A REPORTER AT LARGE

UNHOLY ACTS

The Catholic Church's failure to confront the crisis within its clergy—more than four hundred priests have been accused of sexual misconduct with children in recent years—has begun to cripple its authority among believers. At a small parish in Massachusetts, parents have been forced to confront a pastor's abuse of their faith.

BY PAUL WILKES

On a Sunday morning a year ago last January, the congregants of my church—St. Augustine's Mission, a tiny Catholic church in the central Massachusetts town of Wheelwright—looked up to see an unfamiliar priest at the altar. Nothing was said about our pastor, Father Ronald Provost, by this stranger in white alb and green stole; the Mass went on, as we were taught that it should, regardless of the celebrant. We received Communion, said our thanksgiving, and went downstairs to the hall for coffee and doughnuts. There were some whispers of curiosity about where Father Provost was that morning, but in such a small parish we were not going to ask anyone directly; and, whatever the reason for Father Provost's absence, we knew we were lucky to have a priest at all in these days of an ever-shrinking clergy and a growing number of church closings. After greeting us at the back of the church, the visiting priest, who identified himself as Father Rocco Piccolomini, the diocesan vicar for priests, had quickly left.

Around us, on walls and ledges, in the cheerful panelled basement room were many framed pictures of our parish children: at our annual chicken barbecue; in their First Communion clothes; playing games; running a race. Father Provost, who had been our parish priest since 1988, was always taking pictures and handing out extra copies to the subjects. Also on the wall was his own picture, with our thanks recorded beneath it. Two years before, the room where we were standing had been no more than a dank crawl space. With volunteer labor and scraped-up funds, he had excavated and constructed. His efforts had afforded us a place to gather after Mass and get to know one another.

We parishioners of St. Augustine's—our usual Sunday group consisted of about a hundred adults—were grateful to Father Provost, but we never regarded him as anything more than a marginally adequate pastor. The religious-education classes that he supervised for our children were poorly run; there were no classes for adults; and no grownup ever thought to go to him for counselling or advice on personal matters. In fact, this man, at fifty-three, seemed to have difficulty carrying on a conversation with a grownup. There was a childlike quality about him that seemed to preclude adults' having a serious relationship with him. But he was sweet, simple, smiling, hard-working, and beloved by the children, and he seemed to be doing the best he could with what limited abilities he had. He was interested in kids, and was always organizing trips to amusement parks and swimming pools, assembling teams for flag football and street hockey, and sponsoring nights dedicated to baseball-card exchanges.

The parishioners of St. Augustine's Mission were initially sympathetic toward their pastor, Father Ronald Provost, when he was charged with "posing" a ten-year-old boy for semi-nude photographs. Would the Church show the same compassion for his victim?

On the Sunday mornings that followed, a series of priests unknown to us came to say Mass at our church. None of them gave us any information about our pastor, but one let it be known that if we wanted to write to him our letters would be forwarded. Early in the period of Father Provost's absence, I called the auxiliary bishop, whom I knew, to ask after him. He told me, "We had to get him out of there quickly, put him on sick leave." He asked that parishioners inquire no further but grant Father Provost time and privacy to work out what it was that was troubling him. Surely, we thought, it couldn't be alcohol or drugs. We concluded that he must have had some sort of nervous collapse.

A box was placed at the rear of the church to receive our messages. Adults sent him cards and letters; children sent him their thoughtful artwork, expressing affection and wishes for his return. Some of us received responses, many bearing a Washington, D.C., postmark. Father

Provost said nothing about where he was or what had happened.

Early last summer, our sexton gave me a brown paper supermarket bag, saying that it was from Father Provost, and that, after a seven-month absence, the priest was back in the area. Inside the bag were two street-hockey-championship shirts for my sons, a few packets of greeting cards (Father Provost was famous throughout the diocese for sending cards), and a four-volume set of "Liturgy of the Hours," the Breviary.

The volumes, bound in plastic covers, were in extraordinarily good condition; in fact, three of them were still in the manufacturer's protective cardboard sleeves. Just before Father Provost left, I had mentioned to him my desire to begin some sort of daily prayer. When I asked about the advisability of buying a Breviary, he said, "Oh, no, don't do that—I'll give you mine. I never use them." He laughed, and added, "I never learned how to use them in seminary." I found myself at once moved by his generosity and saddened that his own spiritual life had been so limited.

I learned from the sexton that Father Provost was staying with his brother, Kenneth Provost, in Worcester, and when I called to say thanks for the Breviary he sounded chipper and happy. He had been attending Mass in his home parish, St. Peter's, also in Worcester, and was telling people there that he was awaiting his next parish assignment. For the past seven months, he told me, he had been at the St. Luke Institute, a psychiatric hospital in Suitland, Maryland, just outside Washington. "Ten thousand dollars a month it costs," he said proudly. "A really good place."

He said nothing about why he had gone there, but he implied that the treatment had worked, and said that he was ready and eager to go back to work as a parish priest.

It was a short conversation. I didn't ask Father Provost about his ordeal, but he volunteered a comment that seemed strange to me. "I don't know why they're after me," he said. "Just seven pictures of kids in their underwear." I had no idea what he was talking about.

Later that week, a front-page story in the Worcester *Telegram & Gazette* gave me all too good an idea. The day before, a grand jury had indicted Father Provost on a charge of posing a child in a state of nudity. That story and two more, on subsequent days, told in some detail what had happened in January, when Father Provost so abruptly left.

On Saturday, January 11, 1992, Father Provost had taken a group of boys and girls, aged between six and sixteen, to swim at a public athletic facility in Gardner, a town about fifteen miles away. A man who had been lifting weights saw the priest taking pictures of one of the boys as he dressed in the locker room, and reported the incident to the lifeguard, and the lifeguard called the police. On Wednesday, January 15th, Detective Sergeant Richard Morrissey, of the Gardner Police Department, called the priest to investigate the complaint. Father Provost voluntarily went to the Gardner police station, handed over his camera, which contained an undeveloped roll of film, and gave a statement. That statement prompted Morrissey to have the film developed immediately. Morrissey accompanied the priest back to the rectory in Barre, where he lived alone. Father Provost led Morrissey to his second-floor bedroom and there he handed over more than a hundred pictures of nude and semi-nude boys, dating back to 1977. (Later, diocesan officials came to clean out Father Provost's room, after he was sent to St. Luke, and they discovered a collection of child-pornography magazines. They also found a collection of baseball cards, the most prized of which were attached to his kitchen wall and his refrigerator door.)

According to his affidavit, Father Provost told the police he had "taken pictures of kids in the nude, mooning," and added, "when I look at these pictures I have sexual tendencies. I have fantasies of having sex with the boys." He said he would often masturbate while looking at the pictures. "I have had the problem of sexuality for about twenty years. . . . I admit that I have a problem and intend on getting help with it," the affidavit said. Father Provost was ordained in 1970; if his confession was true, he had been involved with this kind of voyeurism for virtually all his priestly life.

The mother of the boy in the locker-room pictures told the Worcester newspaper that her children belonged to a youth group that the priest had organized. "He was wonderful with the children," she said, noting that he had sent her son cards and gifts. The mother, who asked not to be named, went on to say that when the police identified her son in the pictures and came to her, the boy at first defended the priest, saying, "But, Mommy, he told me he was a priest, and it was O.K." She told the newspaper, "Father Ron spent about two years seducing my son."

On the Sunday following Father Provost's indictment, the St. Augustine's parishioners again gathered in the hall after Mass. This time, we found it impossible to look at his pictures of our children in the same way. Had these pictures been a cover for his other interest? Yet, strangely, we defended him in our conversations with one another. We listed his faults and shortcomings, but few spoke disparagingly of him. In fact, many people wanted to present their stories of how good or kind or considerate he had been. One woman told of her bout with cancer when she was pregnant, and how Father Provost said a Mass at the very hour her operation was scheduled. A young couple related how the priest had eased their transition back to church after many years of absence. I volunteered my Breviary story. Father Provost had visited the sick, buried the dead, married a few young couples, heard an occasional confession, and started his homily each Sunday, regardless of the weather, with "Thank God for this beautiful day that we can be together." His Masses were crisp and never went over forty minutes; his sermons were usually bland and sometimes incoherent, but were never assaultive. He always spoke without benefit of notes. The reviews from the pews were forgiving, by and large: he was a great advocate of the Blessed Virgin; he supported the Church's ban on artificial birth-control methods and abortion, but spoke of such controversial topics with a certain understanding of human limitations. Now there was a palpable sadness in the hall, and no anger. A few pictures: what harm had been done?

After all, he was not Father James Porter, the priest who several months earlier had been accused of abusing dozens of children over many years in the various parishes he served in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New Mexico. And Father Provost's alleged offense was nothing compared with the behavior of Father Joseph Fredette, a priest who had served in Worcester and was accused of

preying on three of the delinquent boys entrusted to his care in a group home. Father Provost was *our* pastor. Now, with the indictment, he had joined the ever-growing legion of priests—by that time they numbered over four hundred—who had been accused in the last decade of sexual misconduct with children and teen-agers.

I MET Father Provost for lunch a week after the indictment was handed up; it was the first time I had seen him in eight months. When he greeted me on the street outside Al & Harry's Restaurant, on Main Street in Worcester, I could see that he had gained some weight, but that otherwise his looks hadn't changed. He has a full head of gray hair, short on the sides, with a small wave in front. His face is smooth and young-looking. His front teeth are usually in evidence—he has a vague ever-present smile, which seems to indicate little of his mood. That day, he was wearing a sports shirt and dark trousers; it was the first time I had ever seen him in anything other than clerical garb.

He felt tired all the time now, he told me, and would be happy when "all this is over." He was sleeping a lot, watching some sports and news on television, and going for a daily walk. He couldn't concentrate on reading. He had read a bit in the first weeks at St. Luke, but then had lost the urge. The days dragged on, with nothing to fill them.

Trying to understand something of his early life and the roots of his vocation, I asked about his family and childhood. "Oh, it was wonderful," he said. I asked about his seminary training. "It was excellent." He said nothing about why he became a priest—what or who had inspired him. When I asked about his life as a parish priest, his face darkened and the smile left. He told me that, while he loved parish work, seven of the eight pastors he served under had been "mean." He said, "They never gave me anything to do."

As for his work in our parish, he said that it had exhausted him. I expected to hear of endless rounds of sick calls, the time needed for preparing sermons, the demands of readying young couples for marriage, and too many meetings, but Father Provost mentioned none of these. "If this hadn't happened, I would have had a nervous breakdown," he said. "I was up until eleven o'clock so many nights. Four hundred bulletins—do you know how long it takes to turn them out each week?"

"What about your prayer life, Father?" I asked. "How was that going?"

He looked at me quizzically, and hesitated. "Oh," he said, and paused again, then added, "Outside of saying the Mass, I really didn't have any."

He talked at length about the spirit of community he had found among the other patients at St. Luke, which specializes in the treatment of pedophile priests. Father Provost said he was now required to be a member of the Worcester chapter of Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, and confided that he had been quite shocked by some of the stories he heard, most notably the story of a gay man who had had sex with as many as fifty partners in a week. The look on Father Provost's face was that of a young boy who was amazed that a grown person could do such a thing. Nonetheless, in these lonely days the group provided him with a sense of belonging to something, he said.

He was optimistic about his chances of being acquitted, and was sure that the lawyer the Church had hired for him, James Reardon, who had handled other cases of alleged sexual abuse by Worcester priests, was first-rate. Again and again, he said that he would be happy when "this is all over."

And after that?

Father Provost looked down into his plate. He said he knew that his days as a parish priest were finished.

WHEN I went to see Father Provost's own pastor, Bishop Timothy Harrington, of Worcester, I was somewhat surprised to find that he had gathered his counsellors about him: Auxiliary Bishop George Rueger and Monsignor Edmond Tinsley, the diocesan director of fiscal affairs. We talked at the Bishop's residence, a handsome, spacious Tudor home on Worcester's west side. Bishop Harrington, who is seventy-four, had welcomed me into his living room dressed in a brightly striped

knit shirt, but he had the look of a beleaguered man. He told me that he had recently recovered from a heart ailment; that a church he was trying to combine with another nearby in Worcester had been occupied for months by angry parishioners; and that vocations were at a trickle. In the presence of his counsellors, who spoke very little, Bishop Harrington ruminated about a Church that, sadly, no longer existed—a Church whose primary concerns once were parishes that didn't pay their apportionments or deciding what to do with an alcoholic priest. "What happened?" he said, shaking his head. "What happened? I just don't understand."

When we finally turned to Father Provost's situation, it was obvious that the three clergymen had been concerned that more might be disclosed about the priest's private sexual life. Would more charges be forthcoming? Had Father Provost been more than a voyeur? Had his looking ever developed into physical molestation?

When I asked Bishop Harrington directly, he said unequivocally that he had had no idea of Father Provost's problem. He had received no complaints from parents, nor had any adults come forward to say that Father Provost had taken similar liberties with them when they were young. The Bishop had learned about the problem the day after the police confronted the priest, and plans were immediately set in motion to send Father Provost to St. Luke. If anything, Bishop Harrington was surprised when the priest was indicted; after seven months with no action, he had concluded that there was insufficient evidence. He had hoped—prayed—that the incident would pass.

THE *Catholic Free Press*, the Worcester diocesan weekly newspaper, keeps a file of clippings on every priest. Before Father Provost's current dilemma was added to the clipping file, he appeared to have had a quite successful twenty years in the priesthood. While still a seminarian, he had been a respected chaplain at the Treasure Valley Boy Scout Reservation, in Paxton, where, according to a 1968 article, "the kids responded to Ronnie," a camp staff member said, and youngsters "yelled and screamed" at his every appearance. With thirty-three thousand dollars in federal funds, Father Provost had built a street-hockey rink in Fitchburg, north of Worcester. His teams were the national champions in 1980 and 1982. He was so beloved in a parish in Winchendon, on the northern edge of the diocese, that when word came from the diocese of his transfer to another church, after only a year there, fifteen hundred signatures were obtained in a protest drive, led by a teen-age boy. He bought and renovated antique fire engines and gave children rides. He took children on camping trips to the White Mountains or to Whalom Park, a nearby amusement park. And there was his philosophy of the priesthood, spelled out in a newspaper article: "Fire and brimstone is not the way today to keep the young close to God. In a society rife with alienation, the love and protection available from God and from doing good is the answer." Also included in his folder was a card listing the barest information about his family, his education, and his parish assignments. He had served ten parishes in twenty years. I was later told by one Church official that during that period no other parish priest in the Worcester diocese had been transferred more often.

Ronald Provost grew up in a second-floor apartment in a triple-decker in the working-class section of Worcester. Father James Hoey, who had been in the Boy Scouts with him from the time they attended St. Peter's grade school (he had also been the Provosts' paper boy), remembers a smiling mother, Laura Provost, but has no memory at all of Provost's father, John, who was a factory worker at American Steel & Wire. "I try to remember his father, and all I remember is a guy standing back from the door, in the shadows," Father Hoey told me last fall. There was a brother, Ken, three years younger, and two sisters. Father Hoey, now a pastor in Leominster, outside Worcester, and others who knew Provost as a young boy

recall him as obsessed with Scouting, in love with outdoor activities and camping. But he was never to be found at such mixed-company events as the frequent dances held at St. Peter's, which was the social, educational, and religious center of their young lives.

After high school, Provost worked for six years as a shipping clerk and counterman at an electrical-supply company. Then, in 1962, he was accepted into Holy Apostles Seminary, in Cromwell, Connecticut. His was considered a "late vocation"—something rare at that time, for most boys then went directly from high school to seminary. Father Peter Inzerillo, who was accepted as a seminarian the same year as Provost and later became a classmate of his at St. Bonaventure College, near Olean, New York, recalls, "There were no tests, mental or psychological, in those days. You just showed up at the cathedral on the designated Sunday and sat down with a priest. He asked you a few questions about why you wanted to become a priest and then opened his Breviary and asked you to read the Latin and translate it. There were really no questions about your family, and I'm sure the word 'sex' was not mentioned. All the better if you had never dated or had a serious relationship. You had shown yourself to be serious about preserving your vocation. What the standards were we didn't know. You were notified, and you went off to study."

Of his and Provost's seminary years together Father Inzerillo remembers "an agreeable, smiling guy who never said much in class," and says, "He didn't seem to be the best student. I guess he had problems keeping up with his studies. But he was very sincere. When we'd do our laundry, or something like that, we'd ask him to go for pizza with us, but he never seemed to want to do that. Looking back, I guess he was kind of a hit-and-run kind of guy—you never got below the surface with him. But, given the opportunity to go out and do a project with some kids, he'd be eager."

Father Hoey says, "Seminary training at the time really didn't help you grow up, or face anything in the real world. It was considered more a place to shield you, to preserve your vocation in the midst of an evil, secular world."

A person with access to Provost's personnel file says that if Provost's record at both seminaries revealed anything about the man or his future, it was concern about his immaturity. But seminary was a time to learn the intricacies of Catholic dogma and ritual, and a young man like Ronald Provost—so the thinking went in those days—would surely grow up in the priesthood. After all, he did not act out; he did not disobey rules.

In March, 1968, when Ronald Provost was in his second year at St. Bonaventure, a small item appeared at the bottom of an inside page of the Worcester *Telegram & Gazette*. Kenneth, Ronald's brother, who was then twenty-seven and was working in a factory, had been arrested on a "morals offense"—a newspaper euphemism that often indicated either indecent exposure or the indecent assault and battery of a minor. Such items were routinely accorded scant coverage, and there is no indication that the seminary or the Worcester chancery was aware that the accused was related to the seminarian Ronald Provost, who was so passionately interested in youth activities.

After his ordination, in 1970, Father Provost's first few parish assignments brought him under the authority of a series of pastors who were known to be quite demanding. This was a period of clerical hazing, a rite of passage for young priests, their boot camp. They were expected to develop a social life outside the rectory with priest friends of their own age to see them through these rocky days. But with these pastors a pattern was formed in Father Provost's life which would not be broken. "He was the kind of priest who drove the old-style pastors nuts," says Father George Lange, who served with Provost at St. Mary's in Southbridge, on the outskirts of Worcester. "He was always out of the rectory, doing kids' things—stickball, Scouts, trips—and kids were calling day and night for Father Ron. We had some antiques in the attic at St. Mary's, and he was selling them to get money for stickball. Our pastor, Monsignor James Gilrain, went through the roof. All these activities with the kids would have gone down easier if he had done his parish stuff, too. But he didn't. He was getting a reputation in the diocese as a guy who didn't do his share." Bob Feen, who served with Father Provost at a parish in Fitchburg (and has since left the priesthood), says, "He had his own agenda, and it never involved Catholic Youth Organization stuff or the classic Catholic activities; his work was largely outside the church. He was busy all the time. I remember him one night mailing out a hundred and twenty-seven cards to Scouts from the previous summer's camp and complaining that he had a hundred and thirty-six more to do. He always seemed at odds with authority, but with kids he was comfortable, relaxed—that is, until they reached about fifteen. Then he wouldn't have anything to do with them."

A priest who served in one of Father Provost's early parishes remembers feeling discomfort as he watched Father Provost standing behind one of the parish boys and massaging the boy's head. "When it happened the first time, I didn't think much of it. But then it happened over and over again. I felt squeamish. But what was I going to say? It was so embarrassing that you almost didn't want to look, and yet you didn't know what to say, so you avoided the guy. A thing like that distances priests from one another."

The quick transfers from his early parishes seem not to have been prompted by any reported impropriety but instead by the pastors' reactions to him: they apparently found the young priest distant and difficult to live with, so obsessed with youth activities that his other work suffered. And yet Father Provost's personnel file shows nothing of the kind. No calls from irate pastors were recorded. Letter after letter attesting to Father Provost's excellent work with young people accumulated. Anyone going through his file would conclude that he was a model priest.

By 1979, when Father Provost reached Our Lady of Mount Carmel–St. Ann, in Worcester, he had been a priest for nine years. Here, pornographic pictures of young boys were inadvertently discovered in Father Provost's room. This incident was supposedly reported to the diocese, but no mention of it can be found in Father Provost's personnel file. At this time, Father Provost began visits to the House of Affirmation, in Whitinsville, a small town outside Worcester. The House of Affir-

mation, a treatment and therapy center, was co-founded in 1973 by Father Thomas Kane. (It was closed in 1989, after thousands of dollars in operating funds were found to be missing, and Father Kane has recently been named in a civil suit charging that he molested a nine-year-old boy, Mark Barry. Barry, now thirty-four, also charges that Kane not only had sex with him at the House of Affirmation but arranged for him to have sex with another priest and a therapist there.) The House of Affirmation was staffed by both clerical and secular therapists and counsellors, and offered both in-patient and out-patient treatment to priests, nuns, and religious brothers who were having problems, which might range from crises of faith about their vocation to drug and alcohol abuse and child molestation. The House of Affirmation promised its clients confidentiality. The reason for Father Provost's treatment, its duration, and its result are not part of his personnel record.

At the time, pedophilia among priests—while rarely revealed to the

public and never openly discussed by Church officials—was actually a well-known phenomenon in many clerical circles. But it was looked upon as a matter not of pathology but of immorality—a failing, but one not nearly on a par with sexual involvement with women. The priest-pedophile was asked to repent his sin—perhaps to make a retreat, or to seek help at a place like the House of Affirmation—and then was reassigned to a tough pastor, who could keep him in line. No thought was given to any extended treatment. As for the young victims, they were viewed almost as inanimate objects or else were looked upon as sources of temptation for a consecrated servant of God. "They're kids, they don't know anything about sex, they'll forget about it," an archbishop told me, sadly recalling the attitude prevalent at the time.

In the Worcester of twenty years ago, I have been told, if a priest had any sexual problems or was involved in a compromising incident—even if it involved an arrest—the diocese could prevail upon the local papers not to write about it and upon the district attorney's office not to prosecute. To reveal a priest's shortcomings was akin to blasphemy in the eyes of diocesan officials, and they were ever vigilant against such disclosures. Clerical *omertà* was a given. One Worcester priest recalls an altar boy's coming to him: "The kid was shaking. This was very hard for him to do—to tell on Father. He said one of the other priests had taken out a comb and was simulating combing his pubic hairs. The kid knew that it was wrong—but the thing was, it wasn't *that* wrong. The boy was wise enough not to let it go by. Of course, now we know that that is a prelude to a further seduction of the kid. Anyhow, I went in to the bishop and told him. He turned it right back on me. Was I having difficulty getting along with this priest? What was the state of my soul that I could cast such a judgment? Dismissal is the most effective tool for silencing someone. It worked—I never said another word about this guy. He was later arrested for molesting a boy."

Father Provost moved on, creating a legend for himself—not only with all his youth activities but by the cards he sent out, to all the Worcester priests on their birthdays and to all his young parish-

ioners on theirs. Even children in his former parishes heard from him on their birthdays. He never failed to attend clergy retreats, and eagerly engaged priests in conversation at the social hour. "It was obvious that he wanted companionship, but it was hard to sustain a conversation with him," Father Lange says. "It was always about street hockey or baseball cards."

Another story about Father Provost that became widely known in the diocese was his annual observance of his grandmother's birthday. He never mentioned his parents, both of whom died not long after his ordination, but each year, according to one priest I talked to, he would have a Mass and a rectory birthday party for his grandmother, cake and all. This wouldn't have been unusual—many priests relish their strong family ties, especially because they lead such an itinerant life—except that his grandmother, too, had been dead for years.

When, in 1983, Father Provost was assigned the post of chaplain at Saint Vincent Hospital, a large Catholic facility in Worcester, any priest knowledgeable about diocesan transfers would have suspected that something was wrong. "His whole life was street hockey, and all of a sudden he's at the hospital—you wonder what's up," says Father Robert Keresey, the pastor of Christ the King Church in Worcester, who had once been the diocese's vocations director. Father Jack Gallagher, a member of the Order of St. Camillus, whose mission is to work with the sick, says, "The drunks, the misfits—if you couldn't find anyplace else for them, they were too often made chaplains; in those days, we got a lot of them. But Ronnie was amazing. He'd run off copies of these soppy Helen Steiner Rice poems and start on the top floor and work his way down, handing them out. He'd cover all six hundred and twenty beds in a day, and some days do half of them again. It was his idea of visiting people. We worked four days off and four days on at Saint Vincent. In his four days off, he was still running the street hockey. I remember one day he had given a woman a ride to the hospital and she arrived to find that her husband had died. 'Jack, I can't believe it,' he told me afterward. 'She cried and cried and wouldn't stop.' I told him I spent an hour, maybe an hour and a half with a person after a loved one died. He was amazed. 'What do you *say*, Jack?' he asked me. Then, there was the time in the emergency room. This Italian woman was dying. Ron walked in, pulled out his book, and, without saying a word to the woman, or to her daughters, standing at the bedside, began reading the anointing prayers. The daughters came up on either side of him and put their arms through his, just trying to make some contact at this very special moment. I could see the prayer book begin shaking in his hands. 'Get these women off me!' he yelled. I wondered, What the hell is wrong with this guy?"

Father Keresey says, "There is a theory of ongoing transformation and growth for priests, where you can correct your shortcomings, where you can learn to do better. But it's a joke. Unless you do it on your own, it doesn't happen. There is no structure to encourage you, or to bolster you. Listen, these are tough days to be a priest. Most of the time we feel pretty much alone out here." Informal support groups and prayer groups for priests did form in the Worcester diocese in the late seventies and early eighties. Some priests remembered seeing Father Provost at one or two meetings, but after that he drifted away.

Other dioceses began to institute procedures by which parishioners could periodically offer an evaluation of their priests, and clergy were called upon for their assessments of fellow-priests, but, according to several priests, Bishop

Harrington steadfastly sided with his presbyterial council, which opposed such evaluations. "When the people had a lousy priest, they had no place to go," a Worcester priest said. "And when we saw stuff we didn't like, what the hell could we do? Go in and have it turned back on us?" Whenever an accusation or a rumor arose about sexual misconduct with children, the diocesan procedure was to insist that the accuser face the accused—that the child be forced to confront the priest. The well-being of parishioners was categorically set aside in favor of a strictly legalistic approach that presumed a priest's innocence and doubted the child's veracity.

IN 1988, Father Provost, with eighteen years' seniority, was in the zone for becoming a pastor. He had previously been passed over, and most of his 1970 classmates had been given their own churches. Once again, his file was presented for consideration to the diocesan personnel board. Though he had been moved frequently, his record contained no formal complaints, no allegations of impropriety. As the board attempted to balance the ever smaller number of priests with the ever larger number of Catholics needing pastors, the bottom line was not "Why?" but "Why not?"

The board members were confronted with a man who had clearly demonstrated problems with interpersonal relations, who had difficulties getting along with his pastors and fellow-priests, and yet was comfortable in the company of young boys—never girls or older teenagers or adults.

"There were what we called 'ghosts' all around Ronnie—rumors—but we had nothing specific on him," one priest told me. "At a time like that, priests ask themselves, 'Am I going to cast the first stone?' We didn't want to turn into a police state, running down everything we heard about him."

And the "ghosts" were many. It was on young boys that Father Provost was now focussing his attention exclusively—and, many who knew him felt, inappropriately. There were rarely any other adult leaders on his outings. And he had taken trips to Disney World with only two or three boys.

Father Inzerillo offers a view of seminary days that seems to pertain to ordained life as well: "Unless it's broken, we don't fix it. When it's cracked, we just patch it up instead of taking it out of service." And Father Keresey says, "I don't want to cast any judgment upon Father Provost, but in any other business he would have been fired long ago."

Moving a priest from parish to parish is known to undermine both his sense of place and his confidence. Giving Father Provost a parish of his own was seen as a way of restoring both to him. "He'll be the boss out there; that should improve his confidence," one diocesan official said as the decision was made to give Father Provost a parish. "Maybe he'll grow up out there," another member of the personnel board added of this now fifty-year-old priest. Indicating its reservations about Father Provost, the personnel board appointed him administrator, rather than pastor, of his new church. This is a step taken in approximately twenty per cent of pastoral appointments, and is meant to make sure that the priest is up to the job and will mesh with the congregation. Canon law prohibits a pastor from being removed without cause—due process must be observed—so bishops are wary of putting a pastor's mantle upon shoulders they are not sure can bear the weight. "I just hope he doesn't turn it into an amusement park out there," one board member commented. "But let's give him a year and see how he does. He can't do too much harm."

Bishop Harrington—the member of the personnel board who had the greatest reservations about Father Provost—was finally won over by his colleagues.

MANY people, both inside and outside the Catholic Church, wonder about the role that the vow of celibacy plays in encouraging—or, at least, sheltering—pedophile priests. Discussion on this subject is emotionally charged and frequently lacks sound evidence, but it is possible to approach the question clinically. Dr. Frank Valcour, the medical director of the St. Luke Institute, who has treated hundreds of

priests with pedophiliac tendencies, told me, "The sexually underdeveloped person may be drawn to a profession where celibacy is a given. The priesthood can be a safe place for such persons, where they will not be called upon to develop sexually—where, in fact, they may even be rewarded for not developing a sexual identity." In some cases, priests may rationalize that becoming heterosexually involved is a direct violation of their vow of celibacy and a threat to their priesthood, while sexual acts with a child, though wrong, are forgivable and are somehow not as great a sin.

Dr. Fred Berlin, the head of a team at the Johns Hopkins Hospital which treats sexual disorders, believes that living under the mandate of celibacy may actually prevent a pedophile from expressing his sexuality in a more normal manner, leaving him to act out with children. Vincent Bilotta, a Worcester-area psychologist who has treated priests with pedophilia and other problems, says, "Too many men—with the best of intentions—have been ordained and then sent off to slaughter. Many have come through seminaries that were repressive and sexually dysfunctional; they find that the ongoing formation they were promised is nonexistent; they live an itinerant life, going from parish to parish, living with men with whom they may have nothing in common. They live with extraordinary stress, and, as is true of anyone in stress, their bodies ache to be relieved. And here are these young kids, who look up to the priest with great esteem and admiration, who offer direct access to emotional contact. It makes perfect sense—and is a tragedy—that a priest would turn to children."

These days, priests who have been accused of child abuse—and those rare priests who come forward and admit their problem—are treated primarily at two institutions: the Servants of the Paraclete, in Jemez Springs, New Mexico (which allows priests in treatment to serve local parishes; several priests who stayed there are now accused or under indictment in New Mexico on pedophilia charges), and the St. Luke Institute, where Father Provost was sent. At St. Luke, priests receive individual and group therapy, and participate in psychodramas in which they reënact both their acts of molestation and the traumatic moments of their formative years which might have caused their pedophilia. "These are articulate men, used to talking their way around things, and that must stop if they are to be helped," says Dr. Valcour. "They have to admit what they did. They also have to identify with their victims, to see the harm they have caused. Morality is often a defense: 'I went to confession about this.' That's not good enough."

The impact of priest pedophilia, both on the individuals affected and on the institution of the Church, has been devastating. All cases of sexual abuse of children by adults involve the misuse of authority, of course, but in the case of priests the authority misused is exceptionally powerful. One priest who had a young boy routinely perform oral sex on him would give him absolution from the sin while the boy was still on his knees. Another priest told a boy while fondling him that what he did was "an expression of God's love" and that "God is blessing this act." A third priest told his young victims, "I am God's instrument and God wants you to have pleasure right now, in this way." A woman has charged that as a girl she told Father James Porter in the confessional that a boy had touched her immodestly; Porter is alleged to have insisted on a demonstration and to have taken the girl into his section of the confessional and fondled her. Priests have admitted to scanning the congregation for child sex objects while saying Mass and ejaculating while at the altar. "Sex clubs" at which young boys were passed from priest to priest have been discovered in New York State and in Canada; others are rumored to have existed in South Bend and other cities.

There are thousands upon thousands

of boys and girls, scarred men and women, whose bodies have been invaded and whose self-worth has been destroyed by perhaps the most revered and trusted adult in their young lives. (An active pedophile may have dozens of victims and may abuse some of them continually over an extended period.) Sexually abused children are often fearful and uncommunicative; a few commit suicide. Adults who were sexually abused as children have higher than average rates of substance abuse, divorce, and mental illness. Some of them molest children in turn.

A recent study by Stephen Rossetti, a priest and psychologist who is now on the staff at St. Luke, shows that revelations of priests having abused children are a major factor in the recent steep decline in American Catholics' confidence in their Church. Catholics trust their priests less, and are less inclined to want their sons to be altar boys or priests. An overwhelming majority believe that the Church has not been honest with them about priests' sexual abuse of children, and has not dealt with the problem forthrightly. "Pedophilia is the lightning rod for disaffected Catholics who find their Church unresponsive or their priests inadequate," Father Rossetti told me. "When people read of abuse by a priest, it is seen as the abuse not of a single priest but of the entire Church."

Every bishop in America is painfully aware of the existence of not only the convicted but also the accused and the suspected pedophiles among his priests. But the bishop faces a conundrum unlike any confronting an employer in the secular world. A priest is a priest forever; his bishop must provide him with work, or simply provide for him, forever. In addition, a public revelation of a priest who is only suspected, and not actually accused, of abusing children could open the diocese to a civil suit for defamation of character. And, because ordained priests are becoming something of an endangered species, any bishop is reluctant to remove a priest from the active ministry.

There are smaller, less publicized losses as well. Priests now almost routinely avoid talking privately with children, because of the charged atmosphere, or they keep office doors wide open if youngsters are with them. "A mother came to me and asked that I take her son under my wing, because the couple had separated and the father was giving the boy a hard time," Father Hoey told me. "Before all this, I would have had the kid come in on Saturdays and help around the church, and then I'd go out and have a hamburger with him, and let him talk. Now? Impossible."

For Catholics of my generation, who came of age in the fifties, it was not uncommon to see a priest walking around the church grounds with girls and boys holding on to his hands or his cassock as he tousled a head of hair or pulled on a ponytail. No longer. Last fall, as I sat with Father Jack Siciliano, who now serves in St. Peter's, Father Provost's old parish, he looked out mournfully over Main Street at an area that over the years has become poorer and is now home largely to minority families. "Many of these kids need a male role model, and they need to be touched, they need to be hugged," he said. "I just can't do it anymore."

If a child needs that physical affection, so does Father—who has vowed never to be a real father. A priest's work with children and young people—the healthy, normal, productive sublimation of his generative drive—must now be curtailed, self-censored. Ordinary, everyday touches and hugs, which were once a legitimate expression of his physicalness, are now denied him.

At nine o'clock on the morning of October 28th, Father Provost appeared in court as his lawyer, James Reardon, filed a petition to dismiss the charges against him, contending insufficient evidence. With that vague smile on his face, Father Provost made his way through the courthouse crowd, his gaze fixed on some distant point on the ceiling. In less than ten minutes, his court appearance was over. November 18th was agreed upon as the date to hear arguments on the motion to dismiss.

A motion to dismiss is a customary legal tactic, a preëmptive strike at the heart of the prosecution's case. Reardon, in a brief, argued that the evidence did not fall under the Commonwealth's applicable pornography statute. "The photographs which form the basis for the indictment do not display a minor in the state of nudity. . . . It is also important to note that none of the photographs demonstrate any frontal nudity on the part of the minor. Nor is the underwear which the minor is wearing translucent, or in any way less than opaque."

I flipped through the document to Exhibit A, a copy of the indictment. There, for anyone who cared to consult the public record, was the name of the ten-year-old boy whom Father Provost photographed that January day at the public pool in Gardner. Exhibits B through M were the photographs of the boy, arranged three to a page. The original color prints had been photocopied in black-and-white, so the collection had an added starkness. The pictures were now streaked with black lines, and virtually all contrast had been lost. There was the boy listed in the indictment, his expression denied any nuance, his features just blobs and lines, almost like the elements of a caricature. In the first picture, Exhibit B, he stands with his back to the camera, hands on hips, his face grinning in profile, his buttocks clearly exposed above cotton jockey briefs, which have been pulled down. Exhibit C presents a similar picture. In Exhibit D, the boy turns full face and grimaces. His briefs are now pulled up. His right middle finger pokes out over the edge of his underwear in a "Fuck you" gesture. The next three pictures depict the boy looking wistful and pensive, and still wearing only his briefs. In Exhibit H, the finger pokes up from his briefs. Exhibit I is another middle-finger shot; this time it is a blurry white mass, defiantly thrust into the air, shoulder high. In Exhibit J, the boy looks as though he were jogging. K is another middle-finger shot, this one in profile. In Exhibit L, the boy is making peace signs with two fingers of each hand. In the final picture, Exhibit M, he poses as a muscle

man, his scrawny arms and taut leg muscles rigidly flexed.

From the newspaper description of the photographs on which the charge against Father Provost was based—and from his own unsolicited comment to me on the phone—I had assumed them to be a series of quickly snapped candids, photo opportunities unobtrusively and casually exploited by a man who sought to add a new erotic jewel to the treasure chest in his rectory bedroom. But these twelve pictures were hardly that. There had been an interchange—spoken or unspoken—between photographer and subject. There had been encouragement to go on.

Questions flooded my mind. Where were the other boys? None were shown in the photographs. How had the priest managed to separate this boy from the others? And what had gone on between priest and boy to produce this many poses, to allow time for the flash to recycle, for underwear to be put on, yanked down, and then pulled back into place? The pity I once felt for Father Provost turned to something else. I have two boys of my own, seven and nine years old. They had trusted Father Provost—and I had trusted him with them. Had Father Provost not been confronted on that January evening, that face looking up at me through the photocopied photograph could have been a son of mine.

On November 18th, the motion to dismiss was argued by James Reardon's son Gavin before Judge James Donohue. Gavin Reardon's defense was a narrow and highly technical one, centering on the claim that the photographs the priest had taken of the young boy did not constitute a pornographic portrayal as the statute defines the term, because there was no frontal nudity depicted. Judge Donohue's frequent shifting in his leather chair and his pointed, impatient questions signalled the outcome. The motion was denied. The trial date was set for December 21st.

In the weeks before Father Provost's trial was to begin, the swirl of allegations of sexual abuse by priests continued as national news. In the Diocese of Worcester, they became almost epidemic. Father Justin Steponaitis, a former Worcester parish priest, and Father Victor Frobas, who had served a Worcester parish years before while receiving treatment at the House of Affirmation, were accused of molesting young boys; Fathers Joseph Fredette and David Holley were formally charged in multicount indictments with sexually abusing many young boys. These allegations and charges prompted still more parishioners to come forward to tell of their own abuse as youngsters. (The priest who had told me earlier of the altar boy who complained about a priest's suggestively combing the outside of his trousers now identified the priest as Holley, whose inappropriate behavior he had tried to report years before.) Father Robert Kelley, of Gardner, fifteen miles north of Worcester, who received a five-to-seven-year prison sentence, in 1990, for repeatedly molesting and raping a girl, beginning when she was ten and continuing over the next two years, was now eligible for parole. Not only did his victim come out publicly to oppose any leniency but four more women came forward to claim that Kelley had also molested them when they were children. Yet another priest, Monsignor Leo Battista, of Worcester, was accused by a nun, who had gone to him for counselling, of exploiting her sexually—she claimed that on one occasion he had sex with her just after she attempted suicide.

The diocese responded to this spate of cases by publishing chancery phone numbers that could be called to report suspected child abuse. Bishop Harrington proclaimed that no child abuser would be assigned to parish work, but that promise, while welcome, seemed hollow to many priests and lay people in Worcester. Obviously, no convicted child molester would be assigned to a parish, but what of other priests, who only had "ghosts"? The burden of proof was still on the victim. And, while the diocese promised an approach that was "personal and pastoral," no offers of counselling or therapy to alleged victims, including the boy Father Provost had photographed, were forthcoming.

All the stories of sexual molestation by priests were on the front pages of the Worcester *Telegram & Gazette*. But another case, also scheduled for December 21st in Worcester Superior Court, barely merited a mention on an inside page. Kenneth Provost, Father Ronald's fifty-one-year-old brother, who in June had been convicted of indecent assault on a young boy and had

• •

been sentenced to serve two and a half years in the Massachusetts Correctional Institute, had appealed the conviction and was scheduled to appear in court that day. The tragic coincidence did not end with the fact that both Provost brothers could theoretically be in court on the same day for morals offenses concerning children; Kenneth Provost had been arrested just six days after Father Provost's picture-taking at the Gardner pool in January, 1992. James Reardon, who naturally wanted to prevent his client from being tainted by his brother's case, was able to have Father Provost's court date rescheduled, for January 28th.

Kenneth Provost, free pending appeal, had accompanied his brother on his court appearances, but the priest—whose picture had appeared numerous times in the local paper—was not on hand to sit with his brother on December 21st. After an unusually long conference with Joseph Brennan, Kenneth's lawyer, and with Mary Gecewicz, the assistant district attorney who was prosecuting the priest's case (she handles a substantial share of the child-abuse docket), Judge Timothy Hillman emerged from his chambers to formally accept a plea bargain that had been struck. His face was flushed; he appeared to be fuming.

What went into that plea bargain—by which a two-and-a-half-year jail sentence became two years of probation—is indicative of what happens in numerous child-abuse cases. Kenneth Provost had been accused of four counts of rape and one of indecent assault of a boy under sixteen, and he was eventually convicted on the indecent-assault charge. (These assaults had occurred in Kenneth's house, where Father Provost later came to live after he returned from St. Luke and was awaiting trial.) In the process of Kenneth's appeal, the victim would have to retell the details of the assaults, which had taken place between July, 1988, and September, 1991, when the boy was between ten and thirteen years old. At the time of the appeal, the boy—who the prosecution maintained at the trial had suffered severe psychological damage from the abuse—had been in a psychiatric hospital for a year. Plagued by depression and having attempted suicide on more than one occasion, he was considered by the prosecution to be a shaky witness at best. Furthermore, his doctors said, his ongoing treatment could be jeopardized by an appearance in court, in which he would have to relive the attacks. Hence the plea bargain was struck.

From the bench, Judge Hillman, whose disposition on the bench is typically that of a bemused and patient uncle, addressed Kenneth Provost in short, choppy sentences, his voice edged with a barely contained anger. The defendant was not to go near the victim, his family, or other young children; his probation would be strictly supervised; and, as a condition of proba-

tion, Judge Hillman demanded that he attend group-counselling sessions for convicted sex offenders who still deny their guilt.

In preparation for disposing of such a case, the court often orders for itself a standardized evaluation for aid in sentencing, known in courthouse shorthand as 15(e). This was done in Kenneth Provost's case. The evaluator noted that Kenneth was a defensive subject who claimed to have no sexual interests, was fearful of the many diseases he believed women carried, and said he confined his erotic life to masturbating over pictures of women. The 15(e) went on to paint a picture of Kenneth Provost as a man who unequivocally denied that he had abused the boy, maintained that he was actually helping the troubled youth, and claimed that if anything had happened it was inadvertent, an accident. Reference was made to his brother, Ronald, during the evaluation. Another family member had portrayed both Provost brothers as victims—they were being persecuted for doing good, for helping others.

A YEAR and two weeks after Father Provost took the pictures in the swimming-pool locker room, his trial was finally at hand. On January 28th, shortly before ten o'clock, Father Provost stood to answer a series of questions intended to insure that he understood, in waiving his right to be tried by a six-member jury, that he would be found guilty or not by one man—his interlocutor of the moment, Judge Daniel Toomey. Father Provost's eyes were red-rimmed, and a tongue of hair that had escaped his combing projected from the back of his head. He answered in a quiet and even voice that he was taking medication—Elavil, Prozac, and Depo-Provera (the first two drugs are antidepressants, and the other is a sex-drive suppressant)—and that they did not impair his ability to understand the proceedings. After hearing the opening arguments, Judge Toomey called the first witness. His name rang through the high-ceilinged courtroom. The tall, wide doors at the rear of the chamber swung open to reveal a small boy, blinking as he moved from the dim corridor into the brightly lit room. A television camera from the local cable station recorded his promise, as he raised his right hand, to tell the truth and then followed him to the witness stand. Dressed in dark trousers, a white shirt, and a dark tie, wearing his dark blond hair in a mushroom cut, the boy who had appeared in Exhibits B through M as an aggressive participant seemed in person more like a choirboy. He stood up straight, his hands behind his back, and began to answer the questions of the prosecutor, Mary Gecewicz.

His voice was so low that the judge leaned forward and James Reardon moved to the edge of the empty jury box to hear his answers. The St. Joseph's youth group had gone for a swim, the boy said, and after a while he wanted to change into his street clothes. Father Provost, who had a camera strung around his neck, with which he had taken a few pictures in the pool area, accompanied him to the locker room. The boy asked the priest to hold a towel so that he could dress in private. The priest at first held the towel, shielding him (although there was no one else nearby), but then folded the towel over his arm and raised the camera to eye level. He began to take pictures.

The boy testified that on seeing the camera he had "posed" for the priest and had "mooned." He said that the priest had not spoken to him while taking the pictures. After the man who was lifting weights happened to walk by and confronted the priest, the boy had dressed quickly. On his way out of the pool, he had said something to Father Provost. The boy testified, "I told him that he'd better throw away those pictures."

"And what did he respond to you, if anything?" Gecewicz asked the boy.

"He said, 'Don't worry, I will.' "

James Reardon chose not to cross-examine the boy.

In the afternoon, as the boy sat with his relatives in the courtroom, a string of other witnesses provided the necessary backdrop to the alleged crime. The boy's mother, dressed entirely in black, testified that she had taken her other son to a wrestling match, and had returned home late in the evening of January 11, 1992, before her younger son came back from the swimming pool. He had said nothing of the picture-taking. As she left the witness stand, fists clenched, the

woman stared fixedly at Father Provost, and as she passed by the defense table where he sat she rapped her knuckles angrily on the table in front of him.

The weight lifter, Leo Nass, testified that the string of picture-taking had seemed wrong to him, and that he had confronted Father Provost, who had angrily maintained that the boy was dressed.

Detective Sergeant Richard Morrissey, who had investigated the matter, told again how Father Provost had meekly and voluntarily brought the camera, containing the undeveloped film, to the police station, and had then gone with him back to the rectory. There he had led the detective to the mantel near his bed. On it was a large brown envelope containing a collection of photographs of young boys, in various states of dress and undress, which he had taken over the years. According to the detective, who had informed Father Provost of his rights, the priest "said that he did have a problem, that he'd had it for about twenty years, and he said that ten years ago he was—"

At this point, James Reardon rose quickly to object. Morrissey could possibly be ready to allude to or openly reveal Father Provost's therapy at the House of Affirmation, which he underwent after the pictures were found at the Mount Carmel rectory. Such a revelation would show a pattern of child pornography—a pattern that no lawyer would want established.

The judge asked Gecewicz what she anticipated the response would be.

"I expect his response to be that Father Provost indicated to Sergeant Morrissey that about ten years ago he was summoned to the bishop's office about his problem, and that he was sent away for treatment. No more specifics than that."

After a meeting at the bench with the judge and the prosecutor, Reardon returned to the defense table. Judge Toomey sustained the objection; Morrissey was instructed to address only the specifics of the charge before the court.

While the witnesses testified, Father Provost sat immobile, his head at an angle, his stare fixed on a faraway corner of the room. He looked neither at the witnesses nor at Reardon, and Reardon spoke not at all to his client.

Later in the afternoon, as Gecewicz attempted to have entered as evidence the more than a hundred pictures confiscated from Father Provost's room, Reardon again rose to object. Another conference at the bench followed, and again Judge Toomey sustained the objection: the collection of pictures had no bearing on the single count of posing a child in the nude for which the priest was being tried.

In midafternoon, all the witnesses having been called, the trial was adjourned for the day; closing arguments were scheduled for the next day at 2 P.M. At the defense table, Reardon was cautiously optimistic. The day had gone as well as he could have hoped: the boy had used the word "posed"; neither Father Provost's earlier treatment nor the hundred pictures had been allowed in the record. James Reardon had successfully isolated those two or three minutes of picture-taking in Gardner as though they were a single, aberrant—even accidental—episode in Father Provost's life. When a reporter asked why Reardon had opted not to have a jury, he answered with a guffaw. He is a huge man, with the look of a younger Tip O'Neill. "They would have convicted the defendant *and* his lawyer," he said.

The next afternoon, the defense counsel moved for a required finding of not guilty, claiming that the evidence and the testimony presented had shown that Father Provost meant no malice, and that, in fact, the boy had voluntarily posed for him. There were no sex acts depicted, the boy was not placed on a bed in a suggestive pose, he said. No, Gecewicz countered angrily, but there was lascivious intent. The motion was

overruled; the decision was near. Only the closing arguments remained.

Mary Gecewicz, a large woman with tinted blond hair surrounding a girlish face, had been a meticulous prosecutor, sometimes making her case ploddingly, certainly with none of the ease and flamboyance of James Reardon. Now she became impassioned, demanding vengeance for a crime visited upon a young boy by a person he had grown to trust. "Father Provost, Your Honor, picked and chose his photos," she said. "He saw the boy undressing. He saw the boy putting on his underwear. He saw his genitals hanging out and he snapped the photos." In a hushed voice, she continued, "He *used* him, he encouraged him. . . . Your Honor, I ask you to look at those photos. They speak for themselves." She held up eight-by-ten-inch blowups of the pictures, declaring, "That boy—when he's pulling down his underwear with his buttocks exposed . . . with his underwear on, it's pushed to the side where you clearly can see his genitals—that boy is not fully clothed, Your Honor." In his summation, Reardon, although his narrow, technical defense had been virtually perfect, stated that because of the attendant publicity of the Provost case "I know we have the heavy oar." He went on to lay out the specifics of the pornography statute, and, looking at the judge, whom he has known for years, he said, "I would say to you were you and I to have some coffee in the days when lawyers would talk about things like that . . . we would have to say that there must be in your mind, sir . . . there must be some reasonable doubt in this."

Once the summations were over, Judge Toomey took no time to ponder his decision. The defendant was asked to stand. Father Provost supported himself with his extended fingers, which shook, resting upon the table before him. Judge Toomey handed a sheet to the clerk, and the clerk read, "The defendant, Ronald Provost, is guilty as charged." Father Provost stood in place, swaying slightly, his eyes momentarily darting from side to side, as if he had been struck and sought to regain his bearings. The only audible noise came from the boy's parents and grandparents—a release of pent-up breath. They reached out to hug each other.

Before sentencing, the boy's father, as was permitted by Massachusetts law, read an "impact statement" that his wife had written, which bitterly castigated the priest, told of the horrors of the past year and of the therapy their son was now undergoing, and concluded by saying, "I feel that every time he looked and photographed my son, he was raping him with his eyes."

The boy's head, which had bowed slightly when the defense counsel spoke of his willingness to pose, and had drooped still further as Mary Gecewicz thrust the blowups into the air for all to see, now trembled slightly. He was crying. Father Provost's glazed eyes appeared to be focussed on some point outside the room. Gecewicz asked for a sentence of ten years in prison, Reardon for a period of probation and for time in which to produce Father Provost's reports from St. Luke and to document his need for continuing therapy—therapy that could best be had outside prison.

TWO weeks later, in still another courtroom—which had a full-sized reproduction of Michelangelo's statue of Moses as lawgiver guarding its portals—Father Ronald Provost was sentenced to ten years in the Massachusetts Correctional Institute at West Concord, with five years of the sentence suspended outright and the other five years to be a period of probation. Father Provost was not to go near this child or any child under sixteen; his future employment would have to be cleared with his probation officer; and he was to continue his outpatient therapy. James Reardon had assured the court that his client would never function again as a priest. (Provost has now filed an appeal of his conviction.)

But Father Provost was a free man. And, although he would not function as a priest, by canon law

he was still considered a priest and as such would receive his full pay from the Diocese of Worcester.

As Father Provost left the courtroom, the mother of the boy confronted him before the statue of Moses. "At least you could have said you're sorry. Sorry! Do you hear me?" she said, her smoldering eyes fixed on the priest.

Father Provost gave that vague smile I had seen so many times. "I'd love to apologize," he said, his voice flat. But he did not. He hurried past her to join Reardon down the hall.

DESPITE the sorry fact that Father Provost's case is but a minor ripple on a storm-tossed sea of allegations, indictments, and trials which the Catholic Church faces these days, it would have been reassuring to hear that my local church was at last honestly facing the reality of child molestation by its priests. (The Archdiocese of New York, which appears to have had comparatively few cases of child abuse, did take a decisive first step last week, when John Cardinal O'Connor summoned all archdiocesan parish priests—more than a thousand—to a two-day meeting on the problem.)

But, in an illustration of the Diocese of Worcester's unwillingness to deal forthrightly with this issue, its report of Father Provost's conviction was relegated to a page-five story in the *Catholic Free Press* headlined "SENTENCING SET IN PHOTO INCIDENT." On the front page of the paper was the announcement of a twenty-fifth-anniversary celebration in June of Timothy Harrington's consecration as bishop; Auxiliary Bishop Rueger and Monsignor Tinsley were to be the coördinators, the story said. Another story announced a planning meeting of Worcester priests, at which they would first try to determine "what it means to be a priest in the Worcester diocese" and then, it was hoped, move on to "begin to address the needs of the Church as a whole."

Those needs at the moment do not include a public apology to that young boy and his family, or an offer to pay for his therapy as he tries to sort out what has happened to him.

According to his family, he now runs away from home when frustrated; formerly an open and accepting child, he now fears adult strangers, and fantasizes that they are murderers and robbers.

The Church that claimed moral authority over his life ultimately resorted to protecting itself *from* him in a court of secular law. A priest who each Sunday had proclaimed the word of God from a pulpit—and asked us to be bound by it—had sat mute throughout his trial. A civil suit naming Father Provost and Bishop Harrington was filed in the wake of the criminal conviction. The suit, which asks for unspecified monetary damages, alleges that the priest "had informed the Diocese prior to his having committed the complained-of acts that he recognized that he had a psychiatric problem and needed assistance in dealing with it," but that "the Diocese did not take sufficient action to safeguard the general public and the minor plaintiff from harm."

The Sunday after Father Provost was sentenced, as the factory workers, farmers, secretaries, teachers, housewives, and computer-firm employees who make up our small parish gathered for Mass, I walked down into the basement room at St. Augustine's. There, on the wall, Father Provost's photograph was still in place, his vague smile directed not at us but at a point somewhere over our heads. His last words to that anguished, frustrated mother as he was about to walk free were still haunting me: "I'd love to apologize." His photograph and those words seemed an apt metaphor for the way many of us perceive the Catholic Church in these distressing times: distant, unconnected, not meeting its people eye to eye; pretending that somehow the embarrassments of the moment will pass, and the Church will once again reign supreme, without being called upon to confess its own sins and do something about them. ♦