

## **Father Thomas F. Shea**

*It was a victim's lawyer who, on October 26, 1994, brought the first recorded sexual abuse allegation against Fr. Thomas Shea to the attention of the Archdiocese. By November 2, 1994, the accused priest was at Saint John Vianney Hospital for evaluation, never to return to his Philadelphia parish, Saint Clement, or to active ministry. The Grand Jury would commend this prompt handling of a sexually abusive priest, except that it merely illustrates what Cardinal Bevilacqua did when a victim's lawyer was involved – and what he did not do in other cases.*

*Documents in the Secret Archives file of Fr. Shea, who was ordained in 1964, reveal why Archdiocese officials acted promptly in this case. They clearly did so not to protect the children of the Church, but only because legal action was threatened. A contemporaneous case – that of Fr. Stanley Gana, who was sent for evaluation as a sexual offender at the same time as Fr. Shea – demonstrates how differently cases that did not immediately threaten the Archdiocese with public scandal or legal liability were handled. Cardinal Bevilacqua had received reports four years earlier that Fr. Gana had molested and anally sodomized an altar boy for years, beginning when the victim was 13 years old. Yet the Cardinal did not remove Fr. Gana from ministry until 2002, seven years after Fr. Shea's forced retirement.*

### **A lawyer reports to Archdiocesan legal counsel in 1994 that his client was sexually abused by Father Shea for several years in the mid-1970s.**

On October 26, 1994, Secretary for Clergy William J. Lynn learned from John O'Dea, the Archdiocese's lawyer, that Fr. Thomas Shea had been accused of sexually abusing one, and maybe two, boys when he was assigned as assistant pastor at Saint Helena parish in Philadelphia from 1969 until 1975. It was a lawyer representing a man named "Scott" who informed O'Dea of the abuse. The lawyer told O'Dea that Fr. Shea had abused Scott when he was an altar boy, that the abuse lasted several years, and that it took place in the rectory and at a motel in Cape May, New Jersey. The lawyer said that he had been in contact with another man who said that Fr. Shea had also abused him.

Monsignor Lynn, accompanied by his assistant, Msgr. Michael T. McCulken, interviewed Fr. Shea the next day. According to a memo recording the meeting, Fr. Shea admitted having "genital contact" with Scott and another boy – "Alfred." He said that he did not know if Alfred was the other victim that Scott's lawyer referred to. Father Shea told Msgr. Lynn that he did not know how many times he had genital contact with Scott and did not remember abusing any others.

Father McCulken's October 27, 1994, memo describes the Secretary for Clergy assessing for Fr. Shea the likelihood of a lawsuit or adverse publicity. It records Msgr. Lynn explaining that the reason for psychological treatment "right away" is to "show responsibility by Father Shea and by the Church in this situation." Finally, after Fr. Shea claimed he was not Scott's first sexual experience, Msgr. Lynn suggested to the accused priest that perhaps he "was seduced into it" by the altar boy. (Appendix D-27)

The same day that he met with Fr. Shea, Msgr. Lynn sent Cardinal Bevilacqua a memo describing the allegations against Fr. Shea, as well as the priest's admission that he had sexually abused at least two minors at Saint Helena parish. The Secretary for Clergy recommended that Fr. Shea be sent to Saint John Vianney Hospital for inpatient treatment. The Cardinal approved sending the priest to the hospital, but questioned whether the usual procedure wasn't to have the hospital evaluate the priest before deciding whether inpatient treatment was called for.

On November 2, 1994, Fr. Shea was sent to Saint John Vianney.

**Monsignor Lynn reports to the Cardinal that Father Shea has admitted many more acts of pedophilia to therapists.**

On December 27, 1994, Msgr. Lynn forwarded to Cardinal Bevilacqua a letter from a therapist outlining his diagnosis. In Msgr. Lynn's accompanying memo, the Secretary for Clergy informed the Cardinal that the therapist had told Msgr. Lynn that he thought pedophilia would be the diagnosis, based on many more acts of sexual contact with children. The letter was in response to Msgr. Lynn's request that the therapist put his diagnosis in writing as soon as it was determined.

Cardinal Bevilacqua discussed Fr. Shea's situation with his top aides at an issues meeting on January 3, 1995. According to a January 13 memo to Msgr. Lynn from Msgr. Joseph R. Cistone, then Assistant to the Vicar for Administration, the Cardinal had several questions he wanted answered before deciding what to do with Fr. Shea. His first question, as recorded by Msgr. Cistone, was: "When was the last act of pedophilia? Are we within the statute of limitation on any one of these acts?" The Cardinal also wanted to know if the victims were now older than 28, a factor relevant to the statute of limitations. He wondered if Fr. Shea would willingly seek laicization.

On January 20, 1995, Msgr. Lynn met with Fr. Shea and a therapist. Monsignor McCulken recorded the meeting in a memo dated January 24, 1995. According to that memo, the Secretary for Clergy tried to get the answers Cardinal Bevilacqua sought. Father Shea, however, was not forthcoming and refused to admit even relationships that he had previously acknowledged. He would not repeat the admission made to the therapist that there had been many more acts of pedophilia. He denied any victims other than Scott, even though he had told Msgrs. Lynn and McCulken in October that he had sexually abused a boy named Alfred as well.

Uncharacteristically, the Secretary for Clergy pushed Fr. Shea to reveal the existence, if not necessarily the names, of other victims. Monsignor Lynn told the priest that based on “the evidence of the medical profession,” it was “very unusual for such instances to be with only one youngster.” Monsignor Lynn asked Fr. Shea to “seriously reflect on this question.” According to Msgr. McCulken’s handwritten notes (but not transcribed into the typed version), the Secretary for Clergy even told the priest that if there were “other times,” that “probably won’t change status.” The therapist counseled his patient “that if there are other occurrences, not brought out into the open, then the pain of shame is a very heavy cross.” According to Msgr. McCulken’s memo, Fr. Shea said “that he will really have to think about this.”

Had Fr. Shea confessed to recent acts of pedophilia, the Archdiocese could have proceeded to laicize the priest without his consent. As was detailed in documents in the file of Fr. Peter Dunne, another diagnosed pedophile that the Cardinal was dealing with at this time, the Archdiocese could only laicize a priest against his will for an offense committed within five years. (Handwritten notes kept by Msgr. McCulken record Msgr. Lynn telling Fr. Shea, incorrectly, that the Cardinal “can’t impose laicization” unless there were incidents “last week;” Msgr. McCulken changed this to “unless misconduct was recent” in his typed memo.) The documents in Fr. Dunne’s file also reveal that the Cardinal’s aides and lawyers were advising him at this time that laicization could protect the Archdiocese from liability for future acts of sexual abuse by an accused priest. Accordingly, Msgr. Lynn told Fr. Shea that it would be problematic for him to remain a priest and live at home with his mother, even with no ministry, because “[t]he Archdiocese continues to be legally responsible.”

Monsignor McCulken recorded that after Fr. Shea left the room, the therapist and Msgr. Lynn continued to discuss the case. Monsignor Lynn's assistant wrote: "It is believed that there are more incidents than what has so far been reported by TFS. The diagnosis is pedophilia with the strength of the diagnosis being very strong because TFS was in a relationship with the boy, rather than just anonymously acting out."

**Father Shea refuses to seek laicization and is permitted to retire in 1995.**

On May 20, 1995, Msgr. Lynn sent a memo to the Cardinal about the January meeting at which Fr. Shea refused to admit to more than one victim – Scott. The Secretary for Clergy reported that on May 5, 1995, the priest, still at Saint John Vianney, had admitted to having one more victim, who had since died in a motorcycle accident. According to Msgr. Lynn's memo, Fr. Shea had been paying the victim to remain silent. Monsignor Lynn answered the Cardinal's questions concerning the statute of limitations, writing: "The known acts of pedophilia in this case are beyond the statute of limitations. The first known act occurred over ten years ago. The one known living victim is in his thirties." Monsignor Lynn also informed Cardinal Bevilacqua that Fr. Shea "will not seek laicization." Having failed to elicit evidence of a more recent incident that could support involuntary laicization of the priest, the Secretary for Clergy recommended that Fr. Shea be permitted to retire and live at Villa Saint Joseph, a home for retired priests.

Although Fr. Shea was only 59 years old, Cardinal Bevilacqua in June 1995 permitted him to retire, and expressly allowed him to participate in "celebrations with permission of Secretary of Clergy." Father Shea has lived at Villa Saint Joseph ever since. For nearly 10 years, he was without apparent supervision. The Archdiocese has never made public that he retired early because he sexually abused minors.

**In July 2002 Cardinal Bevilacqua receives allegations against Father Shea from his assignment at Saint Joseph in Collingdale in the late 1970s.**

On July 25, 2002, Cardinal Bevilacqua received a letter alleging that Fr. Shea had sexually abused minors at Saint Joseph parish, in Collingdale, where he was assistant pastor from June 1975 until February 1979. The letter was anonymous, but came from someone who said he or she was "privy" to abuse perpetrated by Fr. Shea on a "male

family member.” The author, who explained that he/she could not break the victim’s trust by revealing names, said that the victim “can not to this day stop running away from his life.”

The writer told Cardinal Bevilacqua that the victim’s mother had relied heavily on Fr. Shea to guide her son because the boy’s father was absent. The priest betrayed this trust, according to the letter, by providing alcohol to the boy and sexually abusing him “from an early age, well through adulthood.” The writer said that Fr. Shea had paid the victim money “at first to continue with this misconduct and later to ensure its secrecy.” These payments were said to continue until just a few years before the letter was written. The writer encouraged the Archdiocese to investigate the payments, saying that they were made with checks. The writer also claimed to know that Fr. Shea had been “affiliated with” at least three altar boys from Saint Joseph parish.

Father Shea was living at the Villa Saint Joseph retirement home when this letter was received. The only response documented in Archdiocese files is that the letter was forwarded to legal counsel.

### **Church officials’ strategy for handling Father Shea’s case reflects their priorities.**

Father Shea’s case demonstrates how the Archdiocese molded its strategy for handling abuse allegations to fit its exposure to legal liability. This case was different because it was a client’s lawyer who brought forward the allegation. For this reason, it could not be ignored for four years, like the allegation against Fr. Gana, which was brought by a seminarian who could be intimidated and silenced. And because Fr. Shea admitted the sexual abuse, there was no benefit in attacking or questioning the victim’s credibility. The Archdiocese’s therapist had expressly diagnosed the priest as a pedophile, so that made him ineligible for the usual response in such cases: reassignment.

The only option left was to try to distance the Archdiocese from its priest in order to avoid liability for his crimes. This could explain why the Secretary for Clergy would so uncharacteristically seek evidence of more recent misconduct, and why he would note that, according to medical evidence, it would be “very unusual” for an abuser of minors to have just one victim. An admission to the existence of recent victims, particularly if unnamed, could serve the Archdiocese’s legal purposes by providing grounds for

involuntary laicization. The case of Fr. Shea was not about actually looking for victims, much less helping or protecting them. It was about cynical legal maneuvers intended to shield the Archdiocese from responsibility.

On October 8, 2004, Fr. Shea agreed to live “a supervised life of prayer and penance.”

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