

The Tragedy of Gilbert Gauthe

When young Father Gilbert Gauthe began secretly molesting a boy in Broussard in 1972, he set in motion a decade-long tragedy the details of which are only beginning to surface. At issue in the final stages of this tragedy are the troubled lives of dozens of Acadiana families, millions of dollars in damages claims and the responsibility of the Roman Catholic Church's Lafayette Diocese for the actions of one of its priests.

The fate of Gilbert Gauthe—who has admitted under oath to sexually molesting 37 youngsters in hundreds of incidents while a priest in Broussard, New Iberia, Abbeville and Henry—will ultimately be played out in the courts. Gauthe was indicted last October in Lafayette on 11 counts of aggravated crimes against nature, 11 counts of committing sexually immoral acts with minors, one count of aggravated rape (sodomizing a boy under the age of 12) and 11 counts of crimes of pornography involving juveniles, through pornographic photo sessions. Lafayette defense attorney F. Ray Mouton has entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity on behalf of Gauthe. The trial is expected for the fall. Meanwhile, Gauthe is undergoing treatment in a Connecticut psychiatric facility.

Beyond the criminal indictment, the Lafayette Diocese and a number of insurance companies have, in out-of-court settlements, already agreed to payments of at least \$4.2 million to families of nine of Gauthe's victims in Vermilion Parish. Plaintiffs attorneys Raul Bencomo and Paul Hebert refuse to confirm or deny the amounts or terms of the individual settlements. Eleven additional suits have been filed by other victims for claims of approximately \$114 million. But these claims represent only a minority of victims. A veil of secrecy shrouds this tragedy, and only sketchy details have been revealed so far.

It would be easy for a community to shield itself from these painful realities, to isolate Gauthe, as a terrible aberration, from the Church whose sacraments he wore and to turn away from the victims and their families as painful reminders of something better forgotten. But the price of blindness can be high indeed.

National experts interviewed by *The Times* are unanimous in saying children victimized by sexual molestation need help. A sex abuse researcher for the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in Washington, Bruce Selcraig, told *The Times*: "Many (victimized) kids are walking around with a time bomb inside them, feeling incredible guilt. There aren't many victims who aren't affected for a long time."

Dr. David Finklehor of the University of New Hampshire, author of two books on child sexual abuse, told *The Times*: "It is important to stress that the facts of sexual abuse can be severe—depression, flashbacks, suicide attempts, psychosis. Long-term impacts are inevitable for everybody."

Passages of a psychologist's report evaluating Gauthe's younger victims characterize the situation as "of such a magnitude that it almost defies description or classification." (*The Times* did not have access to the full report.)

The real impact of Gauthe's sexual plunder will be with us for years. Several children have undergone therapy at specialized treatment facilities. Some are wracked by recurrent nightmares. An adolescent victim who ran afoul of the law spent time in a parish jail. (Experts say anti-social behavior often stems from such trauma.) And victims who suffered as children are not healed by time alone. Another of Gauthe's earliest victims, now in his 20s, is undergoing therapy for his traumatic childhood memories.

The parents of Gauthe's victims have also paid a tremendous human price. The destruction of innocence can radically alter the bond between father and son, between mother and child—and, not infrequently, put stress on the relationship between parents themselves. And yet, those who have come forward, seeking financial compensation for their agony, have suffered criticism by others in their community, who perhaps do not understand the depths of their suffering or the severity of Gauthe's crimes. The law clearly allows financial redress in cases such as these.

Under Louisiana law, the penalty for aggravated rape of a child under 12 is life imprisonment at hard labor.

Throughout this sad chain of events,

the courts have gone to great lengths to protect the anonymity of victims, as requested by attorneys Bencomo and Hebert. *The Times* is in complete agreement with this principle and has not sought out these young victims during its investigation. We do not believe the public is served by knowing their names. Nevertheless, interviews with sources well-placed in the unfolding litigation convince us there are still walking time bombs ticking. Adolescents or young men who have not come to terms with victimization earlier in life may still be suffering—in need of treatment.

But victims are in an agonizing quandry: Guilt haunts their memories, yet if they come forward, communities may well view them as symbols of a reality too harsh to contemplate or as harsh critics of a cherished institution. Fear of the reaction of friends and neighbors is a compelling reason not to confess their victimization. The victim is victimized again.

The Acadiana community has also suffered under the veil of secrecy that surrounds the case of Gilbert Gauthe.

A Perspective

Although Bishop Gerard Frey has issued several general pastoral statements about the Gauthe case, no Church authority has talked specifically about it with the media. It seems the legal exigencies of insurance companies outweigh the more visceral needs of a community to discuss the matter with full knowledge of the facts—to have a catharsis and wipe the slate clean.

In response to *The Times*' request for interviews with Bishop Frey and Msgr. Henri Larroque, the diocesan vicar general, Lafayette attorney Bob F. Wright wrote: "My clients are inhibited by contractual insurance arrangements to do nothing which might jeopardize the insurers' rights of defense. . . . A press interview on the matters in litigation could result in the Church and its officials being denied insurance coverage. This cannot be risked even though it may seem to you that I am being arbitrary in refusing to authorize the requested interview."

"Please be assured that the Church and its officials have always been concerned about the interests of the individuals and families affected and are and will continue to do all things possible, both legally and morally, to re-

tify—mitigate any damages and to protect as best it can against any future recurrences."

The Church may be acting responsibly as a business by accepting the muzzle of its insurers' right to defense. But spiritual reconciliation occupies a realm above "contractual insurance agreements" and the logic of litigation. In spite of attorney Wright's assurances of the Church's desire to mitigate damages, last summer a request by families who had received settlements to meet with Bishop Frey on a weekend retreat was denied. The diocese and its insurers feared the bishop would be placed in an untenable position vis-à-vis new lawsuits.

Both Bishop Frey and Msgr. Larroque, however, have given sworn statements in pre-trial proceedings. In *The Times*' report, quotations from the bishop and vicar general, unless otherwise indicated, come from depositions. Likewise the words of Gilbert Gauthe himself. At the time he was deposed, Gauthe had been undergoing treatment for a year.

We believe the Gauthe case bears serious scrutiny for other reasons. Sexual abuse of children has become a mounting national issue. Across America, reports of incest and molestation by caretakers of young people are on the rise. It is also a problem of the Catholic Church outside of Louisiana. Other cases involving priests who molested youngsters in California, Oregon, Idaho and Wisconsin have recently been reported. What steps are being taken to assure Catholics that such crimes are being forcefully dealt with inside the Church? How have bishops responded? And what can we learn from these troubling events?

These are painful questions for any publication to raise and answers do not come easily. We believe that citizens of Acadiana, a historically Catholic region, deserve a full accounting. Our reporter began his investigation more than three months ago. Our prayer is that the steps beginning this week will establish the facts necessary to an understanding of the full scope of this sexual tragedy and, looking beyond that, will help heal the wounds and foster a true reconciliation between the diocese and its people.

THE EDITORS

By JASON BERRY



Gilbert Gauthe

Two days before Christmas, 1977, Gilbert Gauthe became pastor of St. John's church in Henry, a tiny town in the rice belt of Vermilion Parish. The Catholic Church is bedrock here; for generations, farmers raised families in the faith of their forebears. And the 32-year-old priest seemed solidly one of theirs. He was a lean man with dark hair and two visible passions: the wilderness and children. Flocks of youngsters followed him on outings to the marsh. His attentiveness to children impressed many mothers. Grown men respected his love of guns and laughed at the story of Father Gauthe, perched in the church belfry, shotgun in hand, blasting geese in low flight on foggy dawns.

He was popular for other reasons. In funeral sermons he could be positively spellbinding. After intercepting police messages on a high-powered radio, he would race to the scene of accidents offering help. Once he saved a man's life by pulling him from an upended tractor.

And always there were the children, mostly boys, playing in the rectory or

at a camp in the marsh as his weekend guests. He was chaplain of the diocesan Boy Scouts and the Biddy Basketball team in Abbeville. Wealthy women, he has said, routinely gave him money. Although his salary was little more than \$7,000 a year, Gauthe claimed in sworn statements that he earned closer to \$18,000 yearly because of parishioners' generosity. Such was



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the surface of life and faith at St. John the Evangelist in the years of Fr. Gauthé.

Revelations

Behind his priestly persona the real Gilbert Gauthé was a pedophile—a man sexually fixated on children. This is one of the darkest manifestations of human sexuality, a psychological condition little studied until recently. Centuries ago it was called "the king's disease" because only a monarch could engage in it with impunity. Pedophilia assaults society's fundamental notions about innocence. For what can be more innocent than a child?

One trait found in many, though not all pedophiles, is a history of sexual victimization in their own youth.

Dr. John Money, a pioneering psychotherapist at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University Hospital, has treated many sex offenders. "Most pedophiles I've come across," he told *The Times*, "are people who fall in love with children. There's something distinctly childlike in pedophiles: Psychosexual age does not keep pace with chronological age."

Two classics of children's literature—*Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*—were written by pedophiles, Lewis Carroll and J.H. Barrie. Both tales create a child-like fantasy world.

Gauthé's twisted fantasy world demanded children for gratification. He drew most of his victims from the ranks of altar boys. They trained in rituals of the mass at ages 7, 8 and 9. And he drew them into acts of sex. Some successfully rebuffed his advances; more did not.

In a deposition taken last October by Lafayette attorney J. Minos Simon, who represents one victim's family in a civil suit, Gauthé said his victims numbered "35, 36, 37, something like that." But Abbeville lawyer Paul Hebert, who began legal proceedings against the church on behalf of victims in 1983, believes otherwise. He cites a report by Dr. Kenneth Bouillion, a Lafayette psychologist who screened victims at Hebert's request. Bouillion declined to be interviewed, but Hebert told *The Times* that, based on Bouillion's report, "Our suspicion is that the number of victims Gauthé molested in his career as a priest could well exceed 70 children, many of whom are now over 18."

Why did it take so long—more than 10 years—before Gauthé was stopped? Consider his role in those young lives: He was a man before whom they saw their parents kneel, showing deference, receiving communion; a man to whom parent and child alike confessed sins; a guest at family dinners; a surrogate father and figure of consummate authority.

"All of the incidences," Gauthé said under oath, "had, more or less, the same pattern where I got to know one of the children, and, you know, they would come over to the house a few times, and then there would be just some wrestling or tickling or something like that, and then there'd be some

Louisiana journalist Jason Berry is the author of *Amazing Grace*, which chronicles the civil rights impact on Mississippi politics. A Catholic, he is a graduate of Jesuit High School in New Orleans and Georgetown University.

Behind his priestly persona the real Gilbert Gauthé was a pedophile—a man sexually fixated on children. Centuries ago the affliction was called “the king’s disease” because only monarchs could engage in it with impunity.

molesting, and then from that point on we'd go into the sexual activity”

Gauthé committed sodomy in early hours before mass, introduced oral sex in the confessional, in the sacristy, and he showed his young victims video taped pornography. He took hundreds of instant snapshots, which he claims to have destroyed, and instigated sex games.

But like countless other pedophiles, he also knew how to reach children in less threatening ways—cultivating them as friends, complimenting them, letting them play in the rectory, fostering notions that sex was fun by letting them play video games after sex—rewarding them for obedience to Father.

Who is Gilbert Gauthé and how could he have become a priest?

Roots of the Tragedy
Gauthé was born in 1945 in Napole-

onville, a small town in Assumption Parish, soft soil along the curve of Bayou Lafourche. He was the eldest of eight children in a family of modest means. His father was a farmer, and as a boy Gilbert followed the seasons, hunting and fishing, camping as a Boy Scout. The origins of his pedophilia may lie in his childhood.

In deposition he spoke of his own molestation: “Both boys were two or three years older than I. The first time I was 9 or 10 years old and the second time I was a senior in high school.” He said he had sex with the first boy “on two occasions . . . and once with the second,” whom he described as “closer to 21.”

Gauthé graduated from Assumption High in Napoleonville and from there went to USL, entering Immaculata Seminary in Lafayette three years later in 1965. A calling to the priesthood is a major decision, yet Gauthé's sworn statements reveal a remarkable ambivalence: “As far as why I was entering, I was very unclear on that myself. I had heard about the seminary all my life and really didn't know that much, so I decided to go in. I didn't really have any kind of commitment to the priesthood; it was more curiosity.”

A stately Colonial structure on Breaux Bridge Highway, Immaculata (closed in 1977) began as a minor seminary in 1948; four years of high school, two of college. From there, the normal progression was to Notre Dame, a major seminary in New Orleans, for completion of college work and a masters of divinity.

In 1968, after Gauthé had advanced

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to Notre Dame, Fr. Vincent O'Connell became rector of Immaculata. A Marxist priest now in his 70s and living in New Orleans, O'Connell would meet Gauthé sometime later. But his reflections on Immaculata open a window on the problems at the Lafayette seminary during Gauthé's time there.

Upon arrival, O'Connell found a community divided by personality disputes and questions of discipline. Age was one problem: Older seminarians taking courses at USI had greater freedom than those of high school age, who were subjected to stricter supervision. "There was no uniformity of policy," O'Connell explains of the facility. He says priests differed on approaches to spiritual and academic development of the seminarians.

O'Connell, who entered seminary in 1926, realized that social and cultural complexities were at work. He felt students required more than just religious attention. If a seminarian showed signs of serious stress, says O'Connell, "he needed a psychiatrist for direction." Bishop Schexnayder, an elderly man, resisted the idea. O'Connell continues: "I told him it was too important to run the institution without that resource. The faculty agreed. It was obvious that, besides normal emotional and intellectual development of students, there were two main appetites. One was food and drink; the other is called sex, but it's really the appetite for procreation. When this is not allowed in normal circumstances, it must be dealt with."

The bishop relented. O'Connell hired a psychiatrist who counseled the students. In time, he says, six candidates were dismissed for showing homosexual proclivities. O'Connell's approach prefigured psychological screening procedures adapted in many seminaries across America in the '70s to gauge the overall stability of future priests.

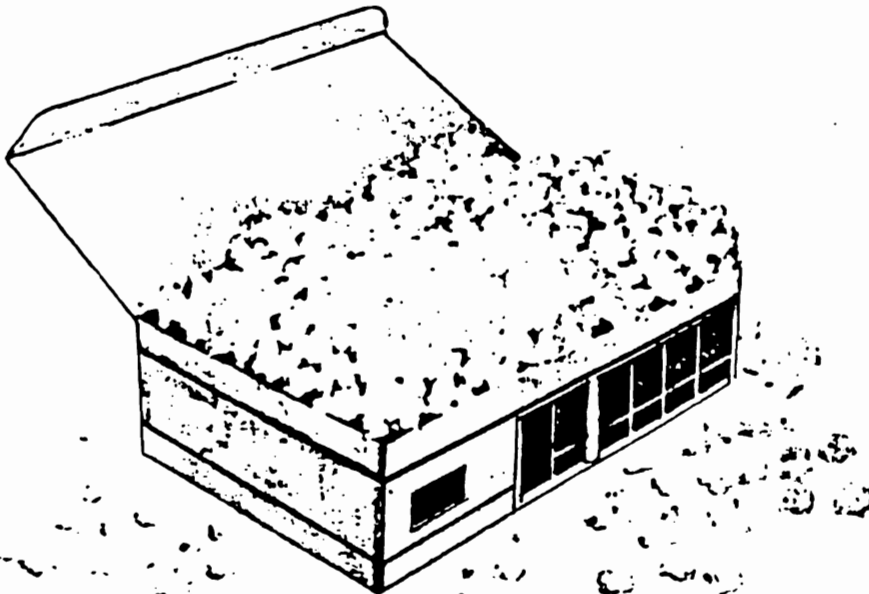
Concern over homosexuality was not the sole force behind these changes; rather, rectors began embracing modern psychological practices as a complement to their own judgments about men moving toward ordination. The Jesuits in New Orleans use the Minnesota Multi-Phase Personality Inventory in their battery of standardized tests to determine general fitness of novitiates today.

Gauthé graduated from Notre Dame before such tests were administered. But his performance in New Orleans hardly suggested the capabilities of a good parish priest. He failed several courses including "Ethics" and "The Sacrament of Penance" and twice failed his master of divinity exams. He eventually raised his grade to passing level. But an early evaluation, outlining problems that would surface later, is a study in ambiguity:

"He has done pastoral work at Little Flower (church) which has been satisfactory. As a radio ham and Scout leader he has perhaps over-extended himself in a compulsive fashion. He shows little humor and worries others. At times he seems threatened and not quite with it, and has drawn some question about his judgment. However, he is steady, constant, and was ordained subdeacon on January 16, 1971."

At the end of the year, Gauthé was

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ordained a priest in St. Ann's Church in Napoleonville, where years before he made his first communion.

A former seminarian who knew Gauthé at Notre Dame told *The Times*, "I was not surprised when I read all this [news of Gauthé's indictment]. Gilbert never really hung around anyone in particular. I got the impression he was very popular with families. Gil was really a charismatic person for those kids. It's incredible, the more you think about it."

Another Notre Dame seminarian says Gauthé wired his car with a burglar alarm, an obsession that grew in later years. At the rectory in Henry, Gauthé installed bulletproof bars over the windows and doors and ran floodlights across the carport.

In deposition with attorney Simon, Gauthé stated he molested three boys during his first assignment as a priest in Maryland in 1972. At a church outing in Grand Isle, several parents confronted him, he said. "They simply asked me if I had been involved with any of the children," he stated, "and I said, 'Yes.' And I asked them if they would help me find a good psychiatrist." A lady made an appointment for him. "And," he said, "I simply kept it." Gauthé said the parents paid for these sessions, which lasted several months and that he did not report them to Church superiors.

Gauthé described his therapy as "like an association with repulsive ideas. I call it shock but not electrical. Just that he would have me imagine, you know, like the embarrassment, things like that. He wanted me to think about that as a salient, as a keeping still. And I went along with the game." The sessions did not cure Gauthé's pedophilia.

The next year, 1973, Gerard Frey became bishop of the Lafayette Diocese. A native New Orleansian who entered the seminary in high school, he was previously the bishop of Savannah, Ga. In 1973 he transferred Gauthé to a parish in New Iberia. In deposition, the bishop explained Gauthé's transfer: "There were two sisters in the parish who were pushing the cause of the cane field workers. He [Gauthé] took their side and the pastor took the other side, and there was a clash of personalities."

It was not the memory of others in Broussard in 1972.

The Times spoke with two nuns organizing cane field workers in Broussard in 1972. They are no longer in Louisiana. They say Gauthé's activities troubled Broussard clergy early on. Gauthé called a boy out of parochial school class one day. One nun says another sister told her one

evening after one such call, "God forgive me for what I thought when [the boy] returned to class and I saw the expression on his face." The sisters made a rule never to allow children to leave school grounds to go to the rectory.

"If most people were like me," says the nun, "when they became suspicious, they were afraid to falsely accuse. I noticed how he'd have little boys spend Friday and Saturday nights in the rectory [where he lived alone.] I thought, how inappropriate—but also how sad, that a man would depend on the companionship of children. The more I worried about it, I felt caught between my growing suspicion and the need to bring the matter to others."

The pastor, Rev. Joseph Kemps, was an old Dutchman who lived in his own house. The nun says Kemps "had utter disrespect" for Gauthé and complained of "his theology being so shallow. Father Kemps complained that Gauthé was not smart and didn't get good seminary training."

By that time, O'Connell had left Immaculata and was organizing Broussard sugar cane workers in a struggle for better wages. The sisters sided with the workers, opposed by planters and mill owners. Another nun says she asked O'Connell about Gauthé's "problem," and recalls "he responded in such a way as to imply that the rumors were true. I presumed [Gauthé's] change in assignment [to New Iberia] was one way in which the bishop was handling the situation."

O'Connell does not remember specifics of the conversation with the nun about Gauthé. He says he did not broach the subject with Bishop Frey.

The memory of former Broussard clergy concerning the sugar cane controversy is at variance with the bishop's. According to O'Connell and the nuns, rather than siding with them, Gauthé opposed their labor organiz-

ing—to the the point of denouncing them at one meeting. At another meeting, a mill owner jotted down license tag numbers of cars outside and shook his fist in a sister's face. "That same group," O'Connell explains, "decided they were going to take her out as principal of the school and put Gauthé in." At that, they failed.

"Gauthé never should have been ordained," O'Connell says. "I knew he had a problem. As far as his being gay—being effeminate, that was common knowledge. But the two things are not necessarily identified with the active part of it. I don't know of it being reported at all. I doubt if many knew he was [homosexually active]. Those in authority, what they knew, I don't know."

Father Kemps is now deceased.

In 1974 the church hierarchy first had Gauthé's misconduct brought to its attention. Bishop Frey has stated in deposition, "A young man stopped me and told me he had been counseling a young man who had emotional problems and in the course of counseling he'd found out that he had a sexual—homosexual contact with Gauthé."

The bishop said his source "seemed to be disturbed by the thing and I didn't want to pursue it with him." The bishop confronted Gauthé. "This was while he was in New Iberia. I talked to Gauthé, and he admitted that he had made a mistake, that he had been guilty of imprudent touches with this young man, that it was an isolated case, incident, that it would never happen again," he said.

Gauthé continued his career as a priest.

The following year, 1975, Bishop Frey appointed Gauthé chaplain of the diocesan Boy Scouts. The actual recommendation for Gauthé's appointment came from Msgr. Jude Speyer who was then diocesan chancellor. He is now bishop of Lake

Charles. The bishop said in deposition that the job involved office work and little contact with boys in the troops.

While in New Iberia, Gauthé shared the rectory with several other priests. In deposition he said he molested six boys in the parish—"in the sacristy, my bedroom and the motor home camper." He also stated, "No priest ever confronted me."

In 1976, at the end of his three-year term in New Iberia, Gauthé became assistant pastor at St. Mary Magdalene parish in Abbeville. The day he arrived, several boys from New Iberia helped him move into his room on the ground floor of the rectory shared with three other priests.

Again in 1976, Gauthé's behavior came to the attention of other clergy. According to depositions, Msgr. Richard Mouton, the Abbeville pastor, met with two parishioners who complained that Gauthé had licked their sons on the cheeks in his camper. Mouton called Msgr. Henri Larroque, vicar general of the Lafayette Diocese, who said Gauthé should receive treatment.

Mouton confronted Gauthé. Mouton has stated Gauthé said, "I am not a homosexual." "Well," said Mouton, "whatever you are, you'll have to go for treatment."

Gauthé remained active as an Abbeville priest while seeing Dr. David Rees, a Lafayette psychiatrist, for six sessions culminating in February 1977. The diocese paid the bill. Mouton never inquired of Gauthé about his treatment. Asked why by attorney Simon in deposition, he replied: "I am trained as a priest to forget sins."

Mouton did take two prudent steps: He forbade Gauthé to have youngsters in the rectory, and he moved his bedroom to the upper floor. Meanwhile, Gauthé continued camping trips and outings with boys. He also traveled to Puerto Rico with the Biddy Basketball team.

Of his second set of therapy sessions, Gauthé stated: "I downplayed and actually lied to both the psychiatrist and Monsignor Mouton. I made it seem like it was not as serious as it really was."

No Church superior contacted Dr. Rees to check on the progress of Gauthé's therapy. Only after Gauthé's 1983 suspension from the priesthood did the bishop confer with the psychiatrist. The bishop has stated he had felt such an inquiry would violate physician-client confidentiality, a privilege analogous to the seal of the confessional.

How did the Church chain of command function in monitoring Gilbert Gauthé? By 1976 he had been a priest

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for five years but always as an assistant pastor. He had received counseling for sexual misconduct with children. Catholicism accepts human failings as sins to be forgiven. But how psychologically stable was Gauthier?

In late 1976, the bishop asked Mouton if there had been further indications. Simon focused on the process leading to Gauthier's appointment as pastor in Henry the following year. "Of course, [Mouton was] watching him," Bishop Frey told the lawyer. "They live together every day. And he had no—nothing of any importance to report."

As diocesan vicar general, Larroque is the bishop's right hand, the man charged with daily operations and record-keeping. In his sworn statement, Larroque said he did not make a formal inquiry but had spoken with Gauthier about the Abbeville incident and his therapy. Larroque, however, said he remembered little of the conversation. "I simply presumed the matter had been covered by the doctor," he stated.

Simon wanted to know if it was unusual for children to sleep in rectories. Larroque answered: "No, it is certainly not unusual to have guests in the rectory under any circumstances. It would not be unusual to have young people or adults to sleep at the rectory."

Bishop Frey has since prohibited diocesan priests from having unaccompanied children as overnight guests in rectories.

In late 1977, nine months after

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Father Gauthé was a man before whom his young victims saw their parents kneel, a man to whom parent and child alike confessed sins, a surrogate father and a figure of consummate authority.

therapy terminated with Rees, Gauthé was summoned to the chancery to discuss a new post with the bishop. "I have some very difficult problems with authority figures, to put it frankly," Gauthé said. "I'd shake in my boots every time I would go into the rectory." He told Frey he was prepared for the new position, and on Dec. 23, 1977, became pastor of St. John's church in Henry. He lived alone in the rectory for the next five and a half years with little boys as frequent guests.

"He's... very, very unique person," the bishop has stated. "He's got a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality... and he certainly deceived me."

But on April 5, 1980, a letter signed "Concerned Parishioners of St. John's Parish" went to Frey, complaining about Gauthé. The letter read: "Father's house became a second home to a bunch of Abbeville boys

who are often left unsupervised... Father even took an Abbeville boy out of school to help him fix his camp. At the camp is where Father stays constantly," the letter read.

Frey referred the letter to assistants, who reported that the complaints were superficial. No action was taken to determine what, exactly, Abbeville boys were doing at the rectory. According to depositions, Frey did not

meet with Gauthé about the letter. Neither did Larroque.

How It Unfolded


On June 27, 1980, a man met with Abbeville attorney Paul Hebert and said he'd learned his three sons had been sexually molested by Fr. Gilbert Gauthé in Henry for several years. Hebert, a Catholic, says: "My first thought was not damages; just get rid

of this priest. It was a horror story. I called the diocese in Lafayette and asked for Bishop Frey. Monsignor Larroque told me the bishop was at his camp in Bay St. Louis. My response was he ought to come back right now. We went to see Larroque."

The vicar general met with Hebert, the father and two of the boys, expressing sympathy, pledging that he would take action. He did, but not fast enough for attorney Hebert. "I remember calling Larroque every night for the next three days. I was concerned that some parents might harm Gauthé. At that time, it had never been firmly set in my mind, or my clients', that the Church had a legal responsibility for the tort," Hebert told *The Times*. In a matter of days, Hebert had four families wanting representation, wanting justice.

Larroque drove to Bay St. Louis the morning after he met with the Hebert

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"If most people were like me," says one nun suspicious of Gauthé, "they were afraid to falsely accuse. The more I worried about it, I felt caught between my growing suspicion and the need to bring the matter to others."

party and conferred with the bishop. Two days later he called Gauthé to the chancery in Lafayette. "Gil," said Larroque, "we have a big problem. It's with little boys." And Gilbert Gauthé began to weep.

Larroque presented Gauthé with papers he signed, suspending him from the priesthood on the spot. He gave Gauthé 24 hours to leave Henry. The next morning Gauthé said mass as scheduled. When the housekeeper arrived Saturday morning, the priest was gone. Two ladies of the parish packed his heavier belongings and sent them to Napoleonville where, rumor had it, he'd gone to recuperate from a nervous breakdown.

The sons of Hebert's initial clients were altar boys. The lawyer asked Larroque to have the Church contact families of all altar boys in Henry and the nearby chapel at Esther, where Gauthé served mass regularly. The

parents wanted Gauthé jailed immediately. Hebert explained that it would require statements by the children to legal authorities, and this troubled everyone.

Doubting his own ability to assess the human damage, Hebert arranged for psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Bouillion in Lafayette. The children told Bouillion about others, and others, and others. Faced with widen-

ing legal ramifications, Hebert once again asked Larroque to have the Church contact parents of other children. But, Hebert says, this did not happen. Weeks passed. Hebert, frustrated at the diocese's procrastination, contacted a former law school classmate, Raul Bencomo of New Orleans, a plaintiffs' attorney experienced in damages litigation.

"I didn't want my vision of what I

knew the Church's legal position to be affected by my faith," Hebert explains, "and because of the case being so difficult, I felt it would be better to bring in someone from outside the area, totally immune."

Finally, on Aug. 12, 1983—six weeks after Gauthé's removal—Bishop Frey wrote Hebert proposing a meeting with "a core group of families" and a psychologist. "I have committed the financial resources of the diocese for whatever counseling may be necessary or advantageous to those affected. The caution which has been exercised throughout may have been impeded by the proper communication of the actions taken by the diocese. This caution was necessary not simply to avoid scandal and harm to the Church but primarily to avoid any further injury or trauma to the young people and their families or other innocent parties."

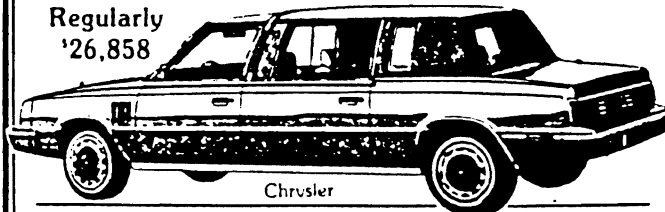
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"We didn't want to begin and end with Gauthé. We wanted to get to the upper councils of the Church to say, 'You're not running a good clean house.'"

—Victims' attorney Raul Bencomo

Bencomo wrote the bishop on August 19 requesting a meeting to review the Church's insurance policies. "In the meantime," the lawyer wrote, "we do ask that the Church and its representatives not make contact, either directly or indirectly with any of the aforementioned families." The letter requested that Bencomo be contacted on all matters pertaining to his clients.

"Only four families were referred to in the letter," Bencomo says. "Nothing, in my mind, should have stopped them from contacting others."

In January 1984, Bishop Frey has stated he read Dr. Bouillon's report on the victims; this was accompanied by an independent assessment written by consulting psychologist Dr. Edward Schwere of New Orleans, a specialist in child sexual abuse. Because *The Times* was denied interviews with Frey and Larroque, we have been unable to

Gauthé's victims have, or have not, been contacted.

Render Unto Caesar

Shortly after Gauthé's removal, Mouton gave a sermon in Henry saying Gauthé left the parish because of "serious moral indiscretions." To one parent he later proposed that the children come and confess their sins. Gauthé spent several days in

Opelousas after leaving Henry, saw a psychiatrist, then returned to his family home in Napoleonville. Larroque remained in contact with him, and in August, arranged for a screening at the House of Affirmation, a Church-run treatment facility for troubled clergy in Whitinsville, Mass., a suburb of Boston. Gauthé returned to Napoleonville where he lived for another two months before departing for the House

of Affirmation. He remained in treatment there for the following year. The Lafayette Diocese paid the bill.

By October 1983, Raul Bencomo was well into negotiations with lawyers for the Church and insurance companies on claims of nine victims and their families. The legal premise behind the suits is "respondeat superior," which means, simply, that an organization may be found liable for damages by its employees. In parishes across America, Church insurance policies cover such possible mishaps, like automobile accidents involving clergy or injuries to visitors on Church property.

Bob Wright of Lafayette represented the diocese. New Orleans lawyer Thomas Rayer represented the archdiocese, and Robert Leake, also of New Orleans, served as lead counsel for a bevy of insurance companies holding the diocese's policies. These are: Lloyds of London, Fire and

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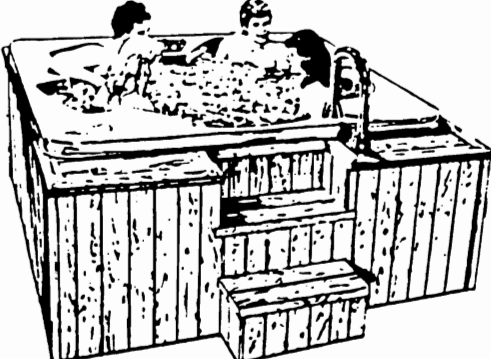
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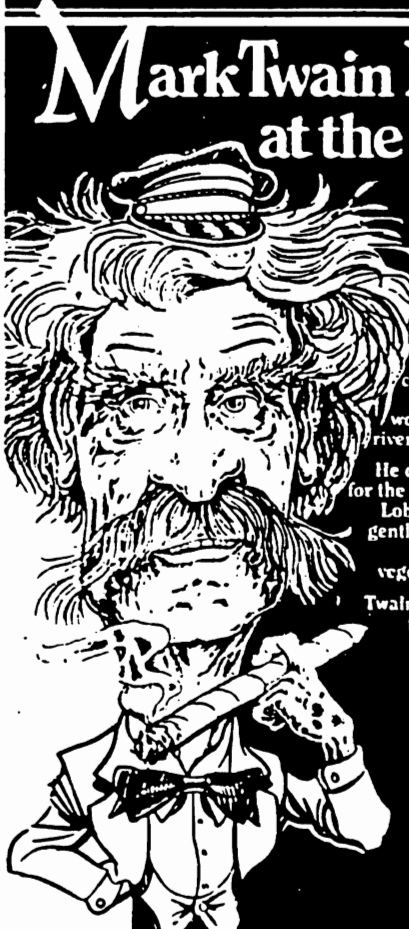


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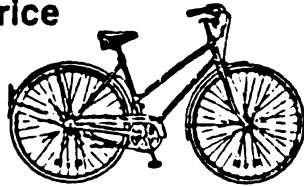
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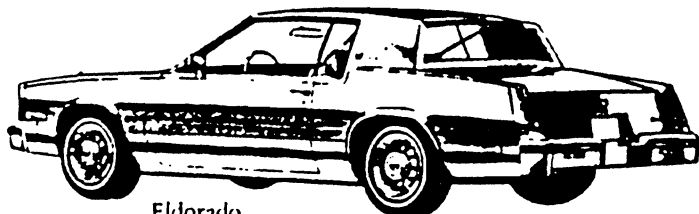
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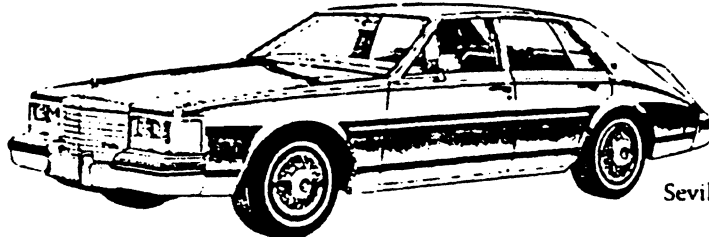
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Long sessions among the lawyers dealt with hard questions. How does a carrier compensate for the destruction of innocence? How many years of treatment, and at what projected cost, are necessary in a life-cycle forecast to treat a sexually abused child?

"We took the position," Bencomo says, "that the psychological processes involved in incest cases were the same here. My concern has been privacy to protect the kids." By spring of 1984, with settlement negotiations drawing to a close, nine months had passed since Gauthe's removal, and not a word had surfaced in the media.

On his end, Hebert had to deal with clients who wanted Gauthe arrested and put in jail. Early on, he had arranged a meeting with his clients and District Attorney Nathan Stansbury, who explained that, to return an indictment, a grand jury would need testimony from victimized children. The parties agreed that Dr. Bouillion, continuing therapy with the young people, would prepare them for the eventual testimony.

Bencomo took an aggressive approach in the settlement negotiations. "We didn't want to begin and end with Gauthe. We wanted to get to upper councils of the Church to say, 'You're not running a good clean house.'"

"I think they've been totally remiss toward their flock. I wanted a broader type of recovery and redress. They should be offering psychological counseling to all the afflicted families at their expense. The Church was trying to obviate the need for publicity with the settlements. They did attempt—because of confidentiality—to pay fair damages in each instance. I still wanted them to circulate a memo, to have the bishop issue edicts for new procedures to check such instances. The amount of suffering a child will incur—the sleepless nights, elements that are intangible, but real: like loss of innocence—all this was crucial.

"I as a lawyer am distinguishing between the Church as a business-like institution and the Church as a religious institution. I was an altar boy and once considered the priesthood. My course of action, my lawsuit, my anger stems from the fact that the Church, at least the diocese in Lafayette, is a poorly managed, shoddily run operation."

In June of 1984, the negotiations concluded. The \$4-million-plus settlement was spread among nine plaintiffs; a third of the fees went to attorneys, with medical and professional expenses deducted. But an emotional wall divided the Vermilion families from the Church; they wanted to re-establish a human rapport. Hebert contacted the chancery, and Msgr. Larroque agreed to a retreat. Jesuits at Grand Coteau scheduled a weekend, but the diocese backed down on grounds that new litigation with other families prevented the bishop's participation for legal reasons.

"As a lawyer I understood that," says Hebert, "but as a Catholic I was disappointed by the absence of a spiritual reconciliation." □

End of Part I