

Philadelphia Is the Ireland of America



By [Marci A. Hamilton](#), March 19, 2011

Waves of betrayal rock the Church in Philadelphia; one Catholic family after another has family photos of precious rites of passage that include a pedophile.

The United States is witnessing the meltdown of the Philadelphia Roman Catholic Archdiocese and its hierarchy. Two hard-hitting Grand Jury reports castigating the Archdiocese for its extensive and persistent cover up of child sex abuse by priests have led the vast majority of Philly Catholics to previously unimaginable depths of disgust and anger.

But few outside the city can fully understand how this scandal is affecting the fabric of Philadelphia. Philly is a lot more like Ireland than Boston or Los Angeles, which have dealt with their own large-scale clergy abuse scandals.

They say that Philadelphia has the largest percentage of people who are born, live, and then die in the same city. How does a Philadelphian identify where they live? The local parish. If two Philadelphians meet, more often than not, they start comparing their Catholic universes—Roman Catholic High School or St. Joe's Prep, Our Lady of Good Counsel elementary or Aloysius Academy, Villanova University, LaSalle University, or St. Joe's. If you don't know them, chances are you know their siblings or cousins. I'm a Presbyterian from Dallas, Chicago, and Nashville, so when I first moved here to be with my husband, these conversations befuddled me. Who cares if they used to live near St. Ignatius? It took a while before I understood that all of this was shorthand for a richly detailed Catholic universe of relationships.

In Ireland, families and parishes also are connected by fewer than six degrees of separation. Sadly, there are many Catholics and an extraordinary number of victims of priests. When the ugly reality emerged into public view, if you weren't a victim, you were a victim's parent, or cousin, or lifelong friend. Everyone was hurt, and therefore angry. The fury swept away the last vestiges of the Roman Catholic Church's involvement in the government and left many lifelong church attendees with free Sundays and a new, more cynical view of religion, if not God.

The abuse scandal there has been documented by government-appointed commissions. In Philadelphia, two Grand Jury Reports have led to the public release of long lists of abusing priests. In the 2005 Report, 63 priests were named. In the wake of the 2011 Report, the Archdiocese has had to lay off 27 active priests, alongside the two who were criminally charged.

People are looking at each other and saying, "Oh my God, Avery married me." Or "Kline christened my baby, too." "I wasn't abused, but my mom was buried by Brennan."

Here is what we have in Philadelphia: The Cardinals' cover up of the abusers left child predators in ministry. They may have been moved from parish to parish, or school to parish, but they performed the standard sacraments for one family after another. That means that in addition to sexually assaulting children, they presided over untold numbers of christenings, first holy communions, confirmations, marriages, and funerals. So one Catholic family after another has family photos of precious rites of passage that include a pedophile.

My own child was christened by an undisclosed pedophile, who suddenly left St. John the Evangelist in Morrisville without explanation. We later learned he had ruined the life of an adolescent boy, and his entire family. Who knows who else?

Philly Catholics were angry when they heard about the contents of the 2005 Grand Jury Report released in the newspapers, but most never read it. It was over 450 pages, and Cardinal Rigali immediately took to the airwaves, promising no more cover up and more compassionate care of the victims. Loyalty is valued in Philly, and Catholics generally believed Rigali and, therefore, they gave the Archdiocese the benefit of the doubt.

But when the 2011 Report was issued, they felt deeply, deeply betrayed. Following the Report, along with many solemn pledges from the pulpit, Rigali had stepped up his public relations to victims. It was a sophisticated public relations campaign—you could hardly avoid him. But when the victims arrived at the Archdiocese's doorstep, the victims' program coordinators betrayed them by sharing their confidential reports with the Archdiocese's attorneys. It was fraud, pure and simple.

Once the names of twenty-four active priests were released, it hit all Philly Catholics—they had been defrauded, too. So many of the men they revered, who guided them through the celebrations and tragedies of life, were evil. And the Cardinals knew.

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Hamilton's column, "God vs. Gavel," is published every Thursday. Subscribe via [email](#) or [RSS](#).