

PRIESTS AND PEDOPHILIA

A greater openness

By Eleanor Bergholz
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The February conviction of the Rev. Roger Trott of the Greensburg Diocese for child sexual abuse contrasts sharply with the way the diocese and local law enforcement officials handled a similar case several years earlier.

Troft, former pastor of St. John the Baptist de la Salle parish in Delmont, admitted molesting 12 boys.

When parents reported Trott's fondling of their children to the Westmoreland County Children's Bureau, it investigated and referred the case to the district attorney for prosecution. Church officials relieved Trott of his pastoral duties.

Under a plea bargain discussed with the parents, Trott was charged with one count of corruption of minors involving a 13-year-old altar boy and sentenced to five years' probation.

The deal also required Trott, 42, to be treated for pedophilia, a sexual disorder in which the love object is a child, at St. Luke's Institute in Suitland, Md.

Troft's case was handled swiftly, openly and decisively. But that of the Rev. Dennis Dellamalba a few years earlier did not result in prosecution. Instead, there was a civil case that has remained secret for five years.

In May 1986, the Greensburg Diocese paid two families \$375,000 to settle a civil lawsuit brought in 1983 on behalf of three teen-age boys molested by Dellamalba, a former associate pastor at Mother of Sorrows parish in Murrysville.

District Attorney John Driscoll said he would do it differently if Dellamalba's case came to him now. He said police, investigators, the Children's Bureau and the diocese all learned a great deal from the inaction that characterized the Dellamalba case.

"If that case happened today, it would have been reported much sooner and it would have been more fully investigated," he said. "The Children's Bureau was not involved. There was no investigation."

"We prepared a criminal complaint, but the families decided they wished not to pursue it. [Today] we would have been able to convince the victims that [criminal prosecution] would not have hurt their interests."

Driscoll praised the way the Greensburg Diocese handled the Trott case. "The diocese has made a complete turnaround in the way they view this type of a case. One could not ask for a better response. They were very prompt, very decisive, no equivocation. They acted in a clear-cut manner from the outset."

Today's greater openness in handling such cases, in Greensburg and elsewhere, is the result of several factors new laws that require more reporting of child sexual abuse; greater public awareness; cancellation of diocesan liability insurance for sexual misconduct; and a developing understanding by diocesan officials about the addictive nature of pedophilia.

As a result of these factors, the four Catholic dioceses in Western Pennsylvania are beginning to develop policies to deal with such cases.

Several parishioners describe the Rev. Dennis Dellamalba as charismatic — a priest who brought new life to the parish when he arrived in 1977.

He enjoyed music and dancing and earned the nickname "Disco Denny." The kids liked him and he was often invited to parishioners' homes. He ran the youth group at the parish and spent time hanging out with kids at Franklin Regional High School. He even traveled in the school bus with the team to high school football games.



The Rev. Roger Trott with his lawyer, Ross Bash, after a hearing in February.

Tony Tye/Post-Gazette

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In the spring of 1982, without explanation to parishioners, Dellamalba was transferred to Holy Family in Latrobe.

A year later, two sets of parents from Mother of Sorrows told the district attorney that Dellamalba had molested their sons.

Driscoll said he learned about Dellamalba as the statute of limitations on his offenses was running out.

"We prepared a criminal complaint but we did not officially file charges," he said, adding that his office was guided by the feelings of the families and their attorney who wanted to protect the boys' privacy.

Parishioners say Dellamalba molested as many as a dozen boys. In the civil suit filed in April 1983, parents retained Melvin Belli

of San Francisco to represent them. The complaint states that Dellamalba "misused his position of special trust and confidence," and that numerous instances of molestation occurred in 1980 and 1981 while Dellamalba was "acting within the scope of his employment as a priest."

It says Dellamalba had "improper and illegal sexual contact by touching their genitals and fondling them" while a guest in one family's home, once on Christmas Day, in the sacristy, and in the confessional.

Dellamalba failed to stop his deviant behavior after being confronted by one family, the complaint states, and the now-retired Bishop William Conare "failed to discharge Dellamalba from his duties after having been confronted by the plaintiffs and others."

In February 1984, diocesan attorneys argued successfully to seal records in the civil suit despite parental opposition.

In March 1987, the Post-Gazette asked that the seal be lifted. After a series of hearings and legal arguments, Common Pleas Judge Donetta Ambrose opened the record but kept the depositions of Conare and Dellamalba secret, even though they had been filed in court. As a result, many details of what happened and how long the diocese knew about Dellamalba's behavior remain secret today.

Dellamalba was sent to a psychiatric hospital in Hartford, Conn., called the Institute of Living, sources say. Diocesan officials won't say where Dellamalba, who opposed the unsealing of the court record, is now, and a family member refused comment. He is listed on leave in the 1986 Catholic Kennedy Directory, and a diocesan official has suggested that he is in the

process of being laicized, or removed from the priesthood.

Besides Trott, a brother has been prosecuted in Allegheny County and two priests in Erie County for sexual acts involving children.

In Cambria County, the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese and a Common Pleas judge have muzzled four sets of parents who sued the diocese in May 1986. They seek damages on behalf of five children they say were molested by Msgr. Francis McCaa.

McCaa, 62, was pastor of Holy Name parish in Ebensburg and was once chancellor of the diocese.

In 1985, parents told the district attorney about the molestations after concluding that no action would be forthcoming from non-retired Bishop James J. Hogan.

Within a week of the meeting with the Da and after a television report about the charges, McCaa resigned. Altoona station WTAJ-TV reported that McCaa had fondled the boys.

District Attorney Gerald Long did not file criminal charges. He has since been elected to Cambria County Common Pleas Court and has become the judge in the civil suit filed by the parents. Long also is a member of Holy Name parish. He did not answer repeated phone calls, nor would he be questioned in person about the case.

Long sealed the record as Ambrose had done, again, even though parents of the boys opposed the secrecy. The seal is so broad, the parents and their attorney say, that they are not permitted to discuss anything about the case.

The suit is still pending. McCaa now works as a chaplain in a hospital in another state, a diocesan official said. He is listed in the 1986 Catholic Directory as absent on sick leave.

In Erie County, Assistant District Attorney Tim Lucas said parents from St. Gregory parish in North East told him their 7-year-old daughter had been molested by the pastor, the Rev. Donald Bolton.

Lucas said the parents came to him because they felt Bolton's order, the Redemptorists, had reneged on a promise that he would not work with children again. The parents had discovered that Bolton was teaching at a school in New York.

An Erie diocesan official said the diocese was not responsible for Bolton because he was a member of a religious order.

Bolton, 60, was charged in November 1986 with one count each of indecent assault and corruption of minors. He pleaded guilty and received three years' probation in February 1987.

He was accused of fondling the girl many times during the previous two years. The police officer who arrested Bolton said there were other victims but that the statute of limitations had run out and Bolton could not be prosecuted. Bolton agreed to enter a program that treats sexual disorders.

A second Erie priest, the Rev. John Murray, 64, of St. Matthew parish, Erie County, was charged in May 1985 with one count each of indecent assault and corruption of minors. He was accused of fondling a 12-year-old altar boy on April 1, 1985, at the church. The boy's parents reported it to the police.

Murray pleaded no contest in August 1985. In the fall of 1986, he was sentenced to one year's probation. In the interim he went to two treatment facilities.

Gary Loncki, director of information for the Erie Diocese, said Murray has been removed from active ministry.

In September 1986, Brother Ralph Mravintz, 60, pleaded no contest to a disorderly conduct charge after the original charge that he had molested a student at North Catholic High School in Pittsburgh was reduced.

Allegheny County Assistant District Attorney Joseph Ruddy said the plea bargain was arranged at the request of the victim and his family because the boy did not want to testify.

Mravintz taught mathematics at Memphis, Tenn., Catholic High School during the past school year.

The Rev. Bert Buby, provincial of the Marianist Brothers in Dayton, Ohio, the order to which Mravintz belongs, said he is "absolutely certain" Brother Ralph is not a pedophile and feels he was falsely accused. He said the order plans to try to have the conviction expunged from Mravintz's record.

Ruddy said Mravintz accepted a plea of no contest, calling that a tacit admission that he did something wrong. He said he would oppose any effort to expunge Mravintz's record.

Ruddy said a friend of the student's reported a similar incident but recanted it to the principal the next day. Mravintz did give police a necktie with a naked torso of a woman on the back, which the boy said the teacher wore.

Memphis Catholic High School principal Edward Locks said Mravintz presents no danger to students.

"We and the order are behind him 100 percent. They [the order] said there was no incident. Eventually, it will be expunged from his record. He is doing a fine job at Memphis Catholic."

Mravintz could not be reached for comment. His attorney, John Doherty, refused to discuss his case.

A Pittsburgh Diocesan spokesman, the Rev. Ronald Lengwin, said the diocese had no responsibility for Mravintz because the brother is a member of a religious order.

The four Western Pennsylvania dioceses are in varying stages of developing policies to deal with priests accused of child sexual abuse.

The policy of the Greensburg Diocese, adopted in January 1985, states that the diocese will investigate any reports of abuse. If the allegations are true, the priest is relieved of his duties and sent for a medical evaluation. The diocese will cooperate fully with civil authorities and will assure victims that they are of "primary concern."

The policy of the Pittsburgh Diocese, adopted in February, states that if bona fide reports are made regarding the misconduct of a priest, the secretary for clergy and pastoral life will "make whatever intervention seems appropriate."

The Erie Diocese is in the process of drafting a policy covering any diocesan employee involved in child sexual abuse. The policy will deal with the victims, the victims' families and the perpetrator.

In Altoona-Johnstown, the policy is to remove the priest from his position as soon as a problem emerges.

"You would try to find an assignment where the priest would not come into contact with children in the course of his duties," said Msgr. Philip Saylor.

He said diocesan officials went to a regional meeting last year at which civil and canon lawyers and a psychiatrist advised that such situations should be dealt with immediately.

But as it stands now, he said, a bishop has "infinite discretionary power in dealing with a situation."

"As far as I am concerned, the whole thing infuriates me," Saylor said. "When you get a bad priest, it reflects on the whole church. It reflects on all priests. But I am not surprised. We are all human beings."



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