

Problem priest had

Archdiocese denied claims of sex abuse

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DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

The Rev. Gennaro Gentile's close relationships with boys began drawing attention more than 30 years ago, but the Archdiocese of New York did little until 1997, when the parents of two teens filed a civil lawsuit accusing the priest of sexual misconduct.

Even then, the archdiocese, which also was named in the lawsuit, took notice only by embarking on a campaign to defend the priest and attack the teens' family.

The archdiocese sent a monsignor to Holy Name of Mary Church in Croton-on-Hudson, where Gentile was pastor, on Sept. 28, 1997, to assure parishioners at five weekend Masses that the cleric was innocent.

"I am here to express my and the archdiocese's support for him," said Msgr. Edward O'Donnell, who was then director of priest personnel for John Cardinal O'Connor. "This civil lawsuit is about money damages. There is no substance to the civil suit."

In November, Patricia and Vincent Nauheimer settled their lawsuit against Gentile, now 55, who served at Holy Name from 1987 to 2000; the archdiocese had been dropped as a defendant. The couple, bound by a confidentiality agreement, declined comment.

Gentile, who is known as Father Jerry, and archdiocesan spokesman Joseph Zwilling also declined comment, and O'Donnell, who is now vicar of priests for the archdiocese, failed to return several phone calls.

Court documents in the Nauheimers' lawsuit, however, accuse Gentile of a pattern of sexual abuse against their sons that began in April 1993.

According to the lawsuit, Gentile showed Vincent Nauheimer Jr., then 15, an erotic catalogue depicting male models "posed seductively in sexually provocative clothing." Vincent said Gentile asked him to "choose a gift for himself," but he declined.

Two months later, in June 1993, Gentile took Vincent Jr. and several other boys to his five-bedroom house on Ballston Lake in Saratoga County. Gentile calls the 2-acre property "Jerry's Retreat."

After complaining of sore muscles, Vincent was instructed by Gentile to remove his shirt and lay down on his stomach, according to the lawsuit. The priest straddled the boy and began massaging him with oil — all while the other boys watched a movie in the same room, the suit says.

Vincent said Gentile began with his shoulders and back, then progressed down to his genitals. Embarrassed, the boy said he asked Gentile to stop, and he did.

Vincent returned home from the weekend and told no one of the incident.

Nearly a year later, in April 1994, the

Nauheimers accepted an offer from Gentile — then a frequent and welcome visitor — to make dinner at their home.

As he prepared the meal, Gentile boasted how he had added a half bottle of hard liquor to one of the dishes. He did this fully aware that the boys' father was a recovering alcoholic, according to papers filed in the lawsuit.

After dinner the family began watching a video that Gentile had brought along — "The Hobbit."

At around 9 p.m., both Nauheimer parents went upstairs to put their other children to bed. That left their son, Brian, then 13, and Gentile alone in the basement family room.

First, according to court papers, the priest beckoned the boy to sit closer. Then he began twirling the child's hair, and touching his ears

and neck in "a sexually provocative manner." The frightened boy ran upstairs to tell his mother.

The Nauheimers consulted with another priest, who said he would talk to Gentile. That priest later told the Nauheimers that Gentile had assured him it would never happen again.

The Nauheimers decided to let the matter rest. But their story does not end there.

Based on interviews with priests, men who say they were victimized by Gentile, parents, former and current parishioners, former co-workers and eyewitnesses, as well as sworn affidavits, other court documents, confidential correspondence and public records, here is more of the story of the Rev. Gennaro Gentile:

Private counseling

In August 1994, a Holy Name parishioner named Karen Mahakian asked Gentile for advice on her 14-year-old son Evan, who had been behaving erratically after his father had moved out, according to court papers.

Gentile volunteered to take Evan up to Ballston Lake for the weekend to talk to the boy.

They were joined for dinner at the lake house by a Holy Name deacon and his wife. The Rev. Ron Lemmert, who worked with Gentile at Holy Name and had sent an anonymous warning about the priest to the archdiocese personnel board the year before, said the deacon



later told him he'd seen Gentile give the youngster liquor that night.

Although he would remain silent for more than two years, Evan Mahakian eventually told the following narrative to his mother and several religious personnel at Holy Name:

Alone after dinner, Gentile gave Evan more to drink. The boy recalled that he "felt high from it."

Gentile told Evan he wanted to discuss his home life. With that, he took him into his bedroom and told the child he "needed a massage to relax."

The priest removed Evan's shirt, applied oil to his body, took off his own shirt, then straddled the boy. Evan said the massage took place on the bed and on the floor, court papers say.

Evan kept his secret, but as the months progressed he grew more troubled. He committed acts of self-mutilation, and while hospitalized in 1996, he revealed details of his night at Gentile's lake house to a therapist.

The therapist wanted Evan's mom to press charges. Instead, in October 1996, Karen Mahakian reached out to Lemmert.

A meeting was convened with Lemmert, the deacon, the church youth counselor and Karen Mahakian, according to court papers. It was

agreed that Karen Mahakian would make a formal complaint to O'Donnell at the archdiocesan headquarters.

At O'Donnell's request, Lemmert said, he wrote a three-page letter on Nov. 7, 1996, spelling out his concerns about Gentile's relationships with so many boys in the parish.

He said he had grown uncomfortable with the frequent unchaperoned trips to the lake house and the boys sleeping over in Gentile's rectory bedroom.

Lemmert also said he had discovered that the rectory had new cable TV service; for the first time, it included a pornography channel. In closing, Lemmert said he feared that "the number of teenage boys involved is staggering."

Shortly before Thanksgiving 1996, O'Donnell convened a meeting with Karen Mahakian and her son Evan, the youth counselor and Gentile.

It was agreed that Gentile would no longer take unchaperoned trips with young boys, that he would get counseling and that he would attend group therapy for sex offenders. Lemmert said he

The Rev. Gennaro Gentile took frequent unchaperoned trips with teenage boys to his home in upstate New York and had sleepovers in his rectory bedroom, according to court papers and eyewitnesses.

church on his side



CHET GORDON

Statue of the Virgin Mary (above) and religious icon of St. Francis of Assisi have a place at the Rev. Gennaro Gentile's home in upstate Ballston Lake.



Above the entrance to Gentile's home rests a wooden plaque with the words: Jerry's Retreat.

was told.

But today, no one — other than Gentile and archdiocesan officials — knows whether any of the terms were fulfilled.

Lemmert's lament

Uncertain that the matter had been adequately handled, Lemmert said he felt under siege. He was hospitalized for stress. He moved out of the rectory and started a job as chaplain at Sing Sing prison. But he still said Mass at Holy Name on the weekends and wanted to keep his link to the parish.

O'Donnell visited Lemmert at his hospital bed and asked him "not to discuss the Mahakian matter with others."

Then, on Dec. 2, 1996, Gentile wrote to Lemmert at Sing Sing informing

him that his weekend services were no longer needed at Holy Name. "I would appreciate the keys back at your earliest convenience," the letter said.

Two days later, Lemmert received a second missive: "I think it is inappropriate for you to attend the Saturday 5 p.m. Mass and sing in the choir. Msgr. O'Donnell also thinks it is inappropriate."

Religious weekend

During a weekend in March 1997, a group of Holy Name teenagers went on a religious retreat. Attendees were encouraged to discuss their problems "in an effort to help them heal," according to Brian Nauheimer, one of the weekend's youth leaders.

In the lawsuit, Brian recalled that

another of the attendees, Evan Mahakian, confided "that he had something that was really bothering him and asked me if he could talk to me about it."

Mahakian proceeded to tell Brian of the night he had spent at Gentile's lake house — the plying with alcohol, the oil, the massage, the straddling. "Evan said that he blacked out at some point during the massage," Brian said in court papers.

Evan also told Brian he had buried the incident until he underwent therapy.

He said that O'Donnell had made Gentile apologize to him in return for his promise of confidentiality.

At that point, Brian Nauheimer told Evan Mahakian of his own disturbing encounter with Gentile, according to court papers.

More anger

Brian Nauheimer was livid. He told his parents about Evan, and demanded that they take action.

In an affidavit she filed in her lawsuit, Patricia Nauheimer said Evan's mother confirmed details of her son's trip to the lake house and showed her a document she described as an official report from her son's therapist. Karen Mahakian told her she had read it to O'Donnell the night of their meeting.

Karen Mahakian also showed Patricia Nauheimer a letter she had received from O'Donnell discussing the situation.

When Karen Mahakian complained that she did not have enough money to pay for Evan's ongoing therapy, O'Donnell said he would try to work something out, according to Lemmert.

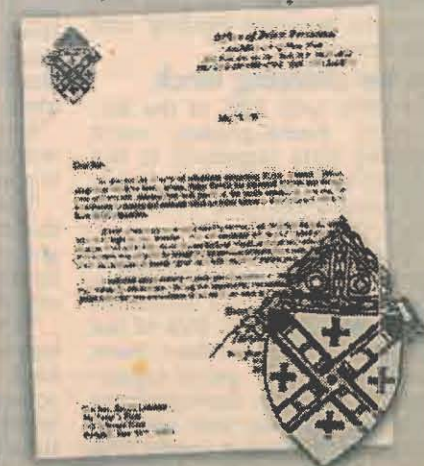
Soon thereafter, Karen Mahakian, who declined a Daily News request for an interview, stopped talking publicly about her son's trip to the lake house and his costly therapy. Sources have told The News she is bound by a confidentiality agreement with the archdiocese.

But according to Patricia Nauheimer's affidavit, Karen Mahakian became enraged when she learned that the money for her son's therapy was coming from the Holy Name of Mary indigent fund.

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LETTERS AND A LAWSUIT

The archdiocese said, "There have been no other complaints of that nature made against Father Gentile, now or in the past."



Msgr. Edward O'Donnell, left, was sent to Holy Name of Mary Church in Croton-on-Hudson, where Gentile was pastor, on Sept. 28, 1997, to assure parishioners at five weekend Masses that the cleric was innocent.

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Lawsuit casts pall

Archdiocese went into spin control

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Nauheimers get nowhere

Spurred on by his son Brian, Vincent Nauheimer called Lemmert, who recommended that he call O'Donnell.

The complaint went nowhere, said Lemmert.

And shortly thereafter, O'Donnell summoned Lemmert to meet him at the archdiocesan seminary in Yonkers. There, Lemmert said, O'Donnell assured him that a committee was "looking into the actions of Father Gentile."

But on May 13, 1997, O'Donnell wrote to Lemmert: "In the current climate of allegations concerning Father Gennaro Gentile, allegations which he firmly rejects, Father Gentile has expressed concern that through your contacts and conversations with people in the parish community, you may be contributing to rumors and accounts which are either untrue or distortions, and which do harm to his reputation."

A vigorous defense

Vincent and Patricia Nauheimer filed their civil lawsuit on behalf of both sons in state court in White Plains in August 1997.

By now, Vincent Jr. had told of his incidents — Gentile showing him the erotic catalogue and the oil massage at the lake house.

The Nauheimers charged Gentile with civil assault and battery, intentional infliction of emotional distress and negligence. They also sued the archdiocese under the theory that Gentile worked for the church and that the archdiocese had hired him



negligently and failed to properly supervise him. They sought \$55 million.

On Sept. 28, 1997, O'Donnell addressed Holy Name parishioners at five Masses. He said church lawyers believed the suit was "without foundation" and asked for trust in the judicial process.

Several days later, Zwilling, the archdiocesan spokesman, told the Catholic New York newspaper that Gentile would continue to carry out his duties at Holy Name.

The article also quoted unidentified archdiocesan officials as saying "there have been no other complaints of that nature made against Father Gentile, now or in the past."

Revised versions

The Nauheimers were under intense pressure. Many of their fellow parishioners were appalled that the couple accused a priest of such behavior.

The Nauheimers released an open letter to the parish, saying they filed suit only after the archdiocese "ignored us until we forced them to meet with us. After our meeting, they ignored us again and placed a gag order on Father Ron [Lemmert]. The archdiocese left us no choice."

The Nauheimers offered to drop the lawsuit under two conditions: They wanted Gentile removed as pastor and they wanted the archdiocese to adopt a Megan's Law for clergy — a policy requiring that parishioners be advised of any sexual misconduct allegations against a priest made before he arrives or during his stay.

O'Donnell and Zwilling were forced to make one concession, though.

Many now knew of the Mahakian alle-

As lawsuit alleging sexual abuse neared trial, the Rev. Gennaro Gentile settled out of court in November.



An adult eyewitness

When Holy Name parishioners Peggy and Robert Ellsberg, both holding Harvard doctorates, heard about the Nauheimer lawsuit and the archdiocese's claims that it was unaware of any other sexual-abuse allegations against Gentile, they said they felt guilty and angry.

In the summer of 1995, Gentile invited the Ellsbergs, then one of the parish's newest families, to Ballston Lake for the weekend.

The Ellsbergs accepted, but when at the last minute, Robert said he could not attend, Gentile told him he could not allow an unchaperoned woman to spend

gations — certainly the Nauheimers. So why had the archdiocese contended it knew of "no other complaints of that nature made against Father Gentile?"

O'Donnell acknowledged to Catholic New York and The Gazette, a local weekly, that there in fact had been another incident, though he and Zwilling downplayed it.

Zwilling said O'Donnell had met with Gentile and the boy's mother to discuss the priest's "interpersonal contact" with her son. "And that was that," Zwilling said.

O'Donnell quoted Gentile as saying he did not consider the incident sexual, that the boy had not made a claim of sexual misconduct, and that his mother had "accepted the outcome" of the discussion.

HE SAID, HE SAID

A letter from Msgr. Edward O'Donnell (left) to the Rev. Ron Lemmert (right), written shortly after an allegation of sexual abuse against the Rev. Gennaro Gentile, accuses Lemmert of "contributing to rumors ... which are untrue."

Dear Ron,

In the current climate of allegations concerning Father Gennaro Gentile, allegations which he firmly rejects, Father Gentile has expressed concern that through your contacts and conversations with people in the parish community, you may be contributing to rumors and accounts which are either untrue or distortions and which do harm to his reputation.

If even unwittingly such could possibly be true, I am confident that you would want it brought to your attention. You will remember that when I visited you in the

