

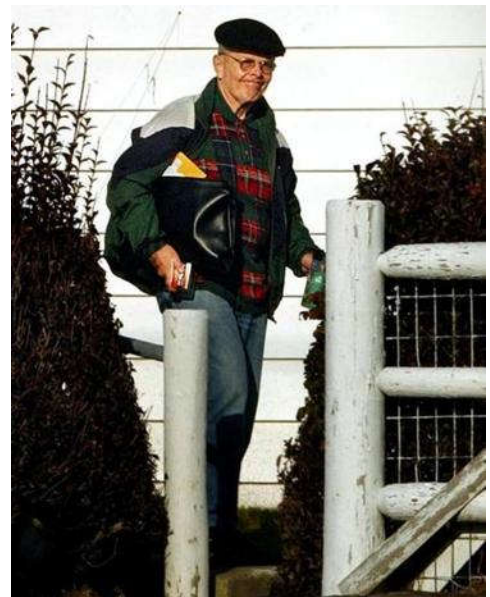


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Church allowed abuse by priest for years

Aware of Geoghan record, archdiocese still shuttled him from parish to parish

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JIM DAVIS / GLOBE STAFF

Former priest John J. Geoghan leaving his family home in Scituate in November.



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This article was prepared by the Globe Spotlight Team: reporters Matt Carroll, Sacha Pfeiffer, and Michael Rezendes; and editor Walter V. Robinson. It was written by Rezendes.

Since the mid-1990s, more than 130 people have come forward with horrific childhood tales about how former priest John J. Geoghan allegedly fondled or raped them during a three-decade spree through a half-dozen Greater Boston parishes.

Almost always, his victims were grammar school boys. One was just 4 years old.

Then came last July's disclosure that Cardinal Bernard F. Law knew about Geoghan's problems in 1984, Law's first year in Boston, yet approved his transfer to St. Julia's parish in Weston. Wilson D. Rogers Jr., the cardinal's attorney, defended the move last summer, saying the archdiocese had medical assurances that each Geoghan reassignment was "appropriate and safe."

But one of Law's bishops thought that the 1984 assignment of Geoghan to St. Julia's was so risky, he wrote the cardinal a letter in protest. And for good reason, the Spotlight Team found: The archdiocese already had substantial evidence of Geoghan's predatory sexual habits. That included his assertion in 1980 that his repeated abuse of seven boys in one extended family was not a "serious" problem, according to an archdiocesan record.

The St. Julia's assignment proved disastrous. Geoghan was put in charge of three youth groups, including altar boys. In 1989, he was forced to go on sick leave after more complaints of sexual abuse, and spent months in two institutions that treat sexually abusive priests. Even so, the archdiocese returned him to St. Julia's, where Geoghan continued to abuse children for another three years.

Now, as Geoghan faces the first of two criminal trials next week, details about his sexual compulsion are likely to be overshadowed by a question that many Catholics find even more troubling: Why did it take a succession of three cardinals and many bishops 34 years to place children out of Geoghan's reach?

Donna Morrissey, a spokeswoman for Law, said the cardinal and other church officials

would not respond to questions about Geoghan. Morrissey said the church had no interest in knowing what the Globe's questions would be.

Before Geoghan ever got to Weston in 1984, he had already been treated several times and hospitalized at least once for molesting boys. And he had been removed from at least two parishes for sexual abuse. In 1980, for instance, he was ordered out of St. Andrew's in Jamaica Plain after casually admitting he had molested the seven boys.

In 1981, after a year's sick leave, Geoghan was dispatched to St. Brendan's in Dorchester, with little chance he would be placed under scrutiny: His pastor for most of his 3 1/2 years there, the Rev. James H. Lane, has told friends he was never warned that Geoghan had a history of sex abuse.

In September 1984, complaints that Geoghan had abused children at the Dorchester parish prompted Law to remove him. Two months later, the cardinal gave Geoghan a fresh start at St. Julia's.

Law allowed Geoghan to stay in Weston for more than eight years before removing him from parish duty in 1993. But even that decision to recast Geoghan as a functionary at a home for retired priests did not prevent him from seeking out and molesting children, according to the multiple civil suits and criminal charges filed against the 66-year-old Geoghan.

Finally, in 1998, the church "defrocked" Geoghan, removing him from the priesthood.

Geoghan's criminal defense attorney, Geoffrey Packard, said his client would have no comment on any of the allegations against him. Geoghan's first trial on sexual molestation charges is scheduled for Jan. 14 in Middlesex Superior Court. The second, more serious set of charges are due to be tried in Suffolk Superior Court in late February. In the civil lawsuits, Geoghan has no attorney, and is not contesting the charges.

The church's likely legal defense, as Rogers hinted in July, will be that doctors deemed Geoghan rehabilitated. Church records obtained by the Globe note that Geoghan was indeed medically cleared for the St. Julia's assignment - but not until he had been at the parish for a month.

In 1984, there were still some clinicians who believed child molesters could be cured. But other specialists had long since warned Catholic bishops of the high risk that priests who had abused children would become repeat offenders.

What's more, specialists in child sexual abuse and attorneys who have represented victims said, it ought to have been apparent to the archdiocese by 1984 that someone with Geoghan's record of habitual sexual abuse should not have been returned to a parish.

"In Geoghan's case, the church defied its own most basic values of protecting the young and fostering celibacy," said A.W. Richard Sipe, a former priest. Sipe, a psychotherapist and expert in clergy sexual abuse, said he has long believed that the Catholic Church has been too slow to deal with priests who molest children.

The Spotlight Team found evidence that one of Law's top subordinates worried that Geoghan would cause further scandal at St. Julia's in Weston, where he began work on Nov. 13, 1984. On Dec. 7, Bishop John M. D'Arcy wrote to Law, challenging the wisdom of the assignment in light of Geoghan's "history of homosexual involvement with young boys."

Within the next week, two doctors cleared Geoghan for parish duty, according to an archdiocesan chronology that is in court files. It reads: "12/11/84 Dr. [Robert] Mullins - Father Geoghan 'fully recovered.' . . . 12/14/84 Dr. [John H.] Brennan: "no psychiatric contraindications or restrictions to his work as a parish priest."

The files also contain a poignant - and prophetic - August 1982 letter to Law's

predecessor, the late Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, from the aunt of Geoghan's seven Jamaica Plain victims, expressing incredulity that the church to which she was devoted would give Geoghan another chance at St. Brendan's after what he had done to her family.

"Regardless of what he says, or the doctor who treated him, I do not believe he is cured; his actions strongly suggest that he is not, and there is no guarantee that persons with these obsessions are ever cured," Margaret Gallant said in her plea to Medeiros.

"It embarrasses me that the church is so negligent," Gallant wrote. Archdiocesan records obtained by the Globe make it clear why Gallant wrote her irate letter two years after the abuse: Geoghan had reappeared in Jamaica Plain, and been seen with a young boy. The records note that the next month, "Another letter from Mrs. Gallant. Why is nothing being done?"

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From the Jamaica Plain case alone, the archdiocese's top officials were aware of Geoghan's attraction to young boys, and how he picked his victims: The affable Geoghan usually befriended Catholic mothers struggling to raise large families, often alone. His offers to help, often by taking the children for ice cream or praying with them at bedtime, were accepted without suspicion.

That is how 12-year-old Patrick McSorley, who lived in a Hyde Park housing project, allegedly became a Geoghan victim in 1986 - two years after Geoghan's assignment to Weston.

According to McSorley, Geoghan, who knew the family from St. Andrew's, learned of his father's suicide and dropped by to offer condolences to his mother, who is schizophrenic. The priest offered to buy Patrick ice cream.

“I felt a little funny about it,” McSorley recalled in an interview. “I was 12 years old and he was an old man.”

Riding home after getting ice cream, McSorley says, Geoghan consoled him. But then he patted his upper leg and slid his hand up toward his crotch. “I froze up,” McSorley said. “I didn’t know what to think. Then he put his hand on my genitals and started masturbating me. I was petrified.” McSorley added that Geoghan then began masturbating himself.

When Geoghan dropped a shaken McSorley off at his mother’s house, he suggested they keep secret what had taken place. “He said, ‘We’re very good at keeping secrets,’” McSorley said.

For years, McSorley has battled alcoholism and depression. And now, as the plaintiff in one of the lawsuits against Geoghan, McSorley is bitter. “To find out later that the Catholic Church knew he was a child molester - every day it bothers me more and more,” McSorley says.

Many documents yet to be unsealed

The letters from Bishop D’Arcy and Margaret Gallant were among documents found by the Globe during a review of the public files of 84 civil lawsuits still pending against Geoghan. But for all Geoghan’s notoriety, the public record is remarkably skeletal. That is because almost all the evidence in the lawsuits about the church’s supervision of Geoghan has been under a court-ordered confidentiality seal granted to church lawyers.

In November, acting on a motion by the Globe, Superior Court Judge Constance M. Sweeney ordered those documents made public. The archdiocese appealed to the state Appeals Court, arguing that the Globe - and the public - should not have access to documents about the church’s inner workings. But the appeal was denied last month. The records, including depositions of bishops and personnel files, are scheduled to

become public on Jan. 26.

The cardinal and five other bishops who supervised Geoghan over the years have been accused of negligence in many of the civil suits for allegedly knowing of Geoghan's abuse and doing nothing to stop it. Never before have so many bishops had to defend their roles in a case involving sexual molestation charges against a single priest. The five, all since promoted to head their own dioceses, are Bishops Thomas V. Daily of Brooklyn, N.Y.; Robert J. Banks of Green Bay, Wis.; William F. Murphy of Rockville Center, N.Y.; John B. McCormack of Manchester, N.H., and Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes of New Orleans. Law and the five bishops have all denied the accusations in legal filings.

No American diocese has faced a scandal of similar dimensions since 1992. That year, in the Fall River Diocese, more than 100 of former priest James Porter's victims surfaced publicly with evidence that Porter's superiors - including, in the 1960s, then Monsignor Medeiros - shifted him from one parish to another as parents learned of his compulsive abuse.

Since 1997, the archdiocese has settled about 50 lawsuits against Geoghan, for more than \$10 million - but with no confidential documents ever made public.

Plaintiffs in the 84 pending lawsuits are refusing to settle their claims as easily, and the church's internal documents are subject to being revealed in the litigation. So the archdiocese has moved aggressively to keep information about its supervision of Geoghan out of public view. One example: When Law was named a defendant in 25 of the lawsuits, Rogers asked a judge to impound any reference to the cardinal, arguing that his reputation might be harmed. The judge refused.

On Dec. 17, Rogers sent the Globe's attorney, Jonathan M. Albano, a letter threatening to seek legal sanctions against the newspaper and its law firm if the Globe published anything gleaned from confidential records in the suits. He warned that he would seek

court-imposed sanctions even if Globe reporters asked questions of clergy involved in the case.

For decades, within the US Catholic Church, sexual misbehavior by priests was shrouded in secrecy - at every level. Abusive priests - Geoghan among them - often instructed traumatized youngsters to say nothing about what had been done to them. Parents who learned of the abuse, often wracked by shame, guilt, and denial, tried to forget what the church had done. The few who complained were invariably urged to keep silent. And pastors and bishops, meanwhile, viewed the abuse as a sin for which priests could repent rather than as a compulsion they might be unable to control.

Even Massachusetts law assured secrecy - and still does. For all the years that Geoghan was molesting children, clergymen were exempt from laws requiring most other caregivers to report incidents of sex abuse to police for possible prosecution. It was only after last summer's revelations that the archdiocese dropped its long-standing opposition to legislation adding clergy to the list of "mandated reporters." But the legislation died in committee.

Until recent years, the church also had little to fear from the courts. But that has changed, as predicted in a 1985 confidential report on priest abuse prepared at the urging of some of the nation's top bishops, Law among them. "Our dependence in the past on Roman Catholic judges and attorneys protecting the Diocese and clerics is GONE," the report said.

Since mid-December, the Globe has been requesting interviews with Law and other Church officials. But the answer was delayed until Morrissey's call late Friday, in which she said she would not even accept questions in writing. Asked if that meant the Archdiocese had no interest in knowing what the questions were, Morrissey replied: "That's correct."

In preparing this article, the Globe also sought interviews with many of the priests and

bishops who had supervised Geoghan or worked with him. None of the bishops would comment. Of the priests, few would speak publicly. And one pastor hung up the phone and another slammed a door shut at the first mention of Geoghan's name.

After ordination, a record of abuse

There is no dispute that Geoghan abused children while he was at Blessed Sacrament in Saugus after his 1962 ordination. The archdiocese has recently settled claims on accusations that he did, and the church records obtained by the Globe note that Geoghan in 1995 admitted molesting four boys from the same family then. The unresolved issue in the remaining suits is whether church officials knew of the abuse at the time.

A former priest, Anthony Benzevich, has said he alerted church higher-ups that Geoghan frequently took young boys to his rectory bedroom. In news reports after accusations against Geoghan surfaced publicly, Benzevich was also quoted as saying church officials threatened to reassign him as a missionary in South America for telling them about Geoghan. Benzevich told his story to Mitchell Garabedian, who represents nearly all of the plaintiffs in the civil suits against Geoghan and church officials, according to an affidavit Garabedian filed.

But court records reviewed by the Globe show that when Benzevich appeared in Garabedian's office for a pre-trial deposition in October 2000, he was represented by Wilson Rogers 3d - the son of Law's principal attorney. Then, under oath, Benzevich changed his story. He said he was not certain that Geoghan had had boys in his room. And he said he could not recall notifying superiors about Geoghan's behavior with children.

In a recent interview with the Globe, Benzevich said he does indeed remember Geoghan taking boys to his room. He said Geoghan often sought to wrestle with young boys - and liked to dress them in priest's attire. But he repeated his sworn assertion that he does not recall notifying his superiors.

Before his deposition, Benzevich said, Wilson Rogers 3d approached him, told him the church was trying to protect him from being named as a defendant, and offered to represent him. His earlier statements to reporters, Benzevich said, had been misconstrued.

Garabedian, citing the confidentiality order, refused to discuss the Benzevich issue with the Globe. The church's financial liability in the pending suits could increase dramatically if there is evidence Geoghan's superiors knew of his abuse.

Geoghan's second assignment - in 1966 to St. Bernard's in Concord - ended after seven months, according to a detailed chronology of Geoghan's service prepared by the church which does not explain why the assignment was so abbreviated.

The pending lawsuits include accusations that Geoghan again abused young boys from several families in his next parish, St. Paul's in Hingham, between 1967 and 1974. One of his alleged victims, Anthony Muzzi Jr., said in an interview last week that in addition to his own abuse, his uncle caught Geoghan abusing his son. The uncle ordered Geoghan to leave his house, and complained to the priest's superiors at St. Paul's.

That complaint to church officials coincides with the time frame when Geoghan received in-patient treatment for sex abuse at the Seton Institute in Baltimore, according to Sipe, the psychotherapist who was on Seton's staff at the time. Sipe did not treat Geoghan.

During his assignment in Hingham, Geoghan found victims far afield, befriending Joanne Mueller, a single mother of four boys who lived in Melrose. There too, according to depositions, the priest became a regular visitor, a spiritual counselor to Mueller and a helpmate to her boys, who were between 5 and 12.

One night, she testified, her second youngest son came to her, insisting that she keep

Geoghan away from him. “I don’t want him doing that to my wee-wee, touching my wee-wee . . .” Mueller recalled the boy saying.

Mueller, according to her deposition, summoned her three other sons and learned that Geoghan, while purporting to be taking them out for ice cream, helping them with their baths, and reading them bedtime stories, had been raping them orally and anally. Also, Mueller said, Geoghan was insisting they tell no one. “We couldn’t tell you because Father said it was a confessional,” she said one of her sons told her.

Mueller testified that she immediately took the boys to see Rev. Paul E. Miceli, a parish priest at St. Mary’s in Melrose who knew both Geoghan and her family.

She testified that Miceli assured her that Geoghan would be handled by appropriate church authorities and would “never be a priest again.” Mueller also said that Miceli asked her to keep the matter to herself: “Bad as it was, he said, ‘Just try - don’t think about it. It will never happen again.’ “

Miceli, until recently a member of Law’s cabinet, contradicted Mueller in his own deposition. He said he did not recall her name, and never received a visit of the sort she described. But Miceli acknowledged receiving a call from a woman saying Geoghan was spending too much time with her children.

Miceli testified that the caller said nothing about sexual abuse. Nonetheless, Miceli said he drove to Geoghan’s new parish in Jamaica Plain to relay the woman’s concerns to Geoghan face-to-face.

Family in need was vulnerable

If Mueller had unwittingly facilitated Geoghan’s access to the children in her home in Melrose, the same role was played by Maryetta Dussourd at the priest’s next stop: St. Andrew’s, in the Forest Hills section of Jamaica Plain, where he served from 1974 to 1980.

Dussourd was rearing her own four children - three boys and a girl - as well as her niece's four boys. In her hardscrabble neighborhood, she said in an interview, she hoped there was a priest the children could look up to. Then she met Geoghan, who oversaw altar boys and Boy Scouts at the parish.

Geoghan, she recalled bitterly, was eager to help. Before long, he was visiting her apartment almost every evening - for nearly two years. He routinely took the seven boys out for ice cream and put them to sleep at night.

But all that time, Geoghan regularly molested the seven boys in their bedrooms, Dussourd said. In some cases, he performed oral sex on them, according to court documents. Other times, he fondled their genitals or forced them to fondle his - occasionally as he prayed.

A 1994 Archdiocesan memorandum, labeled "personal and confidential," said Geoghan would stay in the Dussourd home "even when he was on retreat because he missed the children so much. He `would touch them while they were sleeping and waken them by playing with their penises.' "

Dussourd discovered what was happening after the children finally told her sister, Margaret Gallant. Horrified, Dussourd complained to the Rev. John E. Thomas, the pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas, a nearby parish, according to court documents and accounts by Dussourd and a church official who asked that he not be identified.

Thomas confronted Geoghan with the allegations, and was taken aback when Geoghan casually admitted they were accurate. "He said, `Yes, that's all true,' " the official recalled. It was as if Geoghan had been asked "if he preferred chocolate or vanilla ice cream."

Thomas immediately drove to archdiocesan offices in Brighton to notify Daily. In Thomas's presence that Saturday afternoon, Feb. 9, 1980, Daily telephoned Geoghan

at St. Andrew's and, in a brief conversation, delivered a curt directive: "Go home," the official said.

Geoghan protested, saying there was no one else to celebrate the 4 p.m. Mass. "I'll say the Mass myself," Daily insisted. "Go home." The official said Daily drove to Jamaica Plain and said Mass.

The Rev. Francis H. Delaney, who was Geoghan's pastor at St. Andrew's, said in an interview that church officials never told him why Geoghan disappeared from the parish.

Several weeks later, Dussourd said, a contrite Thomas came to her apartment and told her that Geoghan had admitted to abusing the boys, but had excused his behavior by telling the pastor, "It was only two families."

Thomas, echoing a tack common among clerics at the time, later pleaded with Dussourd not to follow through on her threat to go public, she said. He cited the years Geoghan had spent studying for the priesthood, and the consequences for Geoghan if the accusations against him were publicized. "Do you realize what you're taking from him?" Thomas asked, according to Dussourd.

Thomas, who is now retired, declined to be interviewed.

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A 1994 archdiocesan document summarizing Geoghan's recurrent problems says of the seven children: "Fr. Geoghan `admits the activity but does not feel it serious or a pastoral problem.'"

Geoghan spent the following year on sick leave, under treatment for his compulsion, but living with family in West Roxbury. In February 1981, he was sent to his fifth parish, St. Brendan's.

Almost immediately, Geoghan was working with First Communicants, befriending young children and their parents, even taking some boys to his family's summer home in Scituate, where - parents say they later discovered - he sexually abused the youths.

Geoghan's free rein was made possible because the archdiocese said nothing to Lane, St. Brendan's pastor, about Geoghan's history, according to a teacher in the parish whom Lane has confided in.

The St. Brendan's teacher, who declined to be named, said that at first, Geoghan's willingness to spend inordinate amounts of time with children was admired. But over time, some parishioners became suspicious. "We knew something wasn't right," the teacher said. "He just zeroed in on some kids."

After two more years and more allegations of sexual abuse, Geoghan's tenure at St. Brendan's came to an abrupt end in 1984, when Lane heard complaints that Geoghan had molested children in the parish.

Lane, the teacher said, was so devastated that he broke down when he told her the news. And, she said, he was incensed that he had not been warned. "Father Lane was almost destroyed by this," the teacher said.

Lane is now retired. When a Globe reporter went to see him recently, he slammed the door shut as soon as Geoghan's name was mentioned.

Law denies he tried 'to shift a problem'

In his own defense last summer, Law wrote in the Pilot, the archdiocesan newspaper, "Never was there an effort on my part to shift a problem from one place to the next."

The cardinal's assertion followed his disclosure, in court documents, that he was informed in September 1984 of the four-year-old allegations that Geoghan had molested the seven Jamaica Plain boys. In the court filing, Law went on to say he then notified Geoghan that he was being removed from St. Brendan's and was "in between

assignments.”

The legal response by the cardinal, narrowly drawn in response to the lawsuit against him, omits any reference to Geoghan’s molestation of children at St. Brendan’s in Dorchester.

Despite his record, Geoghan was assigned to St. Julia’s. And in his first two years, he was in charge of altar boys, religious education for public school youngsters and a youth group, according to the church’s annual directories.

Three weeks after Geoghan arrived in Weston, Bishop D’Arcy protested the assignment to Law, citing Geoghan’s problems and adding: “I understand his recent abrupt departure from St. Brendan’s, Dorchester may be related to this problem.”

A copy of the letter contains a redacted paragraph, an apparent reference to the Rev. Nicholas Driscoll, who confirmed last week that he had been removed from St. Julia’s before Geoghan’s arrival - but for alcohol and depression problems, not sexual abuse. So D’Arcy expressed concern about “further scandal in this parish.” If “something happens,” parishioners will feel that the archdiocese “simply sends them priests with problems.”

D’Arcy urged Law to consider restricting Geoghan to weekend duty “while receiving some kind of therapy.” The Globe could find no evidence that Law accepted that advice. Retired Monsignor Francis S. Rossiter, Geoghan’s pastor at St. Julia’s, refused to be interviewed last week. But Church records note that Rossiter was aware of Geoghan’s history.

The civil and criminal allegations Geoghan faces in Middlesex and Suffolk counties suggest that he allegedly abused at least 30 more boys after Law sent him to Weston in 1984 - both before and after the half year’s sick leave in 1989.

After Geoghan’s 1989 return to St. Julia’s, it was another 38 months before Law took

him out of the parish. Three years later, Geoghan was still seeking out victims, allegedly including an altar boy donning vestments for a christening ceremony, according to the criminal charges.

The shuttling of Geoghan from one parish to another created a devastating coincidence for one family. One boy he allegedly molested is the son of a man who had been among the many sexually abused by Porter during the 1960s in the Fall River Diocese, according to Roderick MacLeish Jr., the attorney who represented the man and 100 other Porter victims.

MacLeish declined to provide any information about the family, and said a legal claim has yet to be filed over the son's treatment by Geoghan.

MacLeish, who has had substantial dealings with the Boston Archdiocese, said he remains astonished at Rogers's assertion that Geoghan's assignments were deemed safe by doctors. "No responsible clinician would have said it was safe to transfer him to another parish in light of what the church knew about his pattern of deviant behavior," MacLeish said.

[2002 Spotlight Report: Clergy sex abuse crisis](#)