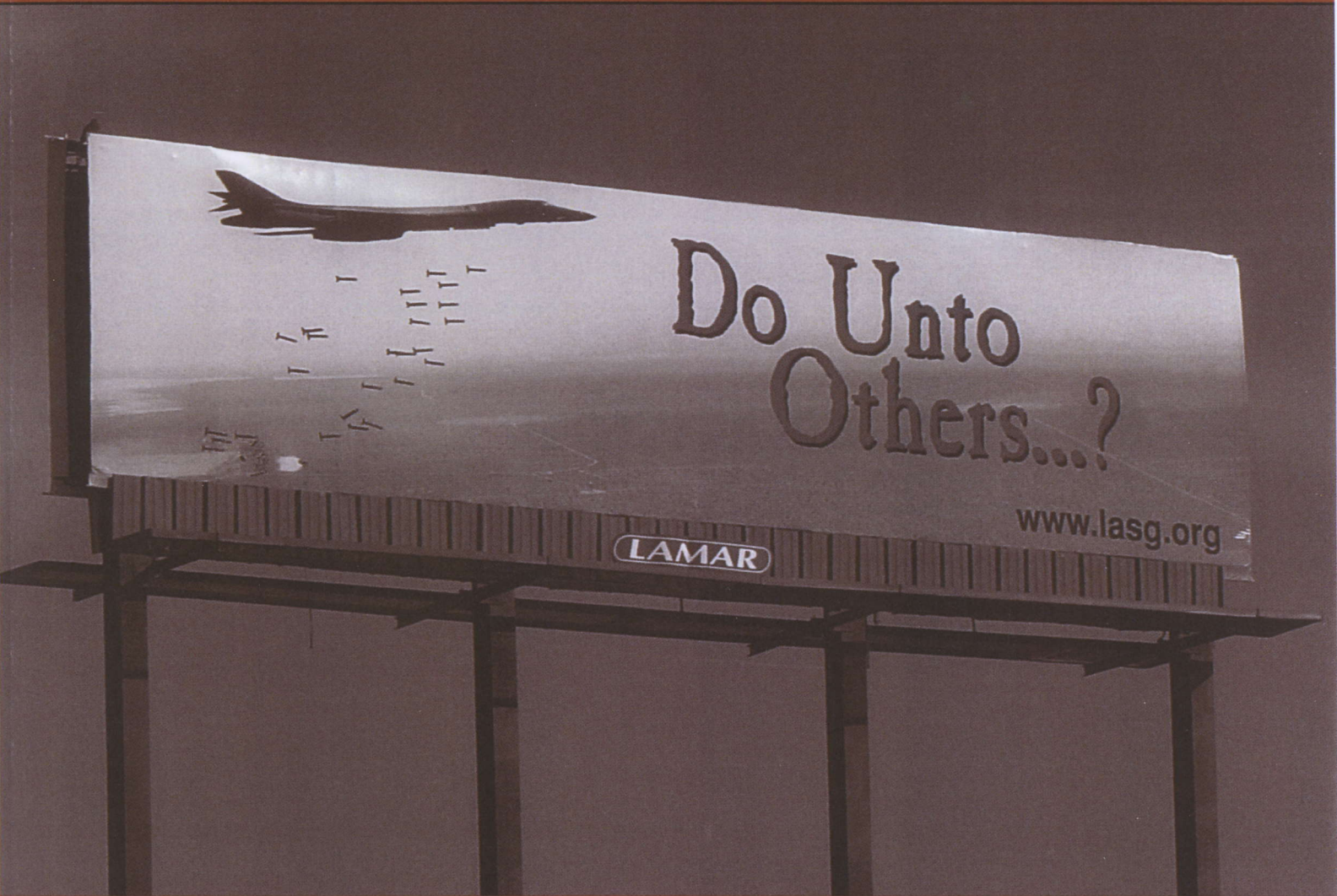


PUBLIC CULTURE

Society for Transnational Cultural Studies



47/2005



LAMAR

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PUBLIC CULTURE

Volume 17 Number 3 Fall 2005

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“Heart in the Wound”

Ann Cvetkovich interviews Lisa Kessler

Lisa Kessler’s “Heart in the Wound” combines journalism and art in order to create a public sphere around the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. Her photographs are unusual because they don’t provide documentary evidence in any conventional way. Instead, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the cord of Cardinal Bernard Law’s phone, or the photographs on the signs carried by protesters, or the icons of the Catholic Church, and that arrested attention complicates the process of designating good and evil. This body of work has been enabled by Kessler’s close relations to those she has photographed and thus also differs from conventional journalism’s often more impersonal and hurried conditions. The photographs demand of the viewer a similar kind of contextualization. Their publication here with an accompanying interview provides one example of such contextualization and reflects Kessler’s ultimate goal of displaying them alongside audio material and other media in order to create forums for public discussion.

“Heart in the Wound” extends the forms of publicity that survivors have brought to the Catholic Church scandal through demonstrations, legal battles, and solidarity groups. It does so not just through advocacy on behalf of the survivors but through what Kessler describes as a “layering” of perspectives that does something more than choose sides. Indeed, one of the values of her work is that her long history of photographing the Catholic Church offers an unusually intimate portrait, one that opens up questions about the perpetrators and those who shielded them from scrutiny, rather than simply condemning them. Her project thus tackles sexual abuse as a complex form of violence that lives in our midst rather than just in other people’s homes or churches. Because such violence is systemic and institutional, rather than a series of isolated incidents, justice can-

not be achieved simply by settling lawsuits or removing (and shaming) priests, however important these actions might be. The wounds of sexual abuse, which tear apart both families and institutions, such as the church, that are like families, call for forms of emotional justice that have not yet been created. In its creative approaches to both documentation and exhibition, “Heart in the Wound” imagines the public cultures that might do this work.

The following interview took place by telephone and e-mail in spring 2004, after Vanessa Haney, the former art editor of *Public Culture*, suggested that Lisa Kessler and I collaborate on this essay. The images included here are a small selection from a much larger body of work that Kessler showed me, and we worked together to select the images for this publication. I also listened to the audiotape, compiled from Kessler’s interviews with survivors, that accompanies a slide show version of “Heart in the Wound.” Although Kessler ultimately envisions “Heart in the Wound” as an installation that would include prints of the photographs, the slide show, the audiotape, and a forum for comments by viewers, the project is adaptable to many forms and occasions (such as the version presented here). In fact, Kessler and I copresented the slide show and audiotape at the Modern Language Association conference in Philadelphia in December 2004. The accompanying sound track offered testimony to the scenes of violence that are not visible in the photographs, and the immediacy of the survivor’s voices, especially when presented to a live audience, gave the event an emotional power that cannot be captured in the print form. Kessler is currently preparing a DVD version of “Heart in the Wound” that will include both the images and the sound track.

Ann Cvetkovich: This project owes a lot to the fact that you came to it with an established relation to the Catholic Church. Tell me how you got involved with photographing the Catholic Church in Boston.

Lisa Kessler: I was offered a freelance photography internship at the archdiocesan newspaper, the *Pilot*, when I was in graduate school in 1989. Within weeks of starting there my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and I began commuting to New York to take care of her. The people at the *Pilot* were very supportive and accommodated my schedule so that I could work for the two and a half years she was sick.

I was new to Boston and was let into a world that’s not typically accessible to an outsider. It seemed to me the church was like a separate city-state within Boston, with a deep community structure through the system of neighborhood parishes and a formidable power structure connected to politics, education, social services, business, and other religions. I photographed hundreds of masses and events at churches around the archdiocese,

many where Cardinal Law was officiating. I photographed everyone from ordinary parishioners to federal officials, from the Dalai Lama to Mother Theresa to the pope; I traveled to Ecuador, Cuba, and Italy, and to Israel on an interfaith pilgrimage. It was fascinating to see.

I ended up freelancing for the Catholic newspaper for many years. Although I was also developing my career in other directions, one of the reasons I stayed is that I had started doing a personal body of work called “Shades of Grace,” which was exhibited in 2000 and later published in *DoubleTake* magazine.¹ That work was about people expressing private moments in public spaces, about the interplay of solitude and community that I felt very poignantly in the church.

AC: What was your relation to the Catholic Church as someone who is not Catholic? Did you have reservations or negative feelings about the power of the Catholic Church?

LK: I grew up in a Catholic neighborhood in New York and was raised in a secular Jewish home that was pretty antireligious. My parents mocked our Catholic neighbors for thinking they could sin on Saturday and just go confess it away on Sunday. I had all of the intellectual and political critiques of the Catholic Church and organized religions.

But I was curious about the church, not suspicious. I was always treated with great respect and kindness, professionally and personally. I also came to understand spirituality and religious faith and the community it creates in a way I didn’t know before. I was ignorant. I didn’t really understand that you could believe in God and still be a thinking individual.

AC: So how did you get involved in photographing the sexual abuse crisis?

LK: I had stopped doing weekly assignments for the newspaper around 1998 but was still doing special projects for the archdiocese as a freelance photographer. When the crisis broke out in 2002, I just thought, “Oh! This is shocking. I need to see what’s really going on.” So I started going to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, which was the cardinal’s home church and where the protests were centered. I just started showing up and following things, and eventually I asked Law if I could have access. I told him I wouldn’t be releasing the material to the media but that I wanted to document what was happening and how he was dealing with it. At the time I thought I was going to be documenting the healing in the church. I never could have imagined the time bomb that went off and where everything would be today.

1. Lisa Kessler, “Shades of Grace,” *DoubleTake*, spring 2002, 82–89.

AC: Was there ever a time when your access to those inside the church was at issue?

LK: Access was always a very delicate thing, and I proceeded with great care. I was asked not to photograph inside the chancery the day Cardinal Law resigned, after his press conference and the announcement of the bishop who'd replace him. It was a very emotional day, and I don't think they wanted there to be a visual record of that. After that day I requested and was given access to certain private events, and of course I had access to all the public events. But in many ways I felt that part of my project was over.

AC: You've also had very close access to those protesting the church. How do you establish a relationship of trust with those you are photographing? What is your position as photographer in relation to your subjects?

LK: Time. I spend a lot of time. I kept showing up, and people got to observe me and how I work over time. I try to read people's body language about when to back down, and I try to respect people's boundaries if they don't want to be photographed. It seemed enormously brave to me that people were standing up in public to reveal the violations they suffered. I got to know some of the survivors and was very moved by the combination of strength and vulnerability they expressed, by their efforts to get out from under the shame they were carrying and transfer it back to its rightful owners.

Some victims and advocates felt I was a spy for the church. But the only way to photograph is to actually be present with people, and I just kept coming back. It was painful to be distrusted, but I understand the rage. The violation and betrayal they experienced during the abuse, and then again through the crisis, was very profound. It was confusing to people because I wasn't working for a newspaper or magazine, and even though I had unusual access to the church, I wasn't ever working on this *for* the church. I kept explaining I was doing an independent project, for myself.

The media was interested in the victims as evidence of what the church had done wrong, which was important but didn't capture the complexity of what I saw survivors dealing with. I really struggled to find a way to convey how they'd been affected by the abuse and how they were coping with the ongoing revelations in their own lives and families. Still photographs seemed inadequate, and I ended up taping conversations with three people I got close to. An edit of that audio, of their voices, is the sound track to the imagery.

The other thing is that people assume there are two sides to a story, two separate sides, and the idea of a documentary to a lot of people is that you need to balance both sides. But that's not the way I've approached this at

all. For me it's like a layering. I started with a historical relationship to the Catholic Church and a complicated kind of empathy that a lot of journalists might not have. And then layer on top of that my understanding of the experience of the victims and the victims as adults, of what they're going through psychologically. And then there's the unfolding of the events. It's like one thing's layered on top of the other. I really think you can't understand the depth of the victims' pain unless you understand how important the church was in their upbringing and in their families. It's an invisible foundation and structure and loyalty. It's like family. And bringing it out into the open has torn a lot of people and a lot of families apart.

AC: Your project raises questions not just about how to take documentary photographs, but also about how to exhibit them. At the time of this interview, you haven't yet exhibited this work publicly because you've been very careful to think through the implications of its effects on different audiences. How does this kind of project necessarily entail creating public spheres, not just taking the photographs? And what other kinds of supplementary information do viewers need to have in order to understand the photos?

LK: I've really done this according to my own timetable, and I haven't been comfortable enough until now with the material and my ideas about it to release it. Sexual abuse is obviously a volatile issue, and religion and people's faith are also very volatile. I think we're arriving at the moment where there's enough distance that people can look at the issues without just being angry or defensive.

I want viewers to be enveloped by the work, the experience of the imagery and the sound, to feel it in their bodies, with their senses. Right now the project is a sound-and-image presentation: a twenty-five minute slide show with an audio sound track. It's a powerful and dissonant experience. I edited the audio and the imagery independently of each other, each according to its own arc. They fall together on top of each other, sometimes working against each other as foreground and background, again, like a layering rather than an explication. Afterwards we have a discussion.

For exhibitions, I'd like the images to be reproduced very large and have the audio running on headphones or in certain areas of the exhibit space. The audio doesn't *describe* the images, it's a sound track of a concurrent experience, three survivors' voices. The work does need some introductory text, but I won't use captions next to images. When you put a caption next to a photograph, people automatically reinterpret the image based on the text. I think this takes us away from a more visceral and emotional experience. I'm trying to use the intimate and specific perspective of photographs to bring us to the universal, to the larger, common issues of sexual viola-

tion and abuse of power. I want to keep things moving rather than getting bogged down in the details.

I've also imagined an exhibition space with a big wall or panel for visitors to create their own text in response to the experience of seeing the imagery and hearing the audio. Not a guest book where people write, "Oh, it was so lovely," but a wall that comes alive with the audience's anger and fears and hopes. This issue has pulled people's guts out. The cultural climate that made it unacceptable to talk about rape, molestation, and sexuality is changing, and this work needs to be part of that change. Silence enables abuse. I want the work to help people talk about painful experiences, and not because I know how to talk about it that well but because I know we all need to figure out how to do so.

AC: You are not just taking documentary photographs. How do the details in the photos convey their meaning? How do the iconography and architecture of the Catholic Church add to the visual power of some of the photographs?

LK: I've tried to use photography to convey the emotion and psychology of this experience. The iconography of the church contextualizes the images and constantly communicates the source of meaning and authority for those identified with the church. It includes clerical attire, architecture, crosses, and representations of religious figures and the sacraments. These symbols help the photographs tell stories. If not for a priest's collar or vestment or a nun's habit, for instance, you can't know who's clergy and who's a layperson in a photograph.

Religious symbols have also been used by protesters to communicate betrayal: enormous crosses of "shame and deceit," listing the names of accused priests, are carried at many protests, as if to make explicit that the faithful are wounded and terribly burdened by the sins and crimes of their church.

AC: You also represent men in power, such as Cardinal Law or the lawyers, in very interesting ways. I think it's difficult to represent institutions and power through photographs because they are not visible in the way that people are.

LK: Isn't that the heart of the problem? That people cede their individual conscience to the rules of the institution? They transfer their judgment to an organization they believe in, but it turns out the organization is structured to defend its image at all cost. Isn't that why bishops transferred pedophile priests? Okay, there were other reasons as well, but certainly the needs of the institution blinded many bishops to their pastoral mission of tending to the victims.

AC: What are the challenges of documenting demonstrations and public discussions?

LK: Strangers were coming together and supporting one another; building community in the streets, in church basements, and at the statehouse; testifying to eliminate all time limits on criminal prosecutions for rape and sex crimes. All of my photographs are candid and unposed, but they are structured to communicate something larger than the facts recorded at that moment, to convey emotion or something you can’t typically see, like power or abuse or faith. The opening photograph is an unnerving image of a child screaming; a protester and a police car are behind her. She symbolizes the rage of a child abused, though in reality she is the daughter of an advocate—a child frustrated with a game she is trying to play, while her dad stands in solidarity with adult survivors.

AC: What difference does it make to explore sexual abuse through a public institution such as the church rather than through the family?

LK: My goal is for people to never again be able to say that they didn’t understand the effects of this kind of violation and abuse. People say, “Well, I wouldn’t have let him touch me,” “My children wouldn’t have let it happen to them,” or “What are they making such a big deal about? That was a long time ago; get over it.”

I think the broader community, including the broader church community, has finally accepted the reality of what happened in the church, the horror of the abuse and the cover-up. So for me the question is, can we now try to understand and address the long-term effects on survivors? Can we use what we’ve seen played out in the Catholic Church to recognize how prevalent sexual violation is and how devastating the effects can be? While betrayal by the human representation of God is unique, in a lot of ways clergy abuse is like incest. What do we do with the fact that most children who are sexually abused are violated in their own homes by family members or people they know and trust, not by strangers on the street? Can we empower children and young adults to speak and train adults to listen and to intervene better? Can we respond to a victim’s fear, shame, and rage with empathy, accountability, and education? Can we diminish the consequences of abuse by interrupting and addressing it rather than sweeping it under the rug? Can we change the cultural climate so the costs of coming forward and advocating for victims are less? What has to be fixed in the church has to be fixed in society as well.

AC: I find in your work a willingness to engage with the church, and not just dismiss it, that is profoundly important, because even survivors who long ago rejected church doctrine feel tremendous anguish about the institution that was so important in their lives. Their comments on the audiotape recall for me the emotional ambivalence that incest survivors can feel about their mothers; even when their mothers are complicit in the abuse, it’s very

difficult to cut them out of your heart, to stop hoping they will protect you. Yet you've also expressed reservations about my sense that your work is, if not sympathetic to the church, then open to it in a way that is unusual.

LK: Catholics who weren't sexually molested have also been betrayed in a very profound way. It's difficult to reconcile one's faith with the damage that's been done. It's unusual that I've walked so much in a world that isn't my own, but I hope it's not too unusual to feel sympathy for people even if you don't share their religion.

I'm also drawn to how we can be blind to things right in front of us, like the suffering of others and the impact of our power over others. What is it that lets people, including many bishops, not see what was wrong? I think one of the survivors says it best in the audio: "How can I hold a man accountable for something he doesn't understand he did wrong?" I don't excuse the ignorance, and I think there was intentional disregard for the suffering of others, but we have to change from where we are; we have to begin with the work of understanding the problem.

Then again, my concern is that in focusing on the complexity, we lose sight of the simple reality of right and wrong. I've struggled with this a lot in making the work: my instinct to explore things more deeply can sometimes obscure the fact that there is a simple right and wrong here.

You mention that people have had to cut the church out of their hearts. Many would say that the church cut *their* hearts out. The wound I refer to in the title has always been clear to me—how big it is, how many people share it, suffer under it, are crushed by it. I think I was always looking for the heart. Who would help? Who would care? Whose care would help? I know there is a lot of caring we can't see that goes on inside and out of the church. But for me, the hearts of the three survivors in the audio are the beat that has turned trauma into living rhythm. Their ability to be strong *and* vulnerable is the heart. It is the model for dealing with trauma, for staying alive.

Ann Cvetkovich is a professor of English and women's and gender studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (1992) and *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003). She is currently associate editor of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. **Lisa Kessler** is an independent editorial and documentary photographer in Boston as well as a teacher of photography at Northeastern University and the Maine Photo Workshops. She received the 2004 Honorable Mention from the Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman Foundation First Book Prize in Photography for her project "Heart in the Wound: Sexual Abuse from the Catholic Church to Civil Society" and the Award of Excellence from the 2002 Pictures of the Year International competition.

“Heart in the Wound”



Figure 1
© 2002 Lisa Kessler



Figure 2 © 2002 Lisa Kessler



Figure 3 © 2002 Lisa Kessler



Figure 4 © 2002 Lisa Kessler



Figure 5 © 2003 Lisa Kessler



Figure 6 © 2002 Lisa Kessler

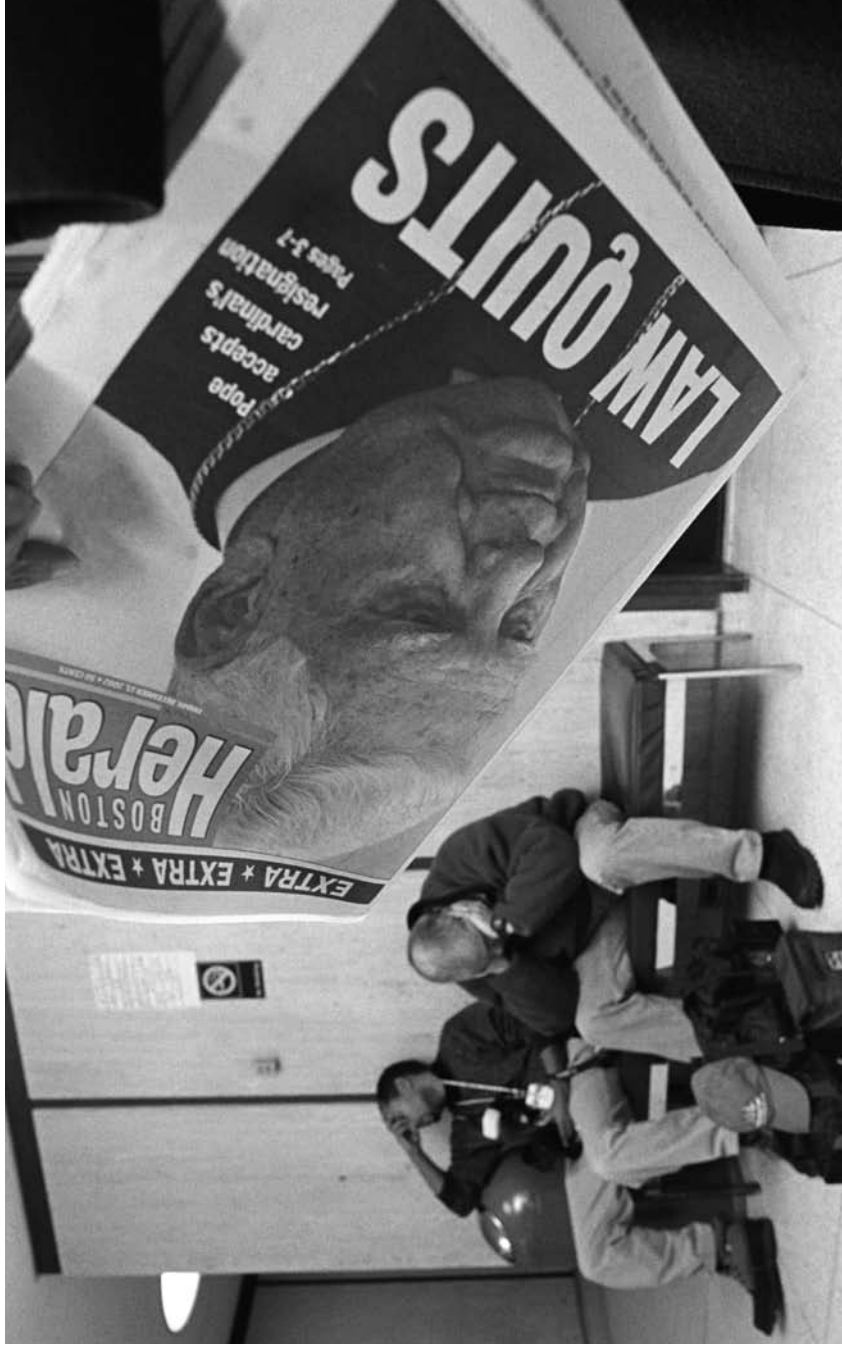


Figure 7 © 2002 Lisa Kessler



Figure 8 © 2003 Lisa Kesslert



Figure 9 © 2003 Lisa Kessler

Figure 1

Advocates for victims of clergy abuse often bring their own children to protests at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. They gather every Sunday to demand accountability for the church's past actions and support victims struggling to heal. Boston, Mass., December 2002.

Figure 2

John Harris, abused in college by a priest he went to for counseling, has formally renounced his baptism in the Catholic Church. Boston, Mass., December 2002.

Figure 3

Cardinal Bernard Law interrupts lunch at home to take a phone call from his press secretary. Brighton, Mass., June 2002.

Figure 4

Lawyers for the church (left) and the lawyer (right) for eighty-six victims of former priest John Geoghan during a court hearing to determine whether to enforce the \$15–\$30 million settlement on which the church reneged. One year later, Geoghan was murdered in his jail cell by a fellow inmate. Boston, Mass., August 2002.

Figure 5

Several enraged survivors pretend to spit at priests leaving the Mass of Installation for Archbishop Sean O'Malley, Cardinal Law's successor. Boston, Mass., July 2003.

Figure 6

Survivor Arthur Austin gets support from lay Catholics following a Voice of the Faithful conference. The priest who abused him, Paul Shanley, was convicted (February 2005) of the few crimes for which the statutes of limitation had not yet expired. Boston, Mass., July 2002.

Figure 7

Cardinal Law's resignation is made public, and the press waits for accused pedophile priest Paul Shanley, who was ordered to the courthouse to clarify the terms of his release on bail. Law was the first American bishop to lose his job for mismanaging sexually abusive priests. Boston, Mass., December 2002.

Figure 8

The daughter of a woman abused by a priest plays with her Barbie doll and a poster of a victim during a protest outside Archbishop O'Malley's installation ceremony. Boston, Mass., July 2003.

Figure 9

Nearly 250 people came out in the bitter cold to show support for victims of sexual abuse by priests and to urge Bishop McCormack to resign. McCormack was a top adviser to Cardinal Law. Documents show he often believed his fellow priests' denials of wrongdoing over the allegations of victims. Manchester, N.H., January 2003.