

# DORCHESTER COMMUNITY COMMENT

## Heroic Deeds and Tragic Failures: The Duality of Cardinal Law

By ED FORRY

On January 26, 1984, just after the Vatican announced Bishop Bernard Law would become the new Archbishop of Boston, the priest flew into Boston's Logan Airport.

It was a typically cold New England mid-winter day. Two nights before his arrival, in the early evening, fire broke out in St. Ambrose church in Fields Corner. Within minutes, the blaze grew out of control, destroying the beautiful neighborhood church and devastating the parish members and Dorchester residents throughout the neighborhood.

Word came that the Archbishop-elect would divert from his original route to the chancery in Brighton, and instead make a personal visit to view the remains of the church.

As press cameras rolled, Bishop Law toured the fire-gutted church, consoled grieving parishioners, and held an impromptu press conference on the steps of church.

Take heart, he told the parishioners: if it can be done, St. Ambrose church will be rebuilt. The Bishop had seen scores of churches burned in the deep south, and the community always came back stronger, he said. The press lights shone bright, the TV cameras recorded the new church leader's words, and scores of parishioners wept with joy.

It was an electrifying moment. The visit lasted no more than 30 minutes, and there was a sense that this dynamic new Bishop would soon chart a promising new course for his flock in the Boston Archdiocese.

Later, an anecdote spread among priests that their new boss had called the then-pastor of St. Ambrose over to his car for a final word. The priest looked a bit disheveled, as he had been struggling to come to terms with the fire and urgently tried to find some way to console his people. When Bishop Law beckoned him to the car, the priest was expecting more words of support.

"Do you have anything planned this afternoon," Law is said to have asked. "No, I am free, Bishop," was the reply. "Then go get a haircut," the new Archbishop said. Then he closed the door and drove away to meet the chancery staff in Brighton.

It was a striking moment: in his first return to Boston since his Harvard graduation more than 25 years earlier, Bernard Law showed two compelling traits: in pledging to try and rebuild the parish church, he showed his warm and caring pastoral capacity, reassuring the faithful and promising to look after their spiritual needs. And in his brief rejoinder with the parish priest, he sent a message that there was a new boss in town, and things would be different.

Word of the Bishop-priest exchange spread quickly among the Archdiocese's priests. There is an adage among priests, that the day a man becomes a bishop, two things happen: He never again has a bad meal, and he never hears the truth. Many wondered just what might change under this new, young church leader, so well-educated and so charismatic. Some saw it as a new breath of fresh air; others doubted



In 1984, then-Bishop Bernard Law surveyed the damage at St. Ambrose Church in Fields Corner, which was destroyed by fire two nights before Law arrived in Boston to assume his duties as leader of the Archdiocese of Boston. (Reporter file photo)

whether things would change at all.

The new Archbishop's arrival in Boston was met with great enthusiasm in many quarters. On January 26, 1984 the *Boston Globe* editorialized:

"For the two million faithful of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston and for many non-Catholics, this season's discontent has been gloriously banished by Pope John Paul's appointment of Bernard Francis Law as the eighth bishop of Boston. By training and by temperament, the 52 year-old prelate seems the perfect choice to bring a strong personal and pastoral presence to Boston for decades to come."

Calling him "a master helmsman of the winds of change that have buffeted modern institutions since that time," the *Globe* said, "The church transcends ideology because of its enduring apostolic mission.... Boston and New England await that fulfillment with joy this January. With the rest of his new friends, we wish him a long and fruitful reign with the Latin admonition for longevity, *Ad multos annos.*"

In the parishes, there was great hope that the new bishop would bring great change to the church's affairs here in Boston. For many pastors, "dealing with the boss" had long meant no direct dealings with the Archbishop. Rather, priests were left to maneuver through the labyrinth known as the chancery, that suite of offices adjacent to the Archbishop's residence at Lake Street in Brighton. Generations of Boston priests had found the chancery to be a place where ideas go to wither and die.

In the late years of Law's predecessor, Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, the chancery became all-powerful. Pastors had learned that if they wanted something done, they should do it themselves. Many chose to avoid the hopeless bureaucracy: if they desired to advance their pastoral mission in their own parishes, it was more efficient to do it themselves. As one local pastor now says, "I have decided to take Tip O'Neil's advice about politics and apply it to my job: All priesthood is local."

In his 18 years as Archbishop, Cardinal Law has accomplished all sorts of good works for his Boston people. In the face of prevailing public opinion to the contrary, he exerted tough moral leadership on the

rights of the unborn; he has been a consistent opponent of the death penalty; he has helped to build schools and finance community centers. And under Cardinal Law, the Catholic Charities has become one of the largest not-for-profit providers of social services for people and families in need, regardless of their religion or ethnicity.

What he has failed to accomplish is the reform of that secretive bureaucracy that concerned many priests two decades ago. Anecdotal reports about the chancery reveal a chaotic system: years and years of records stored in boxes, no computerized personnel files, no systems in place to spot problems and prevent their recurrence. One priest said privately that many of the records now being made public had not been seen in years. It's likely that there has been no oversight of the personnel files, for example, since original entries were made 20 and 30 years ago. All the evidence of priestly wrongdoing has been stored away, out of sight and out of mind, until the media-driven disclosures of the past 12 months forced them out into the open.

Cardinal Law has been in Rome this week, reportedly meeting with Vatican officials. Unconfirmed reports have him discussing a bankruptcy petition for his archdiocese and a resignation from his post. But there is no reliable way to know just what is going on. We will find out what went on when the Vatican chooses to let us know.

For now, this Cardinal continues to be a lightning rod for every evil that has come to light. He may not have been responsible for all the problems, as many of the priestly transgressions happened well before that January day in 1984 when he arrived back in Boston. But the conventional wisdom is that the cover-ups, the silences, the priestly enablings happened on his watch, and to date there has been

little evidence to show the Cardinal and his team—largely the bishops, both currently and formerly assigned to Boston—took any action to punish the evil-doers and prevent these problems. Ironically, much of their actions were said to have been taken to avoid scandal. Now look where we are.

In the midst of all this darkness, the heart cries out for a glimmer of Christian hope. *Boston Herald* columnist Joe Fitzgerald reported this week on a young local priest, Rev. Chris Hickey, who went on the altar at his Dedham church last Sunday and asked his parishioners "to love and forgive the Cardinal."

"Looking back, it's obvious Cardinal Law blew it, which he has admitted and for which he has apologized," Fr. Hickey told Fitzgerald. "He now knows it was naive to believe these guys wouldn't screw up again, to be blunt. But that doesn't discount the fact he was acting out of love and forgiveness... The irony is we're judging the Cardinal for being loving and forgiving, and we're doing so without any love or forgiveness ourselves. I just hope God's not going to judge me the way we're judging this man, because if He does, I won't have a snowball's chance in hell of making it to heaven."

Cardinal Law has been in Rome all this week, and when he returns to Logan Airport tomorrow, his arrival will be reminiscent of that January morning in 1984 when he motored from the airport to the burned-out remnants of the old St. Ambrose on Adams Street.

Now, as then, he finds a church largely in ruins, smoldering and damaged, with people filled with grief over the ghastly conflagration which has consumed so many parts of the Boston Church.

Bernard Law has been through the fire himself this year, yet his commitment at St. Ambrose proves he knows how to rebuild. Many pray the church leader will have the capacity to reconcile with the faithful.

The cornerstone of the Christian faith is forgiveness. The question is whether there are enough Christians left in his church willing to postpone judgment day.

(Ed Forry is the managing editor of the *Dorchester Reporter*)

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