

AT 70, CARDINAL LAW LOOKS TO UNFINISHED TASKS PARISH FINANCES AND VOLUNTEERISM AREAS OF CONCERN

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The reminders of his predecessors are all around him.

When he prays in his private chapel, the light streams through stained glass windows featuring the seals of Boston's previous bishops and archbishops.

When he sits at the long wooden table in his residence, gold- framed portraits bearing the names Cheverus, Fenwick, Fitzpatrick, Williams, O'Connell, Cushing, and Medeiros stare down at him from all four walls.

And now, as he prepares to celebrate his 70th birthday on Sunday, Cardinal Bernard F. Law is looking ahead to the final chapter of his long tenure as archbishop of Boston and the most senior Catholic prelate in the United States.

In five years, when he turns 75, Law will be required to offer his retirement to the pope.

Law is not planning any fanfare for his birthday - on Sunday he will celebrate the annual Mass for lawyers, with Attorney General John Ashcroft as a scheduled guest, and then in the afternoon he will join a few close friends at his home in Brighton.

But in an interview yesterday at that home, Law reflected on the 17 years he has spent as archbishop of Boston.

Law said he was pleased that the difficult era of church closings is largely over, and that he is optimistic that he will meet his goal of raising \$300 million by December 2002 for construction projects and endowment - the most ambitious goal of any

diocese in the country, and one made even more challenging by an economy that has soured.

But he said he is already looking beyond that campaign, saying he hopes next to turn to improving parish finances, and encouraging more volunteerism and involvement of laypeople in the archdiocese's 368 parishes.

He said he expects laypeople to continue to take over jobs formerly reserved for clergy, including the financial and business operations of parishes.

Law said he expects to spend the rest of his career in Boston, contrary to persistent speculation that he might move to Rome as the head of a Vatican department.

"Unless the Lord takes me to Himself, I expect to be here," he said. "I hear rumors too, and rumors are rumors - they're always amusing because nobody knows those things. What do I think, and what do I expect? I expect and look forward to being here until I'm 75 - how long after that would be up to the pope. It would be rather difficult to move once you hit 70."

Law said he does not want to move to Rome, and the Vatican has not suggested he should consider it.

"I don't want to disparage those who assist the Holy Father that way, but being the bishop is a very fulfilling responsibility," he said. "What I like best about being a bishop is what I like best about being a priest: it's the pastoral contact."

Law described his health as "very good," although he said over the last five years he has been temporarily immobilized twice by back pain, apparently caused by a disk problem.

Law also has recurrent respiratory difficulties, which he said are caused by allergies, and which prevented him from traveling to Sudan this year; but he was then able to go to Peru. And Law said he needs to lose weight for health reasons, and plans to do so.

As for how he plans to spend the next five years of his tenure here, Law said his mission will be what it always has been: "To try to bring people closer to God."

"The fundamental vocation of every human being is to be holy, to be good, to be righteous, to be just, and the mission of the church is to try to help us all recognize that more fully," he said. "How can the church do that more effectively here? That's my preoccupation."

Reflecting on the most difficult issue of his tenure in Boston, Law said he is pained over the harm caused to Catholic youngsters and their families by clergy sexual misconduct, but that he always tried to prevent such abuse.

"The act is a terrible act, and the consequence is a terrible consequence, and there are a lot of folk who have suffered a great deal of pain and anguish. And that's a source of profound pain and anguish for me and should be for the whole church," he said.

"Any time that I made a decision, it was based upon a judgment that with the treatment that had been afforded and with the ongoing treatment and counseling that would be provided, that this person would not be [a] harm to others."

Law said the current policy, which bars child-abusers from ever having a job that involves contact with children, is good, but that he wished he knew when he started that pedophilia is essentially incurable.

"I think we've come to appreciate and understand that whatever the assessment might be, the nature of some activity is such that it's best that the person not be in a parish assignment," he said.

Law is now at the height of his national influence. He is the foreign policy architect for the US bishops, and he has new access to the White House since the election of President Bush.

Law said he has spoken to Bush three or four times since his inauguration, but that he would call their relationship "cordial" rather than "close."

He said he continues to support the US military action against Afghanistan, but that "I hope and I pray that the military phase will be able to be successfully concluded so that the risk to casualties and destruction will be over and the focus can be on the building of a new Afghanistan."

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