

Priest worked in North Jersey parishes for decades after being accused of sex abuse

[Abbott Koloff](#), NorthJersey.com Published 4:00 a.m. ET June 5, 2020 |

The Rev. Gerald Sudol, who spent decades serving in North Jersey Catholic parishes, allegedly began abusing children even before he was ordained as a priest. Later he moved from one church to another, at first injecting new life into parishes where he'd been assigned, befriending families and becoming a spiritual mentor to their sons.

Then the man who was fondly known as Father Gerry would allegedly abuse boys sexually — sometimes more than one at a time — and tell them that God would punish them if they told anyone.

He continued working as a priest for decades after a Ridgefield Park woman told her pastor in 1992 that he had abused her son. The Newark Catholic Archdiocese has known about that allegation since at least 1996. Yet as late as 2018, Sudol lived in a Jersey City parish that included a grammar school.

Three lawsuits filed in May, along with interviews and an examination of church records, shed new light on Sudol's alleged behavior over decades — and highlight the response of archdiocesan leaders. The lawsuits say Sudol abused young boys at parishes in Wallington, Nutley and Ridgefield Park. One

of the boys was allegedly sodomized.

It was just last year that the Newark Archdiocese publicly revealed Sudol had been permanently removed from ministry because of multiple credible allegations of sexual abuse.

It was at least the second time he'd been taken out of ministry because of sex abuse allegations. He was removed in 2002 amid a national scandal involving priests abusing children. But he was restored three years later after being acquitted in a church trial, the archdiocese has said.

Sudol, 66, moved out of a Jersey City parish two years ago when the archdiocese investigated new allegations made by three men from St. Francis of Assisi parish in Ridgefield Park.

A woman says that 26 years earlier, she went to the pastor at St. Francis to report that Sudol had abused her son. The woman, who asked that her identity not be revealed, spoke for the first time this week through her attorney, Greg Gianforcaro, to NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey. Her allegations are not related to the recent lawsuits. The archdiocese settled with her family in 2004.

Sudol remained at St. Francis in Ridgefield Park for two more years after she reported him. Then he left abruptly in 1994 when parishioners were told he had a health problem.

In 1996, the woman decided to go to the archdiocese because her son was suffering from depression, Gianforcaro said. She accompanied her son to talk to a church response team that

investigated abuse allegations.

A month later, her son died of a brain aneurysm. A mental health facility where he'd been a patient bolstered the family's case against Sudol in a letter sent to church officials on Jan. 15, 1997. It said the alleged abuse had come up in therapy sessions.

Gianforcaro discussed some of the contents of that correspondence with his clients' permission and read a portion of a Jan. 28, 1997, archdiocesan response to the parents.

"We have issued an appropriate recommendation to the archbishop who we are sure will receive it and consider same in a loving and pastoral manner," the letter said.

Theodore McCarrick, who became a cardinal and was among the American Catholic Church's most powerful figures for decades, was Newark's archbishop at the time. He was defrocked last year amid allegations that he sexually abused minors and harassed adult seminarians.

Gianforcaro said the archdiocesan response team's letter to the parents did not reveal the nature of the recommendation. Once again, Sudol was allowed to continue working as a priest. Church records show he was assigned to two Jersey City parishes in the late 1990s.

Last month, an attorney filed three sex abuse lawsuits naming the archdiocese and Sudol as defendants. They were filed under a state law that took effect on Dec. 1, 2019, making it easier to bring such complaints and suspending the civil statute of

limitations for sex abuse cases for two years.

Taken together, the lawsuits lay out a pattern of alleged abuse from 1976, four years before Sudol was ordained, through the early 1990s. The three plaintiffs declined to be interviewed while their cases are pending but are named in the filings.

“They feel if they don’t speak out and utilize their names, they’re allowing the shame and humiliation they were made to feel as a result of this abuse to continue,” said John Baldante, their attorney. “They realize they can help other victims. They see this litigation as bigger than themselves.”

The Newark Archdiocese declined to comment for this story or to provide information about Sudol, including the years he worked at various assignments. A spokeswoman said in an email that questions about the priest “refer to matters that are under investigation and are now or soon could be in litigation.”

Sudol, who now lives in Pennsylvania, could not be reached for comment.

Michael Dardano, of New York City, said in his complaint that Sudol began abusing him in 1983 at Holy Family parish in Nutley. Dardano, the suit said, was 8 years old at the time. Court papers describe Sudol as a “gigantic teddy bear of a man.” Mirroring the two other filings, it said children vied for Sudol’s attention, and he became a “spiritual mentor” to his victims with the approval of their parents.

The priest made young Michael Dardano feel special, giving him

a star role in a Christmas show. Then, the suit said, came open-mouth kisses and groping.

In one instance, Sudol allegedly kissed the boy on the mouth in the family's kitchen while his mother was turned away. Michael later told his mother that he didn't want the priest kissing him. But he didn't describe the kiss, and she thought it was innocent, saying, "Father Gerry had only kissed him because he loved him so much."

Sudol allegedly abused Michael hundreds of times — once a week until the boy was 12 years old.

The priest sexually abused Michael and another boy in a room behind the church altar, telling them Jesus wanted them to have sexual relations, the suit says. He allegedly abused Michael and a different boy in an empty classroom in the church school, telling them that if they told anyone, "God would hate them, and bad things would happen to them and their families."

Sudol allegedly abused Michael in his car during an annual ski trip and again at the hotel, and choked him while groping him. The suit says that one of Michael's childhood memories is of Sudol standing naked in the hotel bathroom doorway, "a physically shocking and intimidating image."

While other complaints related to Sudol involve open-mouth kissing and groping, Dardano's lawsuit also contains allegations of oral sex and alleges sodomy on at least two occasions, once at the boy's home when his family was away.

Sudol allegedly intimidated the boy by putting his hands around his throat and saying: "You have to do what I say."

The other two lawsuits allege that Sudol groped and kissed the accusers as boys — adding that they have "emotionally suppressed" some of the details and "it is further believed" that they were "abused in additional ways and/or on additional occasions."

Patrick Russo of Belleville said in one of the suits that he was first abused by Sudol in 1976, when he was 8 years old, while attending Most Sacred Heart of Jesus parish in Wallington.

Sudol was a parishioner there, according to the lawsuit, and attended seminary school at the time. The abuse continued after Sudol was ordained in 1980 and assigned to the Nutley parish, lasting until 1986, according to court papers. The priest allegedly groped and kissed Patrick "during his visits to the Russo family home."

Joseph Angelosante of Wood-Ridge said in his lawsuit that he was an 11-year-old altar boy at St. Francis of Assisi in Ridgefield Park when Sudol first abused him in 1991.

Sudol "smothered Joe with exaggerated open mouth kisses," and the boy "was required to sit on Father Gerry's lap" as the priest groped him, the lawsuit said.

Altar boys at the church allegedly told one another, "Don't get trapped in Father Gerry's force field."

In 2002, the archdiocese sent a letter to Gianforcaro's client, the woman from Ridgefield Park, saying it would take another look at her son's allegations. The renewed investigation came under the leadership of Archbishop John Myers and after church leaders agreed to remove clerics who had even one credible abuse allegation.

Two years later, the archdiocese paid a little more than \$1 million to settle a complaint Gianforcaro made on behalf of nine accusers against seven priests — including the allegation against Sudol.

One year after that, Sudol was back in ministry after being acquitted in what is known as a canonical trial. Gianforcaro said his client gave a statement to be used at the trial.

It is possible that church leaders knew about an allegation against Sudol as early as 1994, when he left St. Francis in Ridgefield Park. Gianforcaro said parishioners were told from the pulpit that Sudol "was sick and needed care." But Gianforcaro said his client "knew that was not correct." A church employee told her another parishioner had come forward with concerns about Sudol "doing something to his son," the attorney said.

Father Joseph Doyle, the St. Francis pastor when Gianforcaro's client made her initial complaint, and later when Sudol left the church, did not respond to a message seeking comment. He is now pastor of St. Anne parish in Fair Lawn.

Ed Hanratty was in high school in 1994 when he said his mother mentioned at dinner that Sudol was leaving St. Francis.

“Father Gerry had an incident with a nosebleed,” he remembers his mother saying. “They said he had nervous exhaustion.” Hanratty said his younger brother was upset about the priest’s departure and later reminded him of his own response: “Oh, don’t be. It’s for the best, believe me.”

Hanratty wrote a blog in 2018 saying he’d been abused by Sudol at St. Francis in the 1980s, starting when he was 10 years old. He said he was spurred to write it by the release of a Pennsylvania report alleging that hundreds of priests abused children.

He and two other men from St. Francis went to the archdiocese with allegations against Sudol, Hanratty said. He said hundreds of people from Ridgefield Park sent emails to Our Lady of Czestochowa parish in Jersey City, where Sudol was living. Archdiocese officials have said Sudol agreed to move out of the parish while they investigated.

Hanratty said he didn’t know the outcome of the investigation until last year, when Sudol’s name appeared on a list of credibly accused priests and he was listed as having been the subject of multiple allegations. Now, Hanratty is considering filing a lawsuit. He is represented by Gianforcaro, who said he also represents two other Sudol victims.

Hanratty said he wants to know more about Sudol's time in Nutley before his move to St. Francis.

“I want to know if they knew he was an abuser,” Hanratty said of church leaders. “Why was he sent to St. Francis?”

He also would like to know how the priest ended up at a Jersey City parish with a school, where church records show Sudol lived from 2015 to 2018. Hanratty said he was "livid" when he found out.

The woman who first reported the alleged abuse in the early 1990s "was very disappointed to learn, as far as she understood, that Sudol was allowed to remain around children," Gianforcaro said. "That's not what she thought would occur."

Abbott Koloff is an investigative reporter for NorthJersey.com. To get unlimited access to his watchdog work that safeguards our communities and democracy, [please subscribe or activate your digital account today.](#)