

# CrossCurrents

*A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*

# 296 Bernard F. Swain, Ph.D. [www.CrossCurrents.us](http://www.CrossCurrents.us)



## Some Good News About Scandal

Now that Benedict XVI is sending Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley to manage the sex scandal in Ireland, it is clear that those dismissing this problem as a media invention or minimizing it as an "American problem" were wrong all along.

But even as the scandal widens to a global scale, some good news is emerging. A parish case from Boston last week triggered an old memory for me which suggests that even horrifying scandal may produce some hopeful, if unintended, consequences.

**The New Case.** Last week a Grand Jury in Middlesex County (Massachusetts) indicted a former employee of Saint Mary Magdalene parish in Tyngsboro for theft of \$100,000. The indictment alleges that this person, who was responsible for counting collection money, regularly skimmed cash from parish collections, Saint Vincent De Paul donations, and prayer candle donations, from 2003 to 2009. She then allegedly wrote false numbers into the parish books.

Suspecting something was amiss, a parish priest secretly performed an early count on two occasions and verified that the employee's entries into the parish ledger were "substantially lower" than his own account.

In 2009 she was fired and revenues "skyrocketed," mainly due to an abundance of large-donation bills, which had previously become rare. Investigators found series of large cash deposits in the accused's bank account, mainly made on Mondays.

The Archdiocese of Boston released this statement:

*As sad and difficult as this matter has been for our parish, we pray for the former employee who is at the center of this investigation and facing serious legal consequences.*

**The Old Case.** Nearly twenty years ago, I attended the regular staff meeting of a Boston-area client parish during which the pastor made a shocking announcement.

Based on a sense that parish collections were suspiciously low in recent years, he had hired a private investigator, who installed hidden videos to track the

handling of the money. Tapes showed a parish secretary pocketing cash before locking the collection bags in the parish safe. The pastor called the Archdiocese, which immediately took charge.

The pastor told the staff that the employee, confronted at work by archdiocesan officials, admitted the theft and was fired. Investigators calculated that she had regularly stolen \$1,000 for weekend collections over a five year period – a theft totaling \$250,000 in parish funds!

The staff was doubly stunned: first, by the theft itself, but second by the way their leadership role was being replaced by the Archdiocese's intervention.

Indeed, the next several staff meetings only served to deepen this second shock. Not only was the Archdiocese managing the case, it was also managing the way the pastor and his staff managed parish affairs in its wake. The Archdiocese imposed a gag order: parishioners were to be told nothing of the theft. Local authorities were not to be notified. The accused person would be "dealt with" directly by archdiocesan officials.

Within a few months the staff learned how those officials had "settled" the case. The accused would never face charges (lest the theft be made public), and in return had signed a "payment plan" stating her intention to make restitution over several years. The plan's enforcement was never very clear, since law enforcement officials were never informed and she relocated to Florida – moving into the very home she paid for with the stolen parish money!

The gag order on the staff was made permanent: as far as I know, to this day the people in the pews have never learned that a quarter million dollars of their hard-earned cash was stolen away in secret.

Understandably, the pastor and staff were enraged. First, they regarded the outcome as unjust. Second, they resented the patronizing treatment of the true victims, the parishioners. They seethed at their inability to confront the thief, whom they had worked and socialized with for years. Finally, they were scandalized by the arrogance of

a diocesan bureaucracy whose entire apparatus was driven by one motive: preserving secrecy in order to avoid “scandal.”

**The Moral Of The Story.** If we compare these cases, we find a radical shift from secretive mismanagement (in the old case) to a more transparent approach (in the new case).

In the older theft case, the obsession with secrecy dominated everything else, for the Boston hierarchy under Bernard Law consistently infantilized the laity, assuming they could not handle any bad news. “Don’t let the children (i.e., the parishioners) know” was the order of the day – even when it meant letting criminals go scot free. The blithe ability of archdiocesan bureaucrats to ignore both law and law enforcement, and its active disregard for victims, were as typical as they were appalling.

The sex abuse crisis has, it appears, changed all that. It has proven that the public is more scandalized – and thus the Church is more damaged – by official cover-up than by the original crimes. Sean O’Malley and his subordinates appear to know, at long last, that the decent thing is to proceed openly and in public view.

In the new case, they reported criminal behavior to the police. They knew the Boston Globe would cover the story, but they no longer regard the Globe (which won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the sex abuse crisis) as a troublemaking enemy. They knew people would learn of evil-doing in church operations, but they now believe that laity are mature enough to acknowledge such human imperfections but cannot tolerate official subterfuge to keep them from knowing about it.

They now realize that no one expects the institutional Church to be perfect, but everyone expects it to be accountable.

The moral of the story, then, is that even the most horrific scandal can have beneficial, albeit unintended, consequences. The tragic suffering of victims (plus billions of dollars in settlements) may finally have caused our hierarchy to “bottom out” and begin to recover from its long chronic compulsion to cover its tracks. This may not console the survivors, but it may offer the rest of us some measure of hope.

**Bernard F. Swain PhD 2010**

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***Dr. Swain’s opinions do not represent the views of this parish or any other official body.***

A lifelong layperson, Bernie Swain has devoted more than 35 years to adult spiritual formation in dioceses in the US, Canada, and France. Since 1991 he has had a private practice as trainer, teacher, and consultant to leaders in parishes and other religious organizations.

He holds degrees in political science from Holy Cross & The University of Paris, and in theology from Harvard & The University of Chicago. His writings include *Liberating Leadership* (Harper & Row, 1986) and more than 200 articles in periodicals such as *The National Catholic Reporter*, *Commonweal*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Catholic Free Press*, *The Pilot*, *Harvard Theological Review*, and *Liturgy*.

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