



EDITORIAL

[This week's stories](#) | [Home Page](#)

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The courage to buck the culture

The payoff for the pain and embarrassment the Catholic faithful in Boston have endured through the sex abuse scandal and now the growing financial scandal there may be the slow but inexorable change the church is undergoing in that archdiocese.

As the cover story this week by Jeff Severns Guntzel makes clear, Catholic lay people in Boston are responding to church leaders in these matters of accountability and management in a way unprecedented in the modern Catholic church in the United States. Where once “pray, pay and obey” Catholics would have grudgingly gone along with the hierarchy or left the church disgruntled, today they are saying, in effect: “You created the problem. You can’t take our parishes to fix the problem.”

That, of course, is too simple a reading of the situation. Even without the enormous pastoral blunders and gross mismanagement by previous archbishops in their handling of the clergy sex abuse scandal, things would have to change in Boston. Demographic shifts and the priest shortage alone continue to dictate changes in the urban Catholic landscape.

In Boston, though, the inevitable was made more painful by the revelations of the sex abuse crisis. That crisis has shone the spotlight on how a culture and its processes bred corruption and a lack of accountability. There was no need to guess. The documents released by a judge in 2002 spelled out the problem in the language of the community’s leaders.

The financial statements that have begun to filter out under pressure show how brazenly those leaders betrayed the community and squandered the treasury.

Archbishop Sean O’Malley was handed a mess as his predecessor, Cardinal Bernard Law, was transferred to Rome, where he still holds seats on the most powerful congregations in the church. It was all the people and the priests of the archdiocese could do to get him removed from the archdiocese. That he continues to affect the lives of Catholics in the United States by influencing episcopal appointments and other issues is its own scandal. At the same time, the Catholics of Boston have begun their own shaping of a new model of church.

O’Malley may have a mess on his hands, but he also has a great opportunity. It will take considerable courage, however, to buck the culture that Fr. Donald Cozzens, in his book *Faith that Dares to Speak*, characterizes as the last feudal system in the West.

That system -- dependent on an ignorant populace as well as absolute loyalty and the issuance from on high of benefices -- is crumbling. The serfs have been educated; unquestioning loyalty has been shown to be a dangerous idol; Boston as benefice has lost its luster.

The current lord of the manor arrives against type: He wears the robes and sandals of the pauper saint, his well-developed sense of social justice makes him impatient to get on with projects other than closing parishes and battling with his people.

Those instincts and the system clash. Something has to give.

Mary Beth Carmody, a lawyer who is a member of St. Jeremiah Parish in Framingham, eloquently argues the case for a new direction: “We keep telling the archdiocese that we are not dissident Catholics. We are the core and foundation, we are the parish council members, we are the parish finance council, we are the confirmation teachers, the religious education teachers, the lectors and the eucharistic ministers. We are the core of the Catholic church, and not only that, we are their gold because we are the core that cares enough to fight.”

By extension, Carmody argues for a new level of lay responsibility, one that not only rails against the failings of hierarchy but that cares enough to hold vigil around the clock and take the notion of parish community to new levels. What she and others advocate is not temporary activism but a demanding new way of life for ordinary Catholics.

Perhaps some evening soon, the archbishop will find a way to steal some time away from the demands of office and meet with some of that “gold.” No agenda, no lawyers, no mandates, no press, much as we would love to listen in.

Have a conversation with these newly vitalized Catholics who have proven their deep love for the church at large and their own parishes.

Listen, in a way that doesn't expect the bishop will have all the answers to their concerns, their dreams, their visions.

Maybe the conversations point the way to some new directions, some new structures, new levels of transparency and accountability.

The old way, we know, resulted in a mess of community distrust and upheaval.

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[This Week's Stories](#) | [Home Page](#) | [Top of Page](#)

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