

Father John A. Cannon

Father John A. Cannon, ordained in 1948, molested teenage boys at a Church summer camp from 1959 through 1964. Eight boys reported the sexual abuse in 1964. Father Cannon admitted to some, but not all, of the sexual abuse. The Archdiocese responded by ordering the priest to “desist” and by transferring him to a different parish, with no restrictions on his conduct. In 1992, one of the priest’s victims contacted Archdiocese officials to report the continuing effect of Fr. Cannon’s abuse. The victim was assured that in cases such as Fr. Cannon’s, sexually abusive priests are removed from their present situation, evaluated and treated, and not allowed again to work with children.

That was not true in the case of Fr. Cannon. He failed to undergo treatment, yet Cardinal Bevilacqua allowed him to continue teaching at a girls’ school in Holland, Pa., until he retired in February 2004. In March 2004, following an Archdiocesan Review Board inquiry that found the reports of Fr. Cannon’s victims credible, the priest’s faculties were restricted.

The Archdiocese responds to Father Cannon’s abuse of teenage boys at a summer camp by transferring his residence.

On July 5, 1964, five boys – “Harry,” “Mario,” “Frank,” “Ralph,” and “Ted” – reported to priests at Saint Monica’s Church in Philadelphia that Fr. John Cannon had, a week earlier, sexually abused them in their cabin at a summer camp run by the church. The boys were 16 and 17 years old. They said that Fr. Cannon had come into the cabin in the middle of the night and “touched them sexually.” He molested one of them a second time on a different night. According to a report by Fr. Joseph Curran to the Chancery office, the boys told the priests that “such things have been happening for the past two to three years.” Father Curran wrote that he felt “many questions are left unanswered,” but that he did not want to “probe too deeply until seeking further counsel.” He stated that he and another priest who received the complaints, both of whom lived at Saint Monica’s rectory with Fr. Cannon, “believe entirely the statements of these boys.”

Also in July 1964, another priest living at Saint Monica, Fr. John Murphy, provided Chancery officials with a list of other boys who had reported being molested by Fr. Cannon at the church-run camp near Harrisburg. It was recorded that one boy, “Herbert,” had “sinned once and been solicited 15 times” in the summer of 1962. Another, “Arthur,” had been “solicited and sinned” during the summers of 1959, 1960,

1961, and 1962. A third, “Emmanuel,” was said to have stopped the priest’s “advances.” The boys reported that Fr. Cannon sometimes brought another priest, an order priest who taught at Reading Central High School, to the camp and that that priest “also has the same problem.” (Appendix D-28)

Father Cannon was questioned by then-Chancellor John Noone and, according to notes from the meeting, admitted “two incidents but only of masturbation.” An August 19, 1964, note in Archdiocese files records Fr. Cannon’s pastor, Msgr. Aloysius X. Farrell, reporting that “Fr. Cannon is still going to the camp,” and the Vice Chancellor, Thomas Welsh, ordering Fr. Cannon to “desist.” Monsignor Farrell asked that Fr. Cannon be moved to a different residence. In September 1964, Cardinal Krol assigned the priest to the rectory of Saint Gertrude in West Conshohocken.

Nine months later, Fr. Cannon was named assistant pastor at Saint Eugene parish in Primos. In 1966, he began teaching at Cardinal O’Hara High School in Springfield. Father Cannon was reassigned to become Chaplain at Villa Joseph Marie High School for Girls in Holland, and at Saint Joseph Home for the Aged in November 1985.

In 1992 a victim who first reported his abuse in 1964 again complains to the Archdiocese and receives false assurances.

On October 28, 1992, Herbert, one of the victims whose name had been in Fr. Cannon’s Secret Archives file since 1964, wrote to Cardinal Bevilacqua telling the Cardinal of his abuse and his years of suffering as a result. According to notes from a subsequent meeting with Secretary for Clergy William J. Lynn, Herbert said that Fr. Cannon had molested him and asked for “sexual favors” during the boy’s 7th- through his 9th-grade years. Monsignor Lynn told Herbert “that such priests are immediately removed from the situation and sent for evaluation and treatment.” He further promised Herbert that “they are never assigned where children are involved.”

Despite these assurances, Fr. Cannon never underwent treatment, even though, as Msgr. Lynn informed Cardinal Bevilacqua, an evaluation performed at Saint John Vianney Hospital in February 1993 called for “inpatient hospitalization.” Cardinal Bevilacqua, nevertheless, permitted Fr. Cannon to remain the chaplain at a girls’ high school for 10 more years. The report from Saint John Vianney stated: “He has a small

house on the property and enjoys the privacy it affords him. Although teaching was not a part of his assignment there, he has become involved with teaching three classes and doing some tutoring at the Girls' Academy on the grounds.”

Feeling that Msgr. Lynn had not believed his allegations in 1992, Herbert, in July 2002, sought help from the Bishop of Harrisburg, Nicholas Dattilo. Herbert now lived within that diocese, and Saint Monica's summer camp was located in the Harrisburg diocese as well. Bishop Dattilo called Msgr. Lynn on Herbert's behalf and the Secretary for Clergy promised to review the file again. Monsignor Lynn informed Cardinal Bevilacqua of Bishop Dattilo's call. He reported that legal counsel advised that there was “no legal liability in this situation,” and offered his own opinion that there was not “enough evidence to restrict [Fr. Cannon's] priestly service....” (Appendix D-29) Monsignor Lynn reached this conclusion despite Fr. Cannon's 1964 admission to two incidents of “masturbation” with boys and despite the fact that Herbert's 1992 allegation was corroborated by the 1964 report naming him as a victim. Cardinal Bevilacqua allowed Fr. Cannon to continue to minister at the school as well as the home for the aged.

In 2004, based on adverse findings by the Review Board, the Archdiocese finally restricts the faculties of Father Cannon, who has by then retired.

In November 2003, an investigator with the Archdiocese Review Board interviewed Herbert and found him “extremely credible.” Father Cannon repeated to the investigator the admission he originally made in 1964 – that he had molested boys at the camp. Elaborating on his 1964 admission, he told the investigator and Msgr. Lynn that he had abused three boys on two occasions, fondling their genitals when he thought they were sleeping. The Review Board also unanimously concluded that after fondling the boys Fr. Cannon guided their hands to his own genitals to have them masturbate him. Father Cannon retired in February 2004. On March 5, 2004, the Archdiocese restricted his faculties. The priest agreed in October 2004 to live “a supervised life of prayer and penance” at Villa Saint Joseph, a retirement home for priests.

Father Cannon appeared before the Grand Jury and was given an opportunity to answer questions concerning the allegations against him. He chose not to do so.