only Lynn, "a yes man at the bottom of the totem pole, left holding the bag for the church's collective sins," said Ralph Cipriano, a former Philadelphia Inquirer reporter and a critic of the archdiocese who is blogging the trial daily.

The monsignor testified he believed that the will of God works through the bishop in dealing with priests, according to Cipriano.

David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, called Lynn's trial "one of the most significant and promising developments in the past decade. ... I just have to believe it has caused some number of chancery officials to tell their bishops, 'I won't lie for you any more.'" If not, Clohessy said, "we'll be having this same talk 20 years from now."

University of Santa Clara psychology professor Thomas Plante, who serves on the National Review Board, has co-authored a collection of essays on lessons learned -- and goals still unmet -- since 2002.

The Lynn trial, Plante said, "is enough to make even the most devout, daily-Mass-attending Catholics out there, throw up their hands and say, 'Why can't these guys get their act together?' "