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Marked by Scandal

Tampa Bay Area Priests Accused of Crimes in Recent Years Are No Longer in

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Tampa - Were problem priests in the Tampa Bay area hustled from one parish to the next? Alleged victims sworn to secrecy? Money paid? Crimes committed? Such questions, raised by the most recent wave of accusations against the Catholic Church, could rock the foundation of the faithful in this area. And yet, clergy crises of the past 15 years have shown that in times of trouble, local parishioners have almost always embraced their pastors. Forgive, they said. Focus on the good works, which were many. Remember that priests are human, too.

Since 1987, at least seven Bay area priests have been accused of crimes, from embezzling church money to molesting children. Only two were convicted of crimes. What became of these men shows no real pattern of improprieties - or consistent candor - among the dioceses.

One priest moved on to other churches; one remained at his church. Some left the ministry. With one exception, it appears none of these priests remains active within the church.

NORMAN G. BALTHAZAR When Norman G. Balthazar was charged with soliciting a lewd act from a male, undercover police officer on Oct. 31, 1991, he was pastor of Christ the King Catholic Church in Tampa.

A Hillsborough County judge threw out the case, ruling the conversation about engaging in a sexual act - with no references to money - did not constitute a crime.

Balthazar, then 53 and one of five monsignors in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, blamed his actions on a night of heavy drinking. He "lost control" of his senses, he said, and "stopped in the wrong place."

After a nine-month sabbatical that included counseling, Balthazar returned to the area as assistant pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Inverness. Later, he was assigned to St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Zephyrhills.

Balthazar now works with the Miserere Guild, the board of trustees governing the 41-year-old Calvary Catholic Cemetery on the north edge of Pinellas Park. When reached by telephone, Balthazar declined comment. Diocese spokesman Mary Jo Murphy did not describe his duties.

As pastor of Christ the King, the outspoken priest reportedly encouraged worshipers to "love the sinner but hate the sin."

His social activism extended to the gay rights battle of the early 1990s, when Balthazar joined with then-county Commissioner Joe Chillura to oppose a proposed human rights ordinance.

SIMEON L. GARDNER Though former priest Simeon L. Gardner and one-time bait shop owner Joseph Mondeau argued in court over who abused whom, the judge said the parishioners of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Lutz were the true victims.

Between them, the pair received 30 years of probation, thousands of hours of community service and orders to pay more than \$300,000 in restitution.

Former Assistant State Attorney Anthony Arena says the case was particularly disturbing.

"I felt sorry for both of them," he says.

In 1997, Gardner admitted taking more than \$213,000 from church accounts to pay Mondeau to keep quiet about their sexual relationship. The rifled funds included St. Mary's "Helping Hands" collection for the poor.

Years earlier, Mondeau had sought Gardner's advice about personal problems, including serious money difficulties. Sexual encounters followed, and Mondeau said Gardner helped him pay rent, utilities, even purchase a car.

At some point, lawyers said, Mondeau began to demand money from the priest and threatened to expose the affair.

The relationship reportedly collapsed after a church member noted financial discrepancies. Gardner, then 70, pleaded guilty to grand theft and Mondeau, then 37, pleaded no contest to extortion.

Diocese spokeswoman Mary Jo Murphy said Gardner retired, but she declined to say where he is living or whether he is receiving a pension from the diocese. He is complying with court-ordered reimbursements to St. Mary's, she said. Telephone information for Fort Myers shows an unlisted number for a Simeon L. Gardner.

Mondeau, meanwhile, remains in the Bay area. When called for comment this month, he said simply, "I wish I could."

JEREMIAH M. SPILLANE When Jeremiah M. Spillane arrived at the Diocese of Venice in 1995, he was introduced by letter as "a priest in good standing."

Specifically, his recommendation notes: "Father Spillane has ... manifested no behavioral problems that would indicate he might deal with minors in an inappropriate manner."

A member of the Legionaries of Christ religious order, Spillane hoped to make a "transference" to the diocese. He was assigned to Sarasota's Incarnation Catholic Church and to serve as counselor at Sarasota's Cardinal Mooney High School.

Less than two years later, a second missive arrived at the diocese. This one, from the spokesman for the Legionaries of Christ, said: "The charges against Father Spillane, if proven to be true, are contrary to [our] values and are unacceptable and inappropriate."

Spillane, then 43, was arrested in February 1997 after corresponding on the Internet with what he believed was a 13-year-old boy. The "boy" was actually a Clearwater police detective. The two arranged to rendezvous at a Clearwater gas station, and when Spillane arrived, he was charged with attempting to commit a lewd or lascivious act and seduction of a child by computer.

The incident shocked officials of the order, said Owen Kearns, Legionaries of Christ spokesman. Spillane no longer functions as a priest of the order, he added.

Spillane pleaded no contest to charges and was ordered into a sex offender program. He also was sentenced to house arrest, which was apparently reduced to probation. Call up the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Web site, and his picture remains on the "Sex Offender" list, though Spillane appears to have completed probation.

His attorney, Joseph Ciarciaglino, said he does not know Spillane's whereabouts. A Venice diocese spokesperson also knew of no address. Repeated calls to a Sarasota telephone number - possibly that of a relative, John E. Spillane - were not answered.

ROCCO D'ANGELO Rocco D'Angelo reportedly molested several boys during his 30-plus-year career. And yet he has never been stripped of his collar or criminally charged.

Moreover, when he came to the Diocese of St. Petersburg in 1968, church officials in the Bay area may have known little, if anything, about the allegations of sexual misconduct left in his wake.

D'Angelo's superiors in the Archdiocese of Miami transferred the priest to the Bay area without fully disclosing that he had been repeatedly accused of "homosexual activities with young boys," according to a Miami Herald article published in March.

According to the story - based on court documents, church memoranda and interviews with lawyers - parents first complained to the Miami Archdiocese in 1966. They said the incidents involved kissing, fondling, even rape, and that they occurred while D'Angelo was assigned to St. Mark's Catholic Church in Boynton Beach and St. Bernadette's in Hollywood.

The parents were assured that D'Angelo would receive treatment, which he reportedly did in a New England facility in 1967, and that he would not be able to hurt any more children. The parents remained silent, unaware that D'Angelo had been moved to another Florida church where he would again be among children.

But in the spring of 1996, four Tampa men filed lawsuits claiming they had been molested by the priest in the 1980s. The revelations resonated across the state as D'Angelo's former accusers realized they had been misled.

In 1999, the Archdiocese of Miami paid undisclosed settlements to three men who said they had been victimized by D'Angelo during his tenure there. The Tampa cases were never heard: A judge ruled the statute of limitations had expired.

D'Angelo's attorney, Joseph Ciarciaglino, declined detailed comment. Nor did he say whether the retired priest, now 79, remains in the Tampa Bay area. But in a statement to the Miami Herald, Ciarciaglino said of D'Angelo: "I have never dealt with anyone more remorseful."

JAMES E. RUSSO The parishioners at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Clearwater learned of their priest's resignation first. During Mass. On Jan. 25, 1997.

"As with most people, there are emotional items which we carry with us for years and which eventually must be dealt with," said the statement written by James E. Russo, then 52. "For me, that time is now."

A few days later, Bishop Robert Lynch elaborated on those "items," but barely. His succinct missive said "an episode of misconduct" had occurred years earlier, between Russo and an unidentified minor. Since the person reporting the incident requested anonymity, the diocese would not discuss it, Lynch added.

Russo had led St. Michael's for a decade, following assignments at Blessed Trinity in St. Petersburg and St. Patrick's in Largo. He guided liturgical policy in the diocese by acting as its head of worship and served as the president of Catholic Charities. He also co-hosted a weekly Mass broadcast from the Cathedral of St. Jude in St. Petersburg.

Today, the diocese acknowledges only that Russo left the ministry. But other roads point to Silver Spring, Md., the home of Cooperative Housing Foundation International, where a James E. Russo is chief financial officer. The nonprofit organization partners with local governments and agencies to coordinate affordable housing projects. Much of its current work is in developing countries; a recent initiative in Afghanistan delivered coal to thousands. Though a company spokesperson said a James E. Russo is on staff, biographical information on Russo was not supplied. Nor did Russo return telephone calls.

JAMES LARA In November 1987, the one-time music directors of Church of the Nativity in Brandon accused their longtime priest of making sexual advances to their daughter beginning when she was 14.

Dallas and Elisabeth Pavone's lawsuit claimed priest James Lara touched their daughter numerous times "in a vulgar and offensive manner, including attempting to kiss her in a sexually explicit manner."

The girl reportedly didn't tell her parents until she was about 19.

The couple, who had been fired from their posts five months earlier, also accused Lara of slandering them, hitting and pushing Elisabeth, and publicly humiliating them, among other things.

Lara, who had been the church's pastor since 1969, told parishioners at the time that he had been instructed not to discuss the lawsuit.

"But I ask you to believe in me as your pastor. ... I need you all to continue praying for me."

The suit was "amicably resolved" in 1990, according to Hillsborough Circuit Court records.

Lara, who retired as Nativity's pastor after 30 years in June 1999, lives in Clearwater.

Dallas Pavone declined to comment about the lawsuit, only saying, "It was a very sad and tragic period of time in our family."

WILLIAM A. LAU His accuser came forward many years after the alleged sexual abuse. The Diocese of St. Petersburg, meanwhile, waited another five months before revealing why priest William A. Lau resigned his post at Blessed Trinity Catholic Church in St. Petersburg.

Lau, then 46, abruptly left the church in May 1996 after working there for eight years. Parishioners did not learn the reason for their pastor's exit until months later, when a statement by Bishop Robert Lynch appeared in the bulletin.

"While I will never knowingly condone, support or cover up sexual misconduct, there is an area of gray where the persons involved sometimes need privacy to begin the process of dealing with their actions and personal hurt. This was one of those cases," Lynch wrote.

The case reportedly involved an older teenager, a minor. The diocese gave no further details at the time.

A priest since 1979, Lau received treatment at St. Luke's Institute in Silver Spring, Md., after leaving Blessed Trinity.

Diocese spokesman Mary Jo Murphy says Lau was removed from the ministry and sought employment elsewhere.