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CATHOLICS

WEIGH SCANDAL'S LONG-TERM IMPACT ON THE PRIESTHOOD

By **Kevin Eckstrom**
Religion News Service

In a recent mad dash to catch a flight to Chicago from New York, the Rev. Robert Silva had hoped to change out of his black suit and Roman collar. It's not that Silva is ashamed to be a Catholic priest — he just didn't want the trouble.

With a growing pedophilia scandal engulfing the Roman Catholic Church, Silva knew that wearing his priestly garb in public is something of an occupational hazard these days.

In all the rush, he ran out of time and boarded the plane in uniform. Sure enough, he was approached by someone with a few choice words to say about the scandal. And they weren't very nice words.

"I knew there would be somebody who would make a comment to me," said Silva, 62, a California priest and president of the National Federation of Priests' Councils. "And when someone says something like that to you, it just turns your stomach."

For decades, Catholic priests — like all clergy — enjoyed near-stellar reputations with the public. They were the idealistic do-gooders, like Father O'Malley portrayed by Bing Crosby in 1944's "Going My Way." A white collar translated into immediate respect.

But now, nervous priests like Silva are leaving their collars at home. Anecdotal reports suggest priests are less likely to innocently embrace a child, for fear they might be labeled a pedophile. Bishops, the highest-ranking priests, are assumed to be more interested in cover-ups than genuine reform.

As the growing scandal seemingly spins out of the control of church leaders, the list of the wounded continues to grow to include damaged reputations, diminished levels of trust, low morale in the priesthood and negative effects on seminary recruitment.

According to one recent poll, 83 percent of people now automatically believe a priest is guilty when accused of sexual misconduct. Indeed, one of the greatest casualties in the sex abuse scandal may be the reputations of innocent priests and the entire priesthood.

Even Pope John Paul II, writing on March 21 in his annual letter to priests around the world,

lamented how a "dark shadow of suspicion is cast over all the other fine priests who perform their ministry with honesty and integrity and often with heroic self-sacrifice."

One priest in the embattled Boston Archdiocese — which is paying up to \$30 million to settle the abuse claims of defrocked priest John Geoghan — said the process has been "degrading."

"I have five nephews, and I would be devastated if they would not see me as a role model or someone they could look up to," said the Rev. Bob Bowers, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church, a multicultural inner-city parish in Charlestown, Mass.

Bowers' life as a priest has changed dramatically since the scandal erupted in January. A certified specialist in youth ministry, he no longer takes children on youth trips. Children are not allowed in the rectory. And when they want a hug, he pulls back.

"Kids naturally just want to hug you," he said. "They come running up after Mass, and I have this thing in the back of mind saying, wait a minute, be careful."

That intimacy is crucial to their ministry, many priests say, and it may be gone forever. Tied to that intimacy is a strong degree of trust that experts say has been eroded by the pedophilia scandal.

The Rev. John Coleman, a Jesuit priest and professor of social values at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, said rabbis, priests and ministers cannot effectively do their jobs without that level of trust.

"That would be the biggest casualty of all," he said. "That's my concern, that the pastoral role would be so reconstructed that something pastorally beautiful and extraordinary will get lost."

One ripple effect of the scandal that quickly emerged was plunging morale among the priests. Silva is seething mad at fellow priests who abused children. Bowers, from Boston, is increasingly frustrated with church leaders and lamented that "all the joy has gone out" of his job.

Still, it may be important to remember that Americans tend to regard the clergy much like poli-

ticians — they may be a bunch of scoundrels, but their local pastor, like their congressman, is as good as they come. Bowers, for one, reports an "overwhelmingly supportive response" from his flock.

Experts worry, however, that the scandal may hamper efforts to recruit more priests to join a rapidly shrinking priesthood. According to a Georgetown University research center, the number of men studying for the priesthood has shrunk from 8,100 in 1967 to just 3,400 in 2000. Ordinations of new priests have fallen by 40 percent since 1965.

"All the priests I've been around in the last few months agree that this will hurt recruitment in seminaries," said Dean Hoge, director of the Life Cycle Institute at Catholic University in Washington.

"In the priesthood, the benefits are worth the costs, and part of the spiritual benefits is the esteem you have, and if that's reduced, that reduces the benefits," he said.

Progressive Catholic groups, already at odds with bishops on a host of issues, agree that the changes they seek — including a married priesthood that is open to women — may come at a high cost.

Linda Pieczynski, the past president of Call to Action, said the crisis has opened the door to long-awaited discussions on possible reforms. Still, she lamented damage to an institution she loves, albeit with a good deal of frustration.

"What parent would encourage their son to become a priest under the present circumstances? There's always that feeling that if he wants to be a priest, he must want to get near the kids," she said. "Everybody, instead of automatically trusting their parish priest like they used to, automatically mistrusts their priest."

Nearly everyone agrees that damage done to the priesthood can only be undone by priests themselves. Silva, the California priest stopped on the airplane, said the reputation will be reclaimed by the 47,000 rank-and-file priests who "live out that priesthood with dignity." Bowers, from Boston, said the outcome depends on "what we do now, how we act now."

"There's a lot of people with a lot of faith in us, and I wouldn't want to let them down." ■