

Cardinal Who Covered Up Significant Sex Abuse Dies

Cardinal Bernard Law, the former Archbishop of Boston who resigned in disgrace after covering up years of sexual abuse of children by priests and whose name became a byword for scandal in the Catholic Church, died on Wednesday.

The Vatican announced his death just before dawn.

It did not give a cause of death but sources close to Law, who died in a hospital in Rome, said he had been suffering from the complications of diabetes, liver failure and a build-up of fluids around the heart, known as pericardial effusion.

The telegram of condolences Pope Francis sent to the dean of the College of Cardinals was unusually short and bland compared to those for other cardinals before.

Francis said he was praying that the merciful God would "welcome him in eternal peace." The pope did not mention that Law had been Archbishop of Boston and a brief Vatican biography made no mention of the circumstances of his resignation 15 years ago.

Law was Archbishop of Boston, one of the most prestigious and wealthy American archdioceses, for 18 years when Pope John Paul reluctantly accepted his resignation on Dec. 13, 2002, after a tumultuous year in Church history.

A succession of devastating news stories by Boston Globe reporters showed how priests who sexually abused children had been moved from parish to parish for years under Law's tenure without parishioners or law authorities being informed.

"No words can convey the pain these survivors and their loved

ones suffered,” SNAP, a victims’ group, said.

“Survivors of child sexual assault in Boston, who were first betrayed by Law’s cover-up of sex crimes and then doubly betrayed by his subsequent promotion to Rome, were those most hurt,” SNAP said in a statement.

Law’s resignation sent shockwaves through the American church and had a trickle-down effect around the world as the cover-up techniques used in Boston were discovered to have been used in country after country.

The story of how the Globe team brought the scandal to light in a city where few wanted to cross the politically powerful Church was told in the 2015 film “Spotlight,” which won the Oscar for Best Picture.

The situation in Boston turned out to be the tip of an iceberg of abuse and its cover-up, where churchmen preferred protecting the reputation of the institution rather than the innocence of children.

Thousands of cases came to light around the world as investigations encouraged long-silent victims to go public, shattering the Church’s reputation in places such as Ireland, and forcing it to pay some \$2 billion in compensation.

“As Archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Law served at a time when the church failed seriously in its responsibilities to provide pastoral care for her people, and with tragic outcomes, failed to care for the children of our parish communities. I deeply regret that reality and its consequences,” Law’s successor in Boston, Cardinal Sean O’Malley, said in a statement.

Six months after his resignation, the Massachusetts attorney general’s office announced that Law and others would not face criminal charges.

GOLDEN PARACHUTE

After a period in a monastery in the United States, Law moved to Rome.

In 2004 Pope John Paul appointed him to be archpriest of the Rome Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, one of the four major basilicas of Christendom, whose gold leaf ceiling is said to be made from the first batch of the precious metal Columbus brought back from the Americas. He is likely to be buried there.

In relative terms it was an immense fall from grace. Such posts are symbolic and ceremonial.

But victims of sexual abuse were outraged because it gave Law a second career and a golden parachute that allowed him to stay close to the center of power in Rome and serve as a member or adviser in several influential Vatican departments.

He also maintained the rank of cardinal and participated in the conclave that elected Pope Benedict in 2005.

Before he became ill, Law was a regular on the diplomatic circuit, attending receptions, including many in the gardens of the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican.

While Law was an awkward presence at U.S. receptions for a few years after his resignation, at Italian events he was treated with the same effusive obsequiousness bestowed on all cardinals – something Law appeared to enjoy.

He always declined to talk about events in Boston. “I’m retired from that,” he told a reporter at one reception.

FOOT DRAGGING

O’Malley, Law’s successor, heads a Vatican commission advising Pope Francis on how to root out sexual abuse in the Church.

But the credibility of the commission, which was formed in

2014, has been hurt by the resignation of two high-level lay members who have accused the Vatican of dragging its feet.

The terms of most members expired recently and it is not clear what Pope Francis will do with it.

Last September, Francis, addressing the commission, said the Catholic Church had moved too slowly to confront abuse.

“When consciousness arrives late, the means to resolve the problems also arrive late. I am aware of this difficulty but it is reality and I say it plainly: We arrived late. The old practice of moving people around and not confronting the problem made consciences fall asleep,” the pope said.

Bernard Francis Law was born on Nov. 4, 1931, in Torreon, Mexico, the son of a U.S. Army official and a musician. He graduated from Harvard University and was ordained a priest in 1961.

His first assignment was in Mississippi, where he received death threats for championing civil rights. As bishop of Springfield–Cape Girardeau in Missouri, he opened a home for battered women and a center to help Vietnamese boat people.

The Vatican said Law’s funeral would be held on Thursday afternoon in St. Peter’s Basilica. The Mass will be said by a senior cardinal and the pope will participate in the final blessing, a normal procedure for cardinals. {eoa}

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