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A Betrayal of Faith

During the past several months, scores of lawsuits have been filed against members of the Roman Catholic clergy for sexual assaults on children in the Archdiocese of Boston. Eight priests have been defrocked in the past month and controversy surrounding the behavior of the diocesan Archbishop, Bernard Cardinal Law, continues to mount. Public confidence in the Church is noticeably shaken. But why did Massachusetts's citizens not press earlier for the state to act to protect children and to censure the Catholic Church for her irresponsibility?

Sadly, the current crisis in the Boston Archdiocese and, more broadly, in the Roman Catholic Church herself, is far from new. As is apparent from the charges now pending against Cardinal Law, the Church has made it a practice to cover-up allegations of sexual assault and to re-appoint accused priests after only minimal admonition and rehabilitation.

The Catholic Church's continued negligence has only recently incited action among lawmakers in the Massachusetts state legislature. Although the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment preserves freedom of religion and assiduously guards the Catholic Church's right to abide by Canon Law, the state government possesses the paramount obligation to protect the safety of its citizens. Whether the perpetrator is priest or layman, the sexual abuse of a minor must be understood not only as a sin, but also as a serious crime. And as a crime, such acts may not be left to the sanction of the Catholic Church.

Since 1988, bills that called for adding religious leaders to an existing list of Massachusetts professionals who are required by law to report any suspicions of child abuse to law enforcement authorities, have been repeatedly blocked in both the Massachusetts House and Senate. In January, however, after Cardinal Law's public apology and the mounting civil and criminal cases now being filed against several Boston priests, a similar bill was re-introduced in the legislature. This time the bill unanimously gained the approval of the Senate and is expected to pass the House and win Governor Jane Swift's signature. This bill may appear to be a narrowing of the Catholic Church's independence, but it represents a clarifying gain in the recognition of government's responsibility to protect children from sexual assault and other abuses.

The distinction between the Catholic Church and the commonwealth has traditionally been blurred in Boston and on Beacon Hill due to the compelling majority of both Catholic citizens and state legislators. The Church has enjoyed special favor in state politics and is an active lobby in the Massachusetts legislature. Therefore, the two institutions should have been vigorously working together, from the start, to provide greater safeguards against the sexual abuse of minors rather than remaining idle when allegations of assault were brought forth. It took the legislature nearly two decades to confront the Catholic Church's insulation in this matter and make her legally accountable for past and ongoing abuses.

A grave crime has indeed been committed and the betrayal extends beyond those victims of sexual assault by religious leaders. It is a sad day when we are driven to distrust two of the most important institutions to which spiritual and earthly care have been entrusted. We can only hope that the state's belated action and the Catholic Church's public acknowledgment can help restore that confidence in Massachusetts.

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