

In Philadelphia, a Changing of the Guard in the Shadow of Scandal

By Katharine Q. Seelye

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PHILADELPHIA — As Cardinal Justin Rigali stepped aside Tuesday to make way for his successor on the public stage, he barely mentioned the sexual-abuse scandal that has engulfed his eight-year tenure as head of the 1.5 million-member Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Cardinal Rigali, a longtime Vatican insider, described his departure as a move that was more or less pro forma. He had offered his resignation when he turned 75, as required, in April 2010. Pope Benedict XVI accepted it Tuesday morning, when he named Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver as Cardinal Rigali's replacement.

The Vatican did not explain the move or mention the abuse scandal in its announcement Tuesday morning. And if Cardinal Rigali was alluding to it in his prepared remarks later, at a news conference here at the Archdiocese offices, he was sufficiently vague to leave doubt that he was talking about it at all.

“If I have offended anyone in any way,” he said, “I am deeply sorry. I apologize for any weaknesses on my part in representing Christ and his church worthily and effectively.”

Cardinal Rigali bowed out somewhat meekly as Archbishop Chaput took the podium. The contrast in their styles was instantly apparent as Archbishop Chaput, 66, engaged in jocular banter with reporters, challenged some of them and mugged for the cameras as students presented him with distinctly Philadelphia gifts like a basket of Tastykakes and a red Phillies cap.

But the lightheartedness could not dispel the cloud that hangs over Cardinal Rigali's legacy — his mishandling of the abuse scandal.

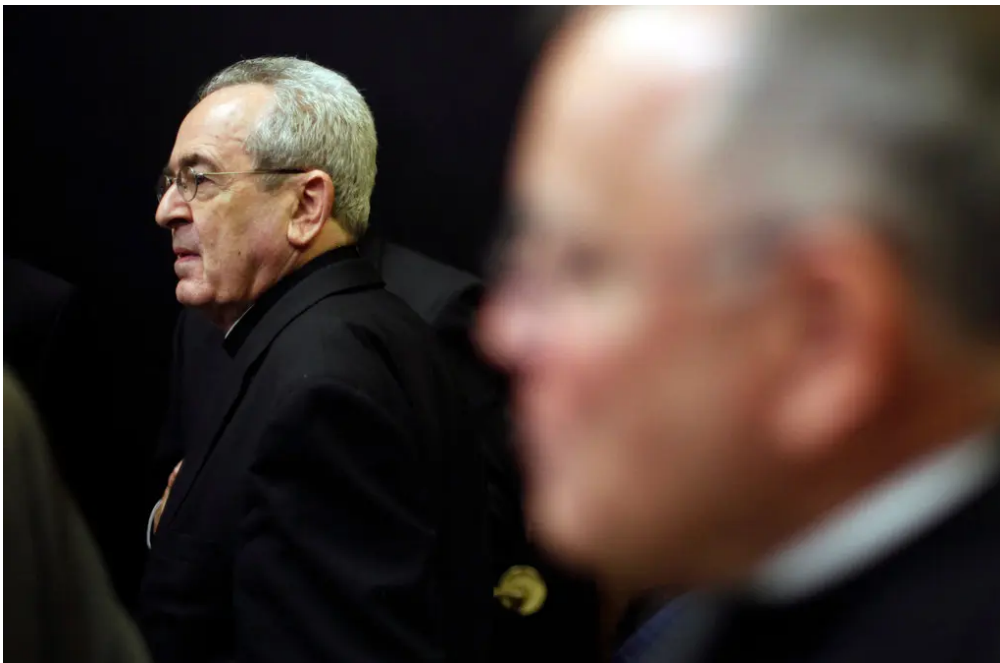
The scope of crimes committed by priests — including rape, as described graphically by a grand jury in February — had shocked many because it had all been described before, by another grand jury in 2005.

In the interim, it seemed, little had changed. In February, there were indictments, including charges that a high-ranking church official had endangered children by protecting rapist priests.

After Cardinal Rigali said there were no priests in active ministry who had been accused of abuse, he reversed field and suspended 21 of them in one day, prompting criticism that he should have alerted prosecutors sooner.

Despite Cardinal Rigali's best efforts Tuesday to leave the scandal behind, it has come to define his term.

"There's a special poignancy to this ugly controversy that has dogged him and his years in Philadelphia," said Russell Shaw, a former spokesman for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and a writer on Catholic affairs.



Cardinal Justin Rigali's retirement came five months after evidence emerged that the archdiocese had ignored sexual-abuse charges against active priests. He was replaced by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver. Matt Rourke/Associated Press

"He's a very decent man, a loyal son and good servant of the church and its people, who wouldn't knowingly do anyone injury," he said. "I'd say, though, that Justin Rigali is singularly ill-equipped by nature to handle this kind of high visibility, painful, complex crisis." He inherited a mess, Mr. Shaw said, but it grew worse under his leadership.

There was some sympathy for the Cardinal at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Peter and St. Paul here, where he celebrated mass after the news conference and introduced Archbishop Chaput.

Robert Hall, a middle-age man, said that Cardinal Rigali had to deal with difficult circumstances.

“I’m sure it was not an easy time for him,” Mr. Hall said. He called the cardinal “an excellent spiritual leader for the community.”

But many, like Mary Anne Lambert, 67, said she welcomed his departure, saying she saw it as an effort by the Roman Catholic Church to heal itself.

“He made a lot of very bad choices,” she said, adding that the archdiocese had not been as transparent as it should have been.

Cardinal Rigali said at the news conference that the scandal had played no role in the acceptance of his resignation now.

Asked whether he regretted how he had handled it, he replied just as the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church has replied for the last two decades: if only we knew then what we know now, he said, “it would have been great.” The multi-year process that has unfolded, he said, has been “a curve of learning, not throughout the church, throughout society.”

The Roman Catholic Church in Philadelphia is facing many of the issues that other archdioceses are facing — changing demographics, the migration of Catholics from cities to the suburbs, the contraction of the parochial school system and the graying of the priesthood. But here, the sexual scandal has dominated those issues.

Terence McKiernan, president of BishopAccountability.org, which archives documents from the abuse scandal in dioceses across the country, said that Cardinal Rigali “never appreciated what a disaster he was involved in,” and that he was “not equal to the task” of repairing it.

“Those grand jury reports have reframed Philadelphia in the first decade of the 21st century as the place where the sex-abuse crisis played out and in that, Rigali failed,” he said. He could have embraced the recommendations of the 2005 grand jury report and removed the accused priests, Mr. McKiernan said, but instead, he sought to refute the report. “He missed that moment,” he said.

At the end of his remarks Tuesday, Cardinal Rigali declared it was “a formidable task to be a bishop.”

In a rare, unscripted aside, he added: “You ought to try it.”