

Monsignor John E. Gillespie

Church officials in 2000 considered Msgr. John E. Gillespie a risk. He had admitted molesting several boys over his many years as a priest. But what appeared to worry Archdiocese leaders and therapists more than the danger Msgr. Gillespie posed to parishioners was his stated desire to “make amends” to his victims. An apology might have helped the victims heal and the priest find peace. But it might also expose the Church to scandal or liability. Archdiocese officials were determined to prevent such an admission of guilt

In 1994, two brothers – now middle-aged men – confronted Msgr. Gillespie and accused him of repeatedly fondling their genitals nearly 40 years earlier at Immaculate Conception parish in Levittown. Monsignor Gillespie, pastor at Our Lady of Calvary in 1994, informed Secretary for Clergy William J. Lynn. He also showed Msgr. Lynn letters he had written to his victims, apologizing, explaining, and trying to persuade them that events had not happened precisely as the victims remembered. The Secretary for Clergy instructed the priest not to write to the victims again.

The Archdiocese received more allegations against Msgr. Gillespie in 1997 and January 2000. In February 2000, after the priest admitted inappropriately touching several boys, Archdiocese-affiliated therapists concluded that Msgr. Gillespie “would be a risk to have in parish work,” not only because of the sexual abuse and its impact on the victims, but also because of his “drivenness to make amends.” Again, he was ordered not to apologize to his victims.

Monsignor Gillespie was still pastor at Our Lady of Calvary in February 2000 because Cardinal Bevilacqua had ordered no further investigation or action in response to the earlier allegations. The Cardinal asked for Msgr. Gillespie’s resignation as pastor only after learning that the priest had admitted victimizing two current parishioners at Our Lady of Calvary and wanted to “make amends” to them. Archdiocesan therapists warned: “If he pursues making amends with others, he could bring forth difficulty for himself and legal jeopardy.”

Upon Msgr. Gillespie’s resignation as pastor, the Cardinal bestowed on the 73-year-old priest the title of Pastor Emeritus of Our Lady of Calvary. Monsignor Gillespie continued to minister, including hearing confessions of schoolchildren. It wasn’t until Msgr. Lynn received a report, in November 2001, of yet another victim that the Secretary for Clergy wrote: “I told Monsignor Gillespie that because of these rumors, and in order to preserve his reputation and the reputation of the Church, I thought it might be best if he retire.”

Cardinal Bevilacqua keeps Monsignor Gillespie as a pastor after receiving allegations in 1994 and 1997.

- **“Mark” and “Andrew”**

On January 10, 1994, Monsignor John Gillespie, ordained in 1953, and then pastor at Our Lady of Calvary in Northeast Philadelphia, visited Msgr. Lynn, having recently

received two troubling phone calls. The first, on December 15, 1993, was from the mother of two former altar boys, Mark and Andrew. They had been at Immaculate Conception in Levittown during Msgr. Gillespie's tenure as assistant pastor between 1954 and 1962. Monsignor Lynn recorded that the mother accused Msgr. Gillespie of "molesting her boys." She said that one son, Mark, had told her about his abuse after entering therapy. The second call Msgr. Gillespie received was from Mark himself a few weeks later, accusing the priest of repeatedly putting his hands down the boy's trousers and touching his genitals.

Monsignor Gillespie told Msgr. Lynn that he had been close to the boys' family, which he said "was split for a while" because the father was an alcoholic. Before the abuse was alleged, the priest had married the boys and buried their father. In 1985, Msgr. Gillespie had loaned Mark \$2,500.

The priest gave Msgr. Lynn copies of letters he had written to the victims. To Mark, Msgr. Gillespie wrote:

As a young and perhaps immature priest, I was exuberant in reaching out, embracing, and touching people for whom I had affection. This may have caused discomfort for you and [Andrew] and for that I apologize. You mentioned or stated in our brief conversation that I reached down your trousers and touched you sexually. To this I respond in all honesty, I did at times touch your belly and kidded you about gaining a few pounds, but again I say, I was extremely careful to avoid touching your sexual parts.

Monsignor Gillespie begged Mark "[i]n remembrance of the many good times we had together," to give him the "benefit of the doubt" and allow him to finish out his remaining years as pastor without scandal. His letter to Andrew was similar.

Monsignor Lynn took the copies of the letters from Msgr. Gillespie and told him not to write to the victims again. Monsignor Lynn forwarded them to Cardinal Bevilacqua the same day, with a memo explaining the allegations Msgr. Gillespie had reported. Although Msgr. Lynn informed the Cardinal that "Mark did not threaten anything or make any demands for money," the Secretary for Clergy said he would consult legal counsel as to precautions that should be taken.

Cardinal Bevilacqua told the Grand Jury that, even at the time, he found Msgr. Gillespie's denials odd and that the priest's language concerned him. But, despite his misgivings, the Cardinal did not request an investigation.

On January 11, 1994, the day after Msgr. Gillespie first came to Msgr. Lynn, Archdiocese officials made their decision. They had conducted no investigation and had not contacted any of the victims; Msgr. Lynn's sole effort was to consult with counsel. Yet, without the benefit of investigation, Cardinal Bevilacqua wrote on Msgr. Lynn's memo: "I believe Msgr. Gillespie." Describing the priest's alleged experience of "false accusations," the Cardinal added: "What a heavy cross." He left Msgr. Gillespie as pastor at Our Lady of Calvary.

- **"Neil"**

Three years later, in November 1997, the mother of Neil wrote the Cardinal, threatening to go to the police because of a "situation . . . between one of your priests and my 12 year old son." The situation involved questions her son was asked in the confessional at Our Lady of Calvary. Monsignor Gillespie admitted to Msgr. Lynn that he was the priest in the confessional at the time of the incident. According to Neil's mother, the questions the priest asked the 12-year-old were: "Are you married? How old are you? Do you touch yourself? Did you ever sexually hurt yourself? Did you ever sexually hurt someone else?"

The Archdiocese declined to ask Msgr. Gillespie about what he had said to the boy in the confessional. In a meeting with Neil's mother and grandmother, the Secretary for Clergy led them to believe that he could not question Msgr. Gillespie about the incident. Father Francis W. Beach, the Vicar for Northeast Philadelphia, accompanied Msgr. Lynn on the interview and wrote: "Many times during the conversation, Father Lynn and I spoke about the seal of confession. [Neil's mother] and her mother understood . . . that we could not question [Neil] or Monsignor Gillespie on what was said in the confessional."

Cardinal Bevilacqua, likewise, used the seal of confession to excuse his and Msgr. Lynn's failure to take any action against Msgr. Gillespie in 1997. Despite the multiple

allegations against the priest, the Cardinal permitted Msgr. Gillespie to continue as pastor with no restrictions on his faculties and no supervision of his access to parish children.

Monsignor Gillespie is again accused of sexual abuse and, again, makes a qualified admission.

After two more years as pastor at Our Lady of Calvary, Msgr. Gillespie was again accused of molesting an adolescent – this time, a former altar boy at the parish where he still presided. On January 21, 2000, the victim, “Gabriel,” now a 29-year-old policeman, told Msgr. Lynn and his assistant, Fr. Vincent Welsh, that Msgr. Gillespie had molested him from his freshman until his senior year of high school. Father Welsh recorded the interview in a memo.

Gabriel told the Church officials that Msgr. Gillespie touched him, over a period of two to three years, every time he assisted with Mass. Gabriel said Msgr. Gillespie summoned him, complimented him on his athletic build, touched his stomach and chest and reached into the boy’s pants, usually fondling the boy’s genitals, and on occasion grabbing and pulling his penis. Gabriel came forward on the advice of a therapist. He told the Church officials “he did not want this type of situation to happen to anyone else....”

Monsignor Lynn and Fr. Welsh interviewed Msgr. Gillespie three days later. According to a memo recording that meeting, Msgr. Gillespie admitted touching Gabriel inappropriately on “a number of occasions.” Specifically, Msgr. Gillespie admitted that he “touched [Gabriel’s] stomach and reached into his pants and touched his pubic area,” but denied touching his penis.

When Msgr. Lynn reminded Msgr. Gillespie of the Mark’s and Andrew’s accusations, which also included genital fondling, the priest again protested that he never touched anyone’s genitals. Father Welsh wrote: “He also stated that he was more sure that he had ‘never gone that far’ with the . . . brothers than [Gabriel], because the . . . brothers were usually together.” This was certainly an unusual form of denial for someone accused of abuse, and one that should have caused concern and inquiry.

Monsignor Gillespie told the Archdiocese officials that he thought Gabriel, 14 years earlier, had been his last victim. He would subsequently tell Msgr. Lynn that he had not molested anyone for 10 years. Another time he said it was seven.

Monsignor Gillespie is sent for evaluation and treatment; Archdiocese therapists offer opinions on the legal ramifications of returning the priest to his parish.

Archdiocese managers sent the priest to Saint John Vianney in February 2000 for a four-day evaluation. Monsignor Lynn explained to Msgr. Gillespie that “since the allegation was presented by [Gabriel] to the Archdiocese, it had to be properly addressed.” The contrast here is stark: notwithstanding the seriousness of Mark’s and Andrew’s 1994 allegations, the Archdiocese managers perceived no need to respond in any way because the victims did not complain directly to them (even though the accused priest brought them the allegations). Thus, on the referral form to Vianney, Msgr. Lynn wrote: “Since they [the brothers] did not come to us, there was no previous history or concerns, & Msgr. G. [Gillespie] brought this to our attention himself, no further action was taken.” The referral made no mention of the 1997 incident in the confessional with Neil.

While at Saint John Vianney, Msgr. Gillespie told Msgr. Lynn that he had abused two other boys at Our Lady of Calvary, also several years earlier. He said that these victims, now adults, still attended services at the parish and that he still spoke to them. He expressed a strong desire to apologize to these victims and to try to “make amends.”

The diagnoses that resulted from Msgr. Gillespie’s outpatient evaluation included: “Sexual Abuse of a Child,” “History of Sexual Misconduct,” “Sexual Disorder,” and “Personality Disorder with Obsessive Compulsive Features.” The therapists concluded that his “history of relationships” and “his lack of appreciation of the impact he had on others makes Monsignor dangerous to others.”

But the Church-affiliated therapists did not limit their assessment to the risk Msgr. Gillespie posed to minors. They also proffered their opinion that “return to his parish does carry potential for further scandal and a possible lawsuit.” They concluded that he was a risk, not only because of his abusive behavior, but also because of “his drivenness to make

amends.” “If he pursues making amends,” the report of Saint John Vianney stated, “he could bring forth both difficulty for himself and legal jeopardy.”

After receiving the hospital’s report and a recommendation from Msgr. Lynn on March 3, 2000, Cardinal Bevilacqua decided that Msgr. Gillespie should be asked to resign as pastor of Our Lady of Calvary. In a note to Msgr. Lynn, the Cardinal suggested that the priest be offered “Senior Priest status” or that he resign “for health reasons.” Monsignor Gillespie acceded to Cardinal Bevilacqua’s wishes and was permitted to continue as pastor for three more months until a new pastor was named in June 2000.

When asked by the Grand Jury why he allowed a pastor labeled “dangerous” by his therapists to continue in his parish for three months, the Cardinal blamed his Secretary for Clergy. He told the Grand Jury: “That was a judgment by Monsignor Lynn.”

Knowing of Monsignor Gillespie’s abuses, Cardinal Bevilacqua nevertheless names him Pastor Emeritus, and asks him to retire only after receiving another complaint.

When Msgr. Gillespie resigned as the active pastor at Our Lady of Calvary in June 2000, Cardinal Bevilacqua named him as its Pastor Emeritus. By not forcing a quick removal of the priest, and then honoring him with this title, Cardinal Bevilacqua helped the sexual offender preserve his reputation and cover as a respected senior priest. The Cardinal also allowed Msgr. Gillespie to continue ministering, assigning him to live and minister at the Motherhouse of the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart in Yardley. There, Msgr. Gillespie served as Chaplain to the sisters. He also regularly heard the confessions of children at Grey Nun Academy, a private school serving Kindergarten through 8th grade that was located on the convent grounds.

The 73-year-old Msgr. Gillespie finally retired after the Office for Clergy, in November 2001, received yet another report that the priest had molested a 15-year-old boy years earlier. The report came from a priest at Saint Ignatius in Yardley, Father Alan Okon. He told Msgr. Lynn’s assistant, Father Welsh, that a woman had come to him because she had seen Msgr. Gillespie at the Motherhouse of the Grey Nuns and was afraid he was interacting with the students at Grey Nun Academy. The woman, he said, had heard from a friend that Msgr. Gillespie had abused the friend’s brother, “Charles,” 25 years earlier at

Mother of the Divine Providence parish in King of Prussia, where Msgr. Gillespie assisted in the 1970s. The described abuse fit Msgr. Gillespie's pattern, with the priest telling the boy how handsome he was, putting his hands down the boy's pants, and touching his genitals.

On December 10, 2001, Msgr. Lynn wrote that he told Msgr. Gillespie "because of these rumors, and in order to preserve his reputation and the reputation of the Church, I thought it might be best if he retire." Monsignor Gillespie was asked to stop his public ministry in February 2002, along with several other priests who had admitted sexually abusing minors.

Meanwhile, Msgr. Gillespie's victims, denied the apology that might have helped them move on, have continued to suffer. In an e-mail forwarded to Msgr. Lynn in March 2002, Gabriel revealed his unredeemed sense of betrayal. After finding out that Msgr. Gillespie continued to give communion to children, even after he had told Msgr. Lynn of the priest's offenses, Gabriel wrote: "Basically I was lied to by Fr. Lynn who said that the pastor would never be around children anymore."

Since April 2002, Msgr. Gillespie has lived at the Archdiocese retirement home, Villa Saint Joseph, in Darby. Cardinal Bevilacqua testified that he did not know what type of supervision, if any, the home provided for known sexual abusers. Given his predecessor's lack of attention to the supervision of molesters in retirement, it is not surprising that the Archdiocese learned in October 2004 that Msgr. Gillespie was still hearing confessions despite the supposed restrictions on his faculties.

Secretary for Clergy, Msgr. Timothy Senior, promptly informed the retired priest that he was not permitted to hear confessions of any lay people in the future. Monsignor Gillespie has agreed to live "a supervised life of prayer and penance" at Villa Saint Joseph, a retirement home for priests. In return, the Archdiocese will not to seek his laicization, but will allow Msgr. Gillespie to remain a priest.

Monsignor Gillespie was subpoenaed to appear before the Grand Jury in order to afford him an opportunity to answer questions concerning the allegations against him. He chose not to do so.