

Father Albert T. Kostelnick

During Anthony Bevilacqua's tenure as Archbishop of Philadelphia, the Archdiocese received reports that Fr. Albert T. Kostelnick, ordained in 1954, had sexually molested at least 16 young girls. Father Kostelnick was accused of fondling the breasts and genitals of girls ages 6 to 15, and fondling a slightly older girl as she lay in traction in the hospital. The reports to Cardinal Bevilacqua began in July 1988, with notice that there had been several earlier reports. Yet the Cardinal did not remove Fr. Kostelnick from parish ministry until May 2002. By that time, as the priest later admitted to the Archdiocesan Review Board, he had "fondled . . . many girls over a lengthy period of time."

The Archdiocese is warned in 1988 that Father Kostelnick is fondling young girls but, despite promises, takes no action.

On July 19, 1988, Vice Chancellor Joseph Pepe recorded being told by Fr. Joseph J. Gallagher, an assistant pastor at Saint Mark Church in Bristol, that he was concerned about his pastor, Fr. Albert Kostelnick, "and his alleged problems with fondling of children." Father Gallagher referred to an incident from January 1987, when a parent had reported the pastor's behavior to police. As later recorded, "[t]he [1987] allegation was that Father Kostelnick fondled [an eight year old] girl in an offensive manner." The police referred the abuse case to the Bucks County District Attorney, but charges were not pursued. Father Gallagher told Fr. Pepe that he had heard that Fr. Kostelnick, a year and a half later, "was still imprudent in his actions." In addition to recording Fr. Gallagher's general report of what the assistant pastor had heard, Fr. Pepe also wrote that Fr. Gallagher had "noted" on one occasion Fr. Kostelnick fondling a young girl in the rectory (the first of his victims reported during Cardinal Bevilacqua's tenure).

At the time that Fr. Gallagher made his complaint, Fr. Kostelnick's Secret Archives file included references to three prior incidents. Two were described in Chancellor Shoemaker's June 12, 1987, handwritten notes as "two other reports of sexual[ly] harassing children." The third was the above-described incident concerning the 8-year-old that produced the police investigation.

In response to Fr. Gallagher's complaint, Fr. Pepe assured him that "he [Fr. Pepe] would certainly look into the matter." Then-Chancellor Samuel Shoemaker told the Grand Jury that it was the Chancery Office's policy for him or Fr. Pepe to report such an

allegation immediately to Archbishop Bevilacqua. Despite Fr. Pepe's promise to Fr. Gallagher, however, there is no indication in the Archdiocese files that any further action was taken. No investigation is recorded, not even an interview with the accused priest.

In 1992, another assistant pastor reports that Father Kostelnick is still fondling girls; again, the Archdiocese takes no action.

On January 21, 1992, another assistant pastor sharing the Saint Mark rectory with Fr. Kostelnick, Fr. Dennis Mooney, passed on to the Archdiocese complaints that he had received concerning his pastor. Father Mooney told Secretary for Clergy John J. Jagodzinski that two women parishioners, who asked to remain unnamed for "fear of reprisals," had reported several instances of what Msgr. Jagodzinski termed "inappropriate gestures of affection" toward young girls. One woman explained that her two daughters – 8th and 9th graders – had quit their rectory jobs because of Fr. Kostelnick's abusive behavior (the second and third of his victims reported during Cardinal Bevilacqua's tenure). The other woman knew of a family that had taken their daughter out of the parish school because of Fr. Kostelnick's "inappropriate gestures of affection" (the fourth victim). The other woman also reported that the parish cemetery caretaker's daughter had quit her rectory job "for similar reasons" (victim number five).

Again the Archdiocese was reminded, this time by Fr. Mooney, that Fr. Kostelnick's behavior was serious enough that he previously had been reported to police. The police, according to Fr. Mooney, had warned the priest to "desist." Father Mooney vouched for the credibility of the two women and told Msgr. Jagodzinski that he had personally witnessed his pastor's inappropriate "gestures." Monsignor Jagodzinski forwarded all of this information to Msgr. James E. Molloy, the Assistant Vicar for Administration.

Monsignor Molloy wrote to Fr. Mooney asking him to have the two women come forward to make their allegations formally. When the women, who had already said they were afraid to identify themselves, did not come forward, the Archdiocese took no action in response to their credible reports, even though Fr. Mooney had corroborated them with the report of what he had personally witnessed.

Had Archdiocese managers truly been interested in investigating Fr. Kostelnick's conduct, they could have conducted an investigation even without the women, or they could have confronted the priest. But Archdiocese files contain no evidence of any effort to question other known witnesses or victims, such as the cemetery caretaker and his daughter, or even to interview Fr. Kostelnick. Given that Fr. Mooney had witnessed, and Fr. Gallagher before him had "noted," inappropriate behavior on Fr. Kostelnick's part, inquiry should not have ended because the two fearful witnesses did not come forward.

The Grand Jury finds that the long history of consistent complaints against Fr. Kostelnick, coupled with reports from other priests of the pastor's improper behavior, should have been sufficient for Cardinal Bevilacqua to take action to protect the girls of Saint Mark parish. He took none.

The consequences of Cardinal Bevilacqua's inaction were predictable. When finally confronted in 2004, Fr. Kostelnick admitted that he continued to fondle "young girls who worked in the parish rectories where he lived" after Cardinal Bevilacqua left him in place following these complaints in 1992. The damage done to these young girls is incalculable.

Cardinal Bevilacqua leaves Father Kostelnick in active ministry for 10 more years; fails to remove him in 2001 when additional victims complain; and allows him to retire in 2002 after another victim comes forward.

Cardinal Bevilacqua permitted Fr. Kostelnick to remain pastor at Saint Mark until 1997, when the pastor turned 70 years old. Cardinal Bevilacqua named him Pastor Emeritus at Saint Mark, honoring the molester (and all other pastors emeritus) with a luncheon at the Cardinal's residence. At the same time, the Cardinal made Fr. Kostelnick a senior priest and transferred him to Assumption B.V.M. in Feasterville, a parish with a school, offering access to a large new source of victims. In a letter dated May 23, 1997, the Cardinal outlined the duties of the senior priest, directing Fr. Kostelnick to "teach the youth" and to "assist in the over-all welfare of the parish." Father Kostelnick was still living and participating in parochial ministry at Assumption B.V.M. when more complaints, these from the past, began to pour into the Archdiocese.

In December 2001, Secretary for Clergy William J. Lynn received yet another complaint about the priest. “Mary,” a 44-year-old woman who had been abused by Fr. Kostelnick more than 30 years earlier (victim number six), wrote to Msgr. Lynn. She explained that as a 13-year-old she had worked in the rectory at Saint John of the Cross, in Roslyn, serving meals to the priests. (Father Kostelnick lived at the rectory for 26 years while teaching at Cardinal Dougherty High School.) Mary described how Fr. Kostelnick, when he ate alone on Sunday mornings, would hold her hands while she served him breakfast and would then proceed to move his hands along her body until he felt her breasts. She described her embarrassment and shame, and her silence until she was in her thirties. At that time, she told her family and learned that Fr. Kostelnick had done the same thing to her two younger sisters (victims seven and eight) when they in turn replaced her in the rectory job. On December 4, 2001, she reported her abuse and that of her sisters to Msgr. Lynn.

The Archdiocese’s response to these reports was to send the priest to Saint John Vianney, where the priest underwent a “psychodiagnostic assessment” in February 2002, which concluded that there was “no history from the Archdiocese since the late 1980s . . . that would suggest that he would be acting on these attractions [to young girls] now.” Archdiocese officials should have instantly rejected that conclusion, since they knew from Fr. Mooney of allegations that Fr. Kostelnick’s behavior was continuing in the 1990s. Even so, the Priest Personnel Board, headed by Cardinal Bevilacqua, determined to leave the priest at Assumption B.V.M. until June 2002, when the priest could retire in the normal course.

Father Kostelnick was removed from parish work ahead of the June date only because “Maureen,” a victim from the 1970s (the ninth reported during Cardinal Bevilacqua’s tenure in office), complained in April 2002 to the Office for Clergy. She came forward after calling Assumption B.V.M. and discovering that Fr. Kostelnick was still active. The victim met on April 22, 2002, with Secretary for Clergy Lynn and his assistant, Fr. Welsh. She told them that twice a week for six months, while she worked at the rectory at Saint John of the Cross, Fr. Kostelnick put his hands inside her blouse and fondled her breasts. She was 11 years old and in 7th grade at the time. Maureen’s mother,

who accompanied her to meet with the Church officials, said that he had done the same thing to another daughter when she was in 6th grade (victim number ten). The mother said that she reported the abuse at the time to the pastor, Fr. Arthur W. Nugent. Maureen said that she knew of two other girls “who had similar claims” (victims eleven and twelve).

Father Welsh’s notes from the meeting reflect that Msgr. Lynn told Maureen and her mother that there had been another recent allegation, but that the priest claimed he was only being affectionate, and that the Archdiocese had intended to allow Fr. Kostelnick to remain in his assignment until his planned retirement in June. Even though Fr. Kostelnick’s Secret Archives file contained numerous other complaints, Fr. Welsh recorded Msgr. Lynn telling Maureen that – because there was now a “second,” “similar” accusation – there was “more credibility” and the Archdiocese would ask Fr. Kostelnick to retire sooner. Accordingly, on May 1, 2002, Cardinal Bevilacqua approved Fr. Kostelnick’s retirement and permitted him to move to a retirement home, Villa Saint Joseph.

The Archdiocese receives five more abuse allegations against Father Kostelnick, who admits fondling many girls over a long period of time.

Between August and October 2003, the Archdiocese received four more allegations of sexual abuse of young girls by Fr. Kostelnick (a fifth report surfaced in February 2004). Three sisters from one of the founding families of Saint John of the Cross reported their own childhood abuse; two also revealed the abuse of their older sister who did not want to come forward (victims thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen). “Anne,” “Patsy,” and “Frances” reported that Fr. Kostelnick was a close friend of their parents’ and that he regularly brought slide photographs of trips he had taken to show at their house. The children sat next to the priest on the sofa in the darkened room. They all said that during these slide shows, the priest fondled their breasts and genitals. The abuse occurred for approximately two years, beginning in 1968. The three sisters were 6, 12, and 13 years old when the abuse began.

Two of the three also told of their oldest sister’s abuse. Father Kostelnick, they said, had molested her in 1971 while she was in the Chestnut Hill Hospital in traction

following an automobile accident. They said that their sister had to summon the nurse with the call button in order to stop the priest from fondling her.

In February 2004, after Cardinal Bevilacqua had resigned, 35-year-old “Linda” reported to Archdiocese Victim Assistance Coordinator Martin Frick that Fr. Kostelnick had fondled her breasts repeatedly in 1984 when she was 15 years old and worked at the rectory at Saint Mark’s in Bristol. Once, she said, he was interrupted and abruptly pulled his hands out from inside her shirt when Fr. Joseph J. Gallagher, an assistant pastor, entered the room.

In March 2004, the Archdiocesan Review Board recommended the same removal of Fr. Kostelnick that Cardinal Bevilacqua should have undertaken in 1992: it urged that Fr. Kostelnick be prohibited from presenting himself as a priest or performing priestly functions. It did so after determining that the sexual abuse allegations of eight victims that it investigated were credible. The Board also reported that “Father Kostelnick admitted that his habit of fondling the breasts of young girls is a longstanding habit that occurred frequently and over an extended period of time.” According to the Board’s report, the priest explicitly “indicated that his behavior continued” after 1992.

Had Cardinal Bevilacqua removed Fr. Kostelnick in January 1992, he would have spared the priest’s post-1992 victims their lasting damage and humiliation. By that date, the Bevilacqua administration had received reports of ongoing or recent abuse of at least five young girls by Fr. Kostelnick. In his Secret Archives file at that time were three other complaints. It is unconscionable that Cardinal Bevilacqua not only allowed Fr. Kostelnick continued access to Saint Mark’s children after 1992, but even honored this sexual abuser in 1997, provided him with a new parish full of potential victims, and allowed him to retire as a respected priest in 2002.

On October 11, 2004, faced with the possibility of involuntary laicization, Fr. Kostelnick agreed to live “a supervised life of prayer and penance” at Villa Saint Joseph, a retirement home for priests.

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