



Reporting an Explosive Truth: The *Boston Globe* and Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church Epilogue

The *Boston Globe* held the story. With input from Spotlight Team member Michael Rezendes, Special Projects Editor Ben Bradlee Jr. decided to proceed with the initial plan: to run a comprehensive package on ex-priest John Geoghan in January 2002 to coincide with the beginning of his trial. Editors recognized that because the explosive documents were in a public file, there was a chance that a competitor might scoop the *Globe* and break the story that Cardinal Law knew about Geoghan's history of pedophilia, but they decided to run the risk. "We were nervous the whole time," Rezendes says.

As a precaution Rezendes wrote a "holding story," a piece that could be quickly dropped into the paper. If, for example, the *Boston Herald* published a story in its first edition, the *Globe* could run its story that night. As it turned out, the *Globe* never needed to use the holding story: no other news organization discovered the public files.

In the meantime, the story grew. In December 2001, the *Globe* won its court case seeking to unseal the documents in the Geoghan trial: they would be made public in mid-January. The archdiocese after the court decision sent a letter to the *Globe* threatening legal action if it ran stories based on the documents. But Editor Martin Baron ignored the threat, which he calls "absurd," and didn't even bother to tell his publisher about it. As the *Globe* readied its first story, based on the documents obtained by Rezendes, it tried to get the archdiocese to address the revelations. Cardinal Bernard Law called Baron to say that the church had no comment.

The *Globe* ran its first story on Sunday, January 6, 2002. As the Spotlight journalists headed to work, they expected to see picketers in front of the *Globe* building, people objecting to the *Globe's* "Catholic-bashing." But there wasn't a single protestor. "There was this eerie silence," Rezendes says:

Then the phone started to ring and it rang and it rang and it rang
and the people who called, for the most part, were loyal Catholics,

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passionate Catholics, who were filled with rage and anger and not at the Boston Globe, not at the messenger but at Cardinal Law for betraying an institution that they loved.

The *Globe's* circulation decreased around this time, but the change was negligible. In fact, it was difficult to know whether the cancelled subscriptions were a result of the story or merely part of an ongoing trend. "With the decline in circulation, you could hardly distinguish what was related to that and what wasn't," Baron said.

Globe journalists attribute the reaction to the depth of the evidence. "I think that's why we had as little blowback as we did from people within the Catholic community," Baron says, "because they themselves were stunned by the evidence." It also helped that the *Globe's* accuracy denied the Church an opening to argue that the paper was biased. "There are so many facts jammed into three or 4,000 words it's almost impossible to get every single thing right," Carroll says. "But we had a very, very tiny number of corrections throughout the year. And they were all minor."

Among the thousands of people who called the *Globe* were victims of pedophile priests, coming forward for the first time. They provided new leads. In January alone, the Spotlight Team, fortified with several new reporters, broke three other major stories on the scandal: one based on the newly unsealed documents revealing the extent of the church's complicity in Geoghan's crimes, one undermining the church's claim that Geoghan had been cleared to work by credible psychiatrists, and one showing that the archdiocese had sheltered more than 70 abusive priests. Eventually more than 200 priests would be implicated as the *Globe* continued its investigation.

The story reverberated around the country as members of other dioceses confronted abusive priests and their protectors among the church hierarchy. By the end of 2002, some 1,200 priests had been accused of abuse and five prelates had resigned. The most prominent among them was Cardinal Bernard Law, who stepped down in December of 2002, almost a year after the *Globe* published its first story on the scandal.

In April 2003, the *Boston Globe* won the Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism for its coverage of the Catholic priest sex abuse scandal. The experience of investigating the church reinforced for the Spotlight reporters several tenets of journalism, chief among them the importance of challenging authority. Says Rezendes:

It's an old adage that the job of a newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and it may sound a little trite but I don't think anything could be truer... We did comfort the afflicted and we did afflict one of the most comfortable people in Boston, that's Cardinal Law.