

## PRIEST SCANDAL Globe court battle unseals church records, reveals longtime abuse

BY SACHA PFEIFFER  
*THE BOSTON GLOBE*

**O**ur project began with an astonishing admission, followed by a simple question.

The admission came in June 2001, from the then-leader of the Archdiocese of Boston, Cardinal Bernard F. Law. He acknowledged in a public court filing that in 1984, he had transferred the Rev. John J. Geoghan to a new parish – despite knowing that Geoghan had been accused of molesting seven children.

The question came in July 2001, from the then-brand-new editor of *The Boston Globe*, Martin Baron, who asked why church documents in Geoghan's case were shielded from public view by a court-imposed confidentiality seal. The answer – that church lawyers had requested the protective order – spurred Baron to send the newspaper's lawyers to court to file a motion to lift the seal.

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## FAITH HEALER Hidden cameras help, hidden records frustrate probe into televangelist

BY MEADE JORGENSEN  
DATELINE NBC

**T**he live orchestra always plays “How Great Thou Art” when televangelist/faith-healer Benny Hinn makes his entrance in his custom-made white suit with the “Holy Spirit” logo embroidered in gold on the pocket.


“Pastor Benny,” as he is known to his followers, will tell you they are singing about Jesus. But after following him on and off for two years, it's hard not to think “Thou” might refer to the good pastor himself.

He has been known for his outrageous theological statements (one of my favorites is that God originally intended for women to give birth from their sides), his outrageous “comb-over” hairstyle, and the way he “slays people in the spirit,” at his crusades. You might get a chuckle out of watching Hinn fill the stage with prostrate followers, and hearing him call down healings for everything from HIV to cancer to demons – but you had better take this man seriously.

He has millions of followers. His

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# FOLLOW THE FAITH



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## PRIEST SCANDAL

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Ultimately, *Globe* attorneys were successful in persuading the court that the public's right to know outweighed the archdiocese's privacy claim, resulting in the release of more than 10,000 pages of previously secret church records. The documents proved devastating to the Boston archdiocese. But while the legal motion wended its way through court, the *Globe* Spotlight Team, a four-person investigative unit, set out to learn as much as it could about what the church knew about Geoghan, when it knew it, and what it did about it.

How, we wondered, had one priest – who by January 2001 had become the subject of at least 84 civil lawsuits alleging that he had molested children – accumulated so many victims in six different parishes in three decades before being removed from active ministry in 1993?

### Unconventional target

Our research began in August 2001, and our findings stunned us. In the Boston archdiocese alone, we now know, more than 150 priests have been credibly accused of sexually abusing children in recent decades. Often, family members and even fellow priests alerted top church officials of wrongdoing. But the crimes were concealed, ignored and forgiven by a lengthy succession of bishops and cardinals who were widely viewed as icons of morality in the Catholic Church.

By March 2003, the *Globe* had published more than 900 news stories about the clergy sex abuse scandal, and more than 500 people had come forward with legal claims that they were molested by priests in the Boston archdiocese. Nationally, similar accusations forced the removal of an estimated 450 priests in 2002. As public disgust grew over ugly disclosures about abusive priests and indifferent bishops, and about millions of dollars paid in so-called hush money, church attendance and donations plummeted. Lay reform groups like Voice of the Faithful were born, attracting thousands of outraged Catholics. In December 2002, Cardinal Law, once America's most influential church leader, resigned in disgrace.

Meanwhile, reeling from the abuse scandal and a down economy, the Boston archdiocese now teeters on the brink of financial ruin, and has considered bankruptcy as a solution to its troubles.

How did we get here?  
The Catholic Church was an

unconventional target for the Spotlight Team. For much of its three-decade history, Spotlight had carried out its mission of exposing corruption by taking on municipal and government institutions, like bad cops, crooked politicians and corrupt public agencies. At the same time, newspapers across the country had been writing stories for years about clergy sex abuse, and the *Globe* had been writing for several years about Geoghan. But most of those stories focused on isolated cases of abuse, and on the actions of individual priests rather than church officials.

With Cardinal Law's June 2001 admission, however, the story of clergy sex abuse shifted from one about priests who abused children to one about church leaders who had covered up for priests who abused children. That was territory few newspapers had explored, largely because church files were inaccessible to the public. Still, before the breadth of the crisis was exposed, many church leaders, including Cardinal Law, denounced the media for its coverage of the issue, insisting that the problem of clergy sex abuse had been blown out of proportion.

But had it? The task of testing the church's claim was a daunting one. We were faced with somehow cracking open an institution that had neither the obligation nor desire to make its records public or discuss how it operates. One example of the church's rigid resistance to public inquiry: Just before the *Globe* published its first

Geoghan story on Jan. 6, 2002, the spokeswoman for

the Boston archdiocese not only refused to answer our questions, but said the church had no interest in knowing what those questions were.

We launched our investigation by interviewing everyone we could think of who knew anything about the Geoghan case: lawyers, known victims, prosecutors, the small circle of people who had studied the issue of clergy sexual abuse. Within a week, it was clear that the dimension of the clergy sex abuse problem extended far beyond Geoghan, and far beyond the Boston archdiocese. Again and again, we were told that Geoghan was only "the tip of the iceberg."

### Not an aberration

In an effort to quantify the extent of the abuse, we combed through nearly 20 years of the archdiocese's annual directories, which list every priest in the archdiocese and his parish or administrative assignment. From those directories, we developed a spreadsheet to track what seemed to be an unusually large number of priests who had been placed in categories like "sick leave," "awaiting assignment," "clergy personnel office," or "unassigned." From interviewing numerous victims, we knew that priests frequently received those dubious labels after church officials received abuse complaints about them.

Scrutinizing the directories was tedious and time-consuming, but fruitful. From them, we found that in the mid-1980s, there were usually

Bill Greene | The Boston Globe



Cardinal Law issues a statement to the press in December.

## The Book

In "Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church" (Little Brown & Co., \$23.95), the investigative staff of *The Boston Globe* gives the complete story of the Catholic Church's cover-up of abusive priests that lasted for decades and involved hundreds of victims

The book adds "new, never-before disclosed details," on how abusive priests were shuffled to different locations, as well as those who knew about the problem and did nothing to stop it.

The book was a finalist in the book category of this year's IRE Awards.

about two dozen priests in all those categories combined in any one year, out of more than 1,000 priests. By the mid-1990s, after the church had begun to pay secret settlements and quietly remove offending priests from parishes, the number shot up to more than 100 priests.

We also scoured a state trial court database, looking for cases in which victims had filed lawsuits. That led to the identities of other accused priests. Then we assembled a list of every attorney we knew who had handled a sexual abuse complaint, including the cardinal's lawyers, and we obtained docket numbers of all civil cases those lawyers had handled since the late 1980s. Among the hundreds of docket numbers, we found other lawsuits that had never been reported. In some instances, judges in those cases had ordered all the records impounded, keeping them out of the public eye.

In November 2001, Superior Court Judge Constance M. Sweeney ruled in the *Globe's* favor on its motion to unseal the Geoghan file. The archdiocese appealed, but a state appeals court judge upheld Sweeney's ruling. The documents were eventually released in late January 2002. Our original series on Geoghan was published Jan. 6-7, 2002, before the Geoghan court file was formally unsealed, and was based entirely on our reporting and public court records. Then, on Jan. 31, 2002, we reported that the archdiocese had secretly settled sexual abuse claims against at least 70 other priests in the previous 10 years. The story obliterated the church's long-time claim that Geoghan had been an aberration.

Alongside the stories, which triggered a massive public outcry and a series of apologies by Cardinal Law, we published what we called

our "tip box," which became an invaluable tool for gathering information. The tip box listed two phone numbers (one to reach a live reporter, one to leave a recorded confidential message) and an e-mail address so readers could contact us with news and comments. That box brought such a torrent of phone calls and e-mails from readers across the country and even around the world – several thousand, at last count – that we had to hire a student intern to help us answer them. Most of the people who contacted us were victims, and from them we learned the identities of many more alleged abusers.

As the story exploded, the Spotlight Team – reporters Matt Carroll, Sacha Pfeiffer and Michael Rezendes and editor Walter V. Robinson – was joined by religion reporter Michael Paulson and special projects reporters Stephen Kurkjian, Thomas Farragher and Kevin Cullen. More than a year and a half later, the tragedy of clergy sexual abuse remains a high-profile national issue. The crisis has led to new church policies, changes in state law, the resignations of numerous top Catholic prelates, and massive shakeups in dioceses throughout the U.S.

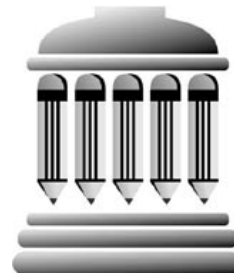
For the *Globe*, the story has been a refreshing reminder that newspapers should not shy away from questioning even society's most revered institutions. It also has renewed our belief that there are always ways to extract information from seemingly impenetrable institutions. Throughout this project, our extensive contact with victims has demonstrated the immense value of reaching out to readers, who are often rich repositories of information. And our investigation has taught us that there is no substitute for documents to prove a case of this magnitude. In the end, the church's own files were its downfall, and the *Globe's* decision to go to court to unseal them was worth the resources it took to do so. Other newspapers would be well-served to do the same.

Perhaps the key lesson we have taken from this project, which has consumed more than a year and a half of our professional lives, is how deeply important it is to question authority. Before we published our original Geoghan stories, we braced ourselves for picket lines outside the *Globe* by Catholics enraged over our reporting. But those protests never came. Instead, readers focused their anger where it belonged: on the church.

*Sacha Pfeiffer is a reporter for the Boston Globe Spotlight Team, the newspaper's investigative unit. The Globe reports won an IRE Medal in this year's IRE Awards and the Pulitzer Prize.*

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