

Cardinal Law's role in Rome recalls church's scars: Reviled in U.S., respected in Rome

News in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

After a grand funeral attracting world leaders to the Vatican and crowds urging a speedy sainthood for the late Pope John Paul II, the assigning of a former U.S. cardinal to celebrate one of the masses in St. Peter's Basilica during the mourning period reminded Americans of the scars still present in the U.S. church.

Cardinal Bernard Law, the former archbishop of Boston who resigned for mishandling the clergy sex-abuse scandal, presided over the mass April 11 while news media covered a small protest from victim advocates who said that Law didn't deserve the honor.

Two leaders of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) flew to Rome to complain that allowing Law such a prominent pulpit poured "salt into an already open wound." Barbara Blaine, president of the Chicago-based SNAP, was escorted by Italian police from St. Peter's Square and kept behind traffic barriers when she attempted to distribute fliers to pilgrims and tourists in the square.

Law presided at one of the daily memorial masses during the nine-day mourning period for John Paul II, who died April 2. Last year, John Paul named Law to the largely ceremonial post of archpriest of the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome.

Blaine said Law never should have been asked, or at least should have recused himself out of concern for victims. She did not, however, contest his right to vote in the conclave to elect a new pope. "He should take a back seat and stay in the background so that Catholics who are grieving the loss of the Holy Father can have their space to grieve without having Cardinal Law in their face," she said.

Although some Vatican officials said Law's assignment to celebrate one of the masses reflected only his position, Blaine accused the Vatican and ten other U.S.

cardinals, who were to vote for a successor in the conclave starting April 18, of insensitivity to Law's admitted mistakes.

However, the *Los Angeles Times* reported April 12 that all but one of the U.S.-based cardinals avoided that mass—for various reasons. Citing three unnamed sources, the *Times* said that three of the seven cardinals—Edward M. Egan of New York, Francis George of Chicago and Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles—“snubbed the mass . . . out of concern over Law's notoriety.” One source said, “They voted with their feet.”

Justin Rigali of Philadelphia was the only U.S. resident cardinal present at the mass with Law. The other American-based cardinals—William Keeler of Baltimore, Adam Maida of Detroit and Theodore McCarrick of Washington—had scheduling conflicts or decided not to attend after being told their presence was not mandatory, their aides told the *Times*. Many cardinals from other countries skipped the mass as well, but their motives were unknown, the newspaper said.

Vatican observers cautioned against reading too much into Law's appearance at St. Peter's. The mass was offered for the priests and employees at Rome's four major basilicas, church officials said, which made Law a natural choice to preside.

Still, Law's appearance at the spiritual and historic center of the Catholic faith sent a subtle message that while he remains reviled in some parts of the American church, he is a powerful and respected voice in the Vatican.

Law resigned in December 2002 after the *Boston Globe* revealed that he had reassigned and protected known sex abusers. After a brief stint at a Maryland convent, Law was transferred to Rome, where he is responsible for the upkeep of the massive basilica built to honor the Virgin Mary.

Although Law lost his job in Boston, he retained his vote in the College of Cardinals. He also kept his position in the Vatican agency that helps the pope appoint new bishops. *-Religion News Service*