

The Case of Father Chester Gawronski

Known Assignments

06/1976 – 09/1978	St. Joseph, Oil City
09/1978 – 07/1979	St Bernard, Bradford
07/1979 – 02/1987	St. Agatha and St. Bernadette Mission, Saegertown
02/1987 – 01/1988	Health Leave
01/1988 – 05/1989	Holy Family Monastery, Erie
01/1988 – 05/1989	St Patrick, Erie
05/1989 – 12/1989	Health Leave
12/1989 – 08/2001	Pleasant Ridge Manor, Girard
06/1992 – 11/1992	Hamot Hospital, Erie
08/1995	St Ann, Erie
09/2001	St Mary's Asbury Ridge, Erie

Father Chester Gawronski became a priest in the Diocese of Erie in 1976. In August 1986, Bishop Michael Murphy was notified that Gawronski had fondled and masturbated a 13-to-14-year-old boy on multiple occasions from 1976 to 1977 under the pretext of showing the victim how to check for cancer. Complaints continued to be received for decades.

In early 1987, the complaints were commonly made by parents who reported similar conduct with their sons. An internal Diocesan memorandum was obtained by the Grand Jury and indicated that the number of victims could be as high as twenty.

So many of the parents know about the skinny dipping and the cancer check. That as one parent said - How many boys were involved?. The same number that he took to camp; my guess we would be counting fifteen or twenty over the years.

Diocesan Records Attempt to Tally the Abuse

Diocesan administrators, concerned about negative publicity and potential legal liability, attempted to assure the families of the victims that action would be taken. Internally the Diocese worked to compile data on the number of families affected and how to keep the matter secret.

On January 7, 1987, Father Glenn Whitman, head of the Diocese's Clergy Personnel Office, wrote a letter addressed to a parent of one of Gawronski's 13-year-old victims. Whitman wrote, among other things, "My only caution to you ... is to refrain from probing for any more information about past events as it may raise undue concern and attention on the part of people who aren't involved." That same day, Whitman documented the need for "discretion" in another Diocesan communication to an interested party. Among other things, Whitman wrote:

I can't stress enough the necessity for discretion in this matter. It is obvious at this time that legal action isn't pending, or being considered. Undue attention or publication of this information to other families, or other priests would be harmful and certainly unnecessary."



Diocese of Erie
Caring Roman Catholics
of Northwestern Pennsylvania

Clergy Personnel
St. Ignace, Erie, PA
St. Mary's, Erie, PA
St. Ann's, Erie, PA

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Dear Henry,

Thanks again for your understanding and insight into the issues we discussed the other day. I'm sure everything will work out for the best, for St. Agatha/St. Bernadette, for Clark and the family involved as the weeks unfold.

I can't stress enough the necessity for discretion in this matter. It is obvious at this time that legal action isn't pending, or being considered. undue attention or publication of this information to other families, or other priests would be harmful and certainly unnecessary. I hope I can rely on you and your wisdom to avoid the dissemination of this information.

I am planning to share the information with Andy Clark at the end of this week, as it is within the realm of his responsibility and pastoral concern.

Thanks again, for your thoughtfulness.

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Diocesan records, obtained by the Grand Jury through a subpoena served on September 1, 2016, recorded the ever-growing list of affected and traumatized parishioners. A summary of potential families affected noted that the mother of a group of brothers that were molested continued “to be very angry about this whole thing” and is in conversation with at least one other family on this list. She stated that “going public would be a distinct possibility should (Gawronski) ever be assigned to parish work.” On February 9, 1987, Gawronski provided the Diocese with a list of forty-one possible victims. He confirmed at least twelve children as victims on whom he had performed the “cancer check.”

February 9, 1987

Frank:

Here is a list of any young man that I had some contact with in the Meadville and Saegertown area. (Played racquetball with, took to the cottage, friends of their family, friends of some of the boys, etc.) Since [REDACTED] says that I was with so many kids, he think I have done something with all of them. I have put a asterisk next to the names of the boys I had taught how to check for cancer.

MEADVILLE: (ST. AGATHA PARISHIONERS)

[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *

FRIENDS OF SOME OF THE BOYS ABOVE:

[REDACTED]

SAEGERTOWN: (ST. BERNADETTE PARISHIONERS)

[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *
[REDACTED] *

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1. A few days before Christmas, 1986, Family A called the Pastor asking why Diocese wasn't doing anything about Fr. Chet. Pastor unaware of her meaning...she explained about camp owned by a Doctor in/near Oil City. Her son was asked to go skinny dipping in pool and felt that CW was going for "those parts of his body forbidden to touch". Son got out, went to shower, CW insisted on showering together and boy was masturbated. Pastor believes boy was 12 then; he told his siblings about it but not his parents until fall of 1986.

Family A still angry about this and threatened to come forward - go public - if CW assigned to parish.

2. Family B (also from Saegertown as is Family A) Son also touched by CW. Family went to previous parish administrator about the incident. Boy about 14 when CW arrived on scene. He went with CW to camp three or four times, always with other boys. He resisted stripping for the skinny dipping. In summer of 1980 (boy 15 at time), with two other boys, CW put all in circle and CW told them all to "get it up". CW helped this boy as he was having trouble getting an erection. Once this was accomplished, the "cancer check" proceeded.

This boy continued going to confession to CW, who told him to "keep it in your pants".

Boy has since married at 19 to emotionally immature girl, possibly to prove his sexuality...since broke up. Mother expressed concern that priests shouldn't be treated any differently than others in these cases (jail? trial?)

3. Family C Two boys, mother feels certain that CW propositioned them both, if not actually did "the check" on them. They often went to the camp, but like the others, mysteriously and suddenly stopped accompanying CW.

(Also Saegertown)

4. Strong suspicions from the parents of three other families in Saegertown the CW molested or at least propositioned their boys. Also a family in Cambridge Springs through his ministry at Alliance College.

5. Family D (Meadville) Two sons, mother says that the oldest was molested. Constant presence of CW in house, "rub downs", racquetball, wrestling in livingroom. Mother not sure about second son's possible molestation - pretty sure of proposition.

6. Family E Mother feels that of her several boys, the oldest was molested. Continues to be very angry about this whole thing and is in conversation with at least one other family on this list. She has said that "going public" would be a distinct possibility should CW ever be assigned to parish work.

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7. Suspicions about two other families - nothing more than that, however.

Comment at Parish council meeting in Saegertown. Discussion was centered on apparent waning of interest/activity. Reasons were cited. One parent spoke up "Don't forget what happened here 3-4 years ago (reference to CW); there's hardly anyone around this table who hasn't been hurt."

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A 1987 List of Families Affected

Additional records, obtained from the secret or confidential archives of the Diocese, noted that, in April 1987, Gawronski freely confessed to numerous instances of sexual abuse. He was sent to Chicago for psychological evaluations but denied any problems with boys. He was placed on a temporary leave of absence. In some instances, entire families of young boys were molested by Gawronski. Regardless, Gawronski was still permitted to wear the collar of the priesthood as he engaged the public.

In addition to this information, more victims reported Gawronski for criminal sexual acts with children to the Diocese in 1988. In 1990, Bishop Donald Trautman took command of the Diocese. Trautman also received additional complaints in 1995 from a victim who had been molested at the age of 15 in 1986. The victim reported he had fallen prey to Gawronski's "cancer checks."

By 1996, there was no possible doubt that Gawronski had spent most of his priesthood preying on the vulnerable. However, even as complaints continued, on November 6, 1996, Gawronski was notified that Trautman had approved his request to hear confessions for persons with disabilities. On May 19, 1997, Trautman sent a letter to Gawronski and thanked him for "all that you have done for God's people during those twenty-one years of ordination. Only the Lord knows the many acts of kindnesses on your part and the deep faith that you have shown. The Lord, who sees in private, will reward."

For approximately fifteen years, from 1987 to 2002, Murphy and Trautman allowed Gawronski to remain in active ministry by reassigning him multiple times. As late as 2001, Trautman assigned Gawronski to a new five-year term as a chaplain for St. Mary's Home in Erie.

In January 2002, the *Boston Globe* broke national news by publishing an article detailing child sexual abuse by clergy in the Archdiocese of Boston. Located within records provided by

the Diocese was a petition for “withdrawal from priestly ministry” signed by Gawronski with the handwritten notation, “EFFECTIVE FEB. 27, 2002.”

On June 2, 2002, one of Gawronski’s 13-year-old victims wrote a letter to Trautman. Among other things, the victim requested that the Church: 1) stop aiding and abetting priests; 2) ensure collections were not used to compensate priests; 3) publicize the names of pedophile priests; 4) identify any priest who has molested a child; and 5) establish a policy to ensure offending priests were reported to law enforcement. The victim also advised that Trautman had never contacted him since the *Erie Times* ran an article identifying potential offenders within the Diocese in April 2002. The victim specifically cited that his dealings with his molestation recently resurfaced when learning of Trautman’s “libelous statement that there were no pedophiles in the Erie Diocese.”

Trautman responded to this victim by letter dated June 21, 2002. Trautman stated that he was shocked the victim would “go to the press directly rather than to contact me regarding the past” and argued that the victim was 14 years old when the abuse occurred, not 11 as stated in the article. Trautman explained that the Diocese had a “zero level tolerance for any abuse situation”; that he knew of no priest with a pedophile background in any form of ministry; and that he had never transferred an accused priest from parish to parish as had occurred in other dioceses.

On November 12, 2004, Trautman wrote a ten-page letter to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome. The letter was accompanied by a twelve-page directory of Gawronski’s victims and crimes. In total, forty-four identified children were identified in the documents. In providing a basis for Gawronski’s removal from the priesthood, Trautman stated, “Gawronski identified, pursued, groomed, and then abused his victims. The classic use of manipulations of the parents, siblings, and friends of the victims in order to get to

those victims or cultivate other potential victims is consistently evident throughout.” Trautman went on to write:

I now see in its totality that his conduct has been deeply harmful to several individual persons, to the faith communities of St. Joseph Parish, Oil City, PA, St. Agatha Parish, Meadville, PA and St. Bernadette Mission, Saegertown, PA, and the common good of the Church. He has gravely offended the dignity of the priesthood, the Sacrament of Penance, and the dignity of marriage, as well as against good morals in general. As long as Gawronski exercises priestly ministry and that is publically known, the effects of scandal among the people of the Diocese of Erie will continue. Justice has yet to be restored, given the number and kind of his offenses.

Trautman’s scorching indictment of Gawronski’s decades of child sexual abuse was necessary to convince Rome to remove Gawronski from ministry. It was also the only full and fair accounting of Gawronski’s crimes that either Trautman or the Diocese has provided to date. Unfortunately, it was contained within a private letter to Rome rather than through a public acknowledgment to Gawronski’s victims or the public. Additionally, it occurred fifteen years after the Diocese received the first report of child sexual abuse and only occurred after immense external pressure was placed on the Diocese by press accounts and litigation.