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Santa Fe archdiocese learned lessons

By Marco R. della Cava, USA TODAY

SANTA FE — A decade ago, a cloud as dark as the meanest desert thunderhead settled over the faithful in this fiercely Catholic state. It hovered for three years of public horrors and private humiliation — and nearly bankrupted the Archdiocese of Santa Fe.

Beginning in the 1960s, New Mexico's parishes served as a national dumping ground for pedophile priests. After doing time in a rural rehab center geared toward alcoholics, they slipped into sunbaked, Hispanic hamlets and set about their unholy work.

By the '90s, 187 lawsuits were filed against dozens of priests. By 1995, an estimated \$25 million in settlements was paid out by the archdiocese and its insurers. And a beloved young archbishop, Robert Sanchez, acknowledged having sex with women, resigned and disappeared from sight.

Now that same storm of clerical abuse has formed over Boston, where high-ranking church officials appear to have kept silent as priests repeatedly abused children. According to a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll, the angry voices rising from the pews want church leaders to repent and reform: A majority of 522 Catholics polled say they feel the church is more interested in protecting its own than helping victims (74%); most will not accept rehabilitated clergy back into their parishes (74%); and they would allow married priests to lead services (75%).

Such cries leave people here wondering whether anyone was paying attention when New Mexicans moaned in disbelief and then set about fixing their broken church.

"You'd think the rest of the country would have noticed when we went through our dark night of the soul," says Archbishop Michael Sheehan, who took over the 91-parish archdiocese in 1993.

"The lesson we learned? Apologize, and take steps toward zero tolerance (of abuse)," he says. "The church will come through, but the temple must be cleansed."

Under Sheehan, 23 seminarians have made it through AIDS tests and police background checks to join the priesthood; church ranks are up 17,000 families to 87,000; and, as of December, the archdiocese is debt-free.

"We're alive and strong," Sheehan says.

That is not to say unchanged or without critics. "Laypeople still have no voice in the church, women even less than men," says Genevieve Chavez of Las Cruces, a member of the national Catholic reform movement Call to Action. "If we don't adapt to the times, people will leave."

One well-known local just did. After hearing about the Boston cases, Marlene Debrey-Nowak decided that her lifetime in the church was over. That she had



By Pat Vasquez-Cunningham for USA TODAY

Archbishop of Santa Fe Michael Sheehan, second from left, takes part in a recent procession.

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stuck it out this long is a testament to her faith. Her sons, Mark and Tom, then preteens, were abused by their priest in the 1970s.

"We went public in 1992. It was emotionally devastating, but important to do so," says Debrey-Nowak of Placitas, a hilltop suburb of Albuquerque. "But then you hear about these new cases and think, 'Where was everyone? Didn't they hear us?' That this happened again is unconscionable."

But perhaps not surprising. Some observers of the Catholic Church long have warned about a repeat of New Mexico's woes.

"For years we've been saying this (pedophile) issue is a symptom of a deeper ill in the clergy, but there's been no leadership from bishops," says Tom Roberts, editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*. "I'm often amazed at how resilient believers are, which just shows that religious expression is bigger than any one bad priest. But these latest cases are really pushing it."

As a result, churchgoers are beginning to "switch from the 'one bad apple' theory to acknowledging there's a rotten core at the leadership level," says David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, which is based in Chicago. "Finally, we're getting away from the notion that victims need to just keep quiet while the bandage is put back over the dirty wound."

Such talk irritates conservative Catholics. To vilify church leaders for the mistakes of a few sick individuals is to "ignore the vital role priests fill in the everyday lives of parishioners and to disregard the cycles of scandal and recovery the church has endured through the ages," says Duncan Anderson, editor of *Faith & Family*, a magazine aimed at Catholic mothers.

He dismisses reformists: "The church doesn't change based on polls. It thinks in centuries."

A Spanish import

Catholicism rode into New Mexico on horseback in the late 1500s. By 1610, Spanish conquistadors had settled on Santa Fe as their regional seat. Missionary days brought the Bible and disease to many Native Americans. Modern times find this low-slung adobe jewel a magnet for artists and tourists.

But the region has never lost its Catholic roots. On lawns, St. Francis statues sprout like flamingos in Florida; down alleys, shop signs read Holy Spirit Espresso. Even the city's name makes the point: *santa fe*, Spanish for "holy faith." About 40% of New Mexicans are Catholic, compared with 23% nationwide.

"The sense of allegiance to the church runs very deep here, which contributed to an atmosphere of secrecy," says Richard Wood, sociology of religion professor at the University of New Mexico-Albuquerque. "Our scandals did create a healthy unwillingness to trust blindly. But people did not noticeably leave the church."

Remarkable, considering that "the stories of abuse were unbelievably shocking," says Santa Fe attorney Merit Bennett, who with his partner, Stephen Tinkler, handled 40% of the 187 cases against the archdiocese. The experience helped make both Buddhists.

That some priests were known to have abused hundreds of children gave them pause. But what staggered the attorneys most was that many parents had inadvertently placed their children in harm's way.

"Some would invite the priests to sleep over in the very bed with their child," Tinkler says. Later, many parents either denied the abuse had taken place or, like Manny Arellano's, asked their children to forgive the offending father.

"My parents remain very strong Catholics," says Arellano, 36. "But I'll never set foot in a church again."

Arellano still seethes that "the church denied it all until the end." Not for long, says Bennett: "(Church leaders) will be more careful going forward because they don't like bad publicity or the money these cases can cost them."

Parishioners dig deep

Although news reports at the time indicated the archdiocese and its carriers paid out \$50 million, the true figure was closer to \$25 million, says Bing Grady, a retired banker who for 19 years has served as the chairman of the archdiocese's finance committee.

The church's final bill was roughly one-third, "with the rest covered by a half-dozen carriers (including Lloyd's of London and St. Paul Fire and Marine) after much litigation," Grady says.

(Bennett says the individual payouts — undisclosed by agreement — were "substantial." Victim Tom Nowak says his was "really just a joke.")

To come up with its share, the Archdiocese of Santa Fe raised \$2 million from parish savings and collections, and \$1 million from the sale of a Dominican retreat house. Some Catholic foundations also assisted because many cities had sent their troubled priests to New Mexico. A recent \$4.5 million land sale in Albuquerque cleared the archdiocese's remaining debt.

"Now," Grady says, "we're just reveling in the peace."

Part of that peace can be attributed to the church extending a bit more control to its flock.

For example, at Santa Maria de la Paz Catholic Community, on the outskirts of Santa Fe, the Rev. Adam Ortega y Ortiz presides over 2,500 families who steer the church's financial and spiritual ship.

"The laity are trusted, as opposed to being dictated to by priests who supposedly know what's best," Adam says.

Not everyone is sold.

Younger Catholics have been lured over to various charismatic groups, such as Santa Fe's Potter's House. And adults such as Camille Flores, once a dedicated volunteer at this city's famed St. Francis Cathedral, left for the Episcopal church two years ago because of its more liberal views toward women. The decision wasn't an easy one.

"Culturally, Catholicism is so huge here," says Flores, arts editor at *The Santa Fe New Mexican*. "It's in the art, the music, the fiestas, the processions. So you just don't convert, because people see that as shedding your own culture. I didn't even tell my own kids."

She also was torn because of her respect for local priests. "I was sickened by all the jokes about men who I knew were good," she says. "But in the end, the extremely authoritarian nature of the church was too much for me."

A mother's anger

During her lifetime in the church, Marlene Debrey-Nowak acknowledges now that she spent most of her years deaf, mute and blind.

Raised Catholic in New Jersey, where the same priest baptized and married her, Debrey-Nowak followed scientist husband Jim to New Mexico. When she wasn't with children Tom, Mark and Cathy (now 38, 37 and 34), she was counseling alcoholics and volunteering at her Albuquerque parish.

One day in 1971, she was asked to welcome a new priest, Arthur Perrault. Soon, the Canadian was a regular houseguest, which is when he began having sex with Tom and Mark, sometimes in front of Cathy. The abuse lasted more than a year before the brothers spoke up.

Today, sitting with a rescued poodle in her lap and another scuttling around a modest house that overlooks a vast stretch of high desert, Marlene can barely contain her anger, while Tom can hardly get his life in gear.

"I love the people of the church, but I now want nothing to do with that institution," she says, her voice shaking. "The pope recently released a comment. So many

lines about the priests, only one line about the victims. It hurts. When I came forward, all I got was stares. No one said they were sorry."

Tom Nowak offers his mom a gentle smile. He is unemployed, unwed and lives at home.

"I can't seem to get anything going, and some days, well, I wonder if it'd be better if I weren't here at all," Nowak says in a whisper. "I think, maybe I'm lazy? Maybe I'm too thin? Maybe it has to do with what happened. I don't know."

But perhaps he does. Nowak recalls watching a talk show recently when a psychologist came on to comment about the Boston cases. "She said, 'Kids are taught that priests are God on Earth. So they're having sex with God. Now that takes its toll.' And I thought, she's right. That is it."

Changes ahead

When Debrey-Nowak looks at her son, it is with a mother's hope that he will yet transcend the horror. But she is doubtful that the church — whether here or in Boston — can fix itself with ease.

"So long as the Catholic mothers I know have to tell their children, 'If a priest touches you, call the police right away,' there is going to be a problem," she says. "Personally, I don't know if we need priests. If they went away, people would still be drawn to the Mass, to the desire to be good to each other."

No priests — this from a woman once filled with greatest *santa fe*. But she is not alone in her radical view. The storm here may have passed, but change is in the air.

"Never again will people invest so much trust in a priest. And you know, in a way that's liberating for us," says the Rev. Ray Gunzel, who runs retreats for Catholics at the Servants of the Paraclete center in Jemez Springs — the very place where pedophile priests once were brought for "treatment."

"What happened in New Mexico 10 years ago was a real moment of truth, in which people went inside themselves and realized that what they got from the church was far more than the structure that supported it," he says. "Church leaders should pay attention to what we've seen. That when you react to scandal by immediately protecting the institution, you forget that the institution is here to serve the people."

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