

Admitting mistakes deserves credit

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

One of New York City's most colorful former mayors, Fiorello LaGuardia, once said, "When I make a mistake, it's a beaut!"

It takes a big person to admit a mistake. The easy way out is to try and shift the blame on others, or to keep quiet and hope that no one else has noticed.

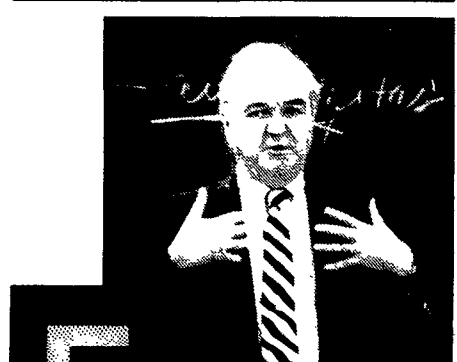
Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law deserves a lot of credit for admitting a major mistake of his own.

As reports of sex abuse by priests filled the press and the airwaves in late spring, the cardinal lashed out at the local media for conducting a kind of smear-campaign against the priesthood.

Last month, in a column in his archdiocesan newspaper, *The Pilot*, Cardinal Law acknowledged that his angry criticism of the media over their reporting of sex-abuse cases was "not particularly constructive."

What may have brought home to His Eminence the full force of his mistake was the searing pain and hurt of the victims of a former priest of the Fall River, Mass., diocese, James Porter.

Porter returned late last month to New Bedford to plead "not guilty" to 46 charges of sexual molestation alleged to have taken place over 25



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

years ago.

Over the past several months more than 70 individuals have come forward to say that Porter sexually abused them as children while he served as a parish priest in three Massachusetts communities. Thirty-two accusers have been named in indictments.

Unfortunately, the Porter case is not just about an individual priest who happened to go bad.

As in the Watergate scandal of some 20 years ago, where the cover-up proved more catastrophic to the Nixon presidency than the burglary itself, a classic pattern of denial,

stonewalling, negligence, and blame-shifting emerged.

Lies were made to the victims' parents and relatives. Priests in the same rectory looked the other way. Diocesan officials ignored or refused to believe complaints from parents and moved Porter from assignment to assignment.

The shabby public record has been amply detailed over the past several months in the *Boston Globe*.

When there were complaints from parents at St. Mary's parish in North Attleboro, Porter was moved to Sacred Heart parish, Fall River. And when there were similar complaints there, he was moved to St. James Parish in New Bedford.

He is charged with having abused and traumatized children in all three parishes. Those with the power to prevent him simply changed the venue of his crimes, allowing him all the while to maintain the access and credibility his priestly status afforded him.

The same pattern emerged in New Mexico, where he sought treatment at an institution staffed by the Servants of the Paraclete. He was allowed to do weekend work in a local parish, without warning to its children and their parents. On July 22 of this year seven persons there filed lawsuits against him for alleged molestations.

After leaving New Mexico, Porter

obtained a parish assignment in the Diocese of Crookston, Minn.

The chancellor has told the press that Crookston would never have accepted Porter for pastoral service had the Servants of the Paraclete in New Mexico disclosed the nature of his problem.

The Porter case, sadly, is only one of many that have been in the news these past several months and years. But its pattern seems depressingly familiar: denial, negligence, cover-up.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago has taken a giant step in recent weeks to reverse this terrible and scandalous record and to enkindle hope that church officials will now confront this crisis directly and honestly. The cardinal's well-publicized guidelines may become a model for all dioceses.

Before this can happen, however, bishops will have to acknowledge that their primary moral obligation is to the victims and their families, not to their priests, nor to the priesthood in general, nor to the financial well-being of their dioceses. But they will also have to acknowledge another hard truth: that this problem isn't going to go away even if new, tougher guidelines are enforced and the present clerical pool is purified.

The problem is not only in the pool, but in the pipeline.

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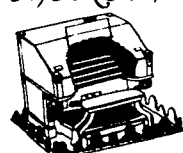
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