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## **Twisted Journey of a Problem Priest Cleric Dogged by Claims of Sex Abuse**

Daily News Investigation  
Series: Predator Priest  
First of Two Parts / Part 1 of 2

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During the past three decades, the Rev. Gennaro Gentile has served in nine parishes throughout the northern reaches of the Archdiocese of New York. At virtually every station, allegations of sexual abuse of boys have dogged him.

According to court documents and scores of witnesses interviewed by the Daily News, Gentile has abused boys since 1971 in his rectory bedroom, at his remote upstate lake house and even in a parishioner's family room.

A News investigation into the life of Father Jerry, as the 55-year-old cleric is known, shows that archdiocese officials have chronically rejected the merits of the allegations while waging a vigorous fight to protect the priest's reputation.

Sources say financial settlements or arrangements have been made with the families of at least three young men - two of them brothers - who say they were sexually abused as teens by Gentile, who now handles annulments for the archdiocese in Poughkeepsie. A lawsuit involving the brothers was quietly settled four months ago.

When called by a News reporter, Gentile said, "No comment," then hung up.

Joseph Zwilling, archdiocesan spokesman, said he could not respond to a series of written questions yesterday. Msgr. Edward O'Donnell, who as archdiocesan director of priest personnel was involved in many aspects of the Gentile matter, did not return several phone calls.

The News investigation includes claims that Gentile:

Tried to forcibly remove the pajama bottoms of a 13-year-old Wappingers Falls boy during an unchaperoned camping trip to Virginia Beach in 1973.

Disregarded warnings from priest after priest, at parish after parish, that he should not take unchaperoned boys on overnight trips, including visits to his five-bedroom house on Ballston Lake in Saratoga County, which he calls Jerry's Retreat.

"I've been here for over 20 years," said one neighbor. "He has definitely had many kids that come up and spend either a weekend or a week, quite frequently. It is typically always boys."

Allowed young men to stay overnight in the rectory at Holy Name of Mary Church in Croton-on-Hudson, where he served as administrator and pastor from 1987 to 2000, and allowed one of them to use the rectory as his mailing address.

Took male teens up to his rectory bedroom and sometimes turned postdinner conversations or chess lessons into "full body massages," according to the teens.

Kept a video titled "The Art of Erotic Massage for Men" in his bookcase in the rectory at Holy Name of Mary. He also kept a book on a similar topic at his 100-year-old lake house.

In 1993, showed one of the brothers involved in the lawsuit a catalogue depicting male models "posed seductively in sexually provocative clothing." The boy was 15.

Gave young boys oil massages at the upstate home and didn't flinch when, on one occasion, a mother and her 8-year-old son walked in on him.

Took boys on all-expenses-paid vacations to Pennsylvania and Walt Disney World without their parents.

Has had four post office boxes issued in his name during his priesthood, which the plaintiffs' lawyer in the lawsuit suggested was how Gentile received the sexy male clothing catalogue and possibly other erotic materials.

In November, Gentile settled the lawsuit filed by the parents of the brothers who said he sexually abused them in the early 1990s when he was pastor at Holy Name of Mary. One of the attacks allegedly occurred at the upstate home, another in the family's home.

Defense lawyers successfully argued in 1999 that charges against the archdiocese should be dismissed because of the statute of limitations and because the archdiocese had no warning that Gentile, who has a master's degree in pastoral counseling from Iona College, had any propensity toward sexual abuse of young boys.

In reaching the settlement with Gentile, parents Vincent and Patricia Nauheimer were required to sign a confidentiality agreement, according to sources.

The News has learned that around the time the Nauheimers filed their lawsuit in 1997, the archdiocese agreed to finance psychiatric therapy for a third boy who, after alleging he'd been sexually abused by Gentile, tried to kill himself.

The money to pay for the boy's treatments came from the Holy Name of Mary fund for indigents, according to court papers and interviews.

The Nauheimers, who originally sought \$55 million in their lawsuit, declined repeated requests for comment. But The News obtained hundreds of pages of documents related to the lawsuit and to other allegations of sexual misconduct by Gentile.

Based on interviews with priests, men who say they were victimized by Gentile, their parents, former and current parishioners, former co-workers and eyewitnesses, as well as sworn affidavits, other court documents, confidential correspondence and public records, here is the story of the Rev. Gennaro Gentile:

#### Catholic boyhood

Charismatic, well-read and outgoing, Gentile was born in Manhattan and grew up in the north Bronx.

He is a camera buff, chess aficionado and avid racquetball player who enjoys taking his boat out on Ballston Lake.

Wherever he has worked, Gentile has been described as popular with preteens and teens. In 1978, he published a children's Christmas book titled "Mouse in the Manger."

Gentile attended Catholic schools in New York from age 9, beginning with Holy Rosary Elementary in 1955 and 1956, then St. Peter and Paul Elementary from 1956 to 1959. At his Confirmation, he chose Louis as his middle name.

He graduated in 1963 from Cathedral Prep on West End Ave. in Manhattan, then attended Cathedral

College from 1963 to 1965 and St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers from 1965 to 1971.

For about six months in 1970, he served as a deacon at St. Mary's Church in Wappingers Falls, Dutchess County, then returned to the seminary to complete formal training.

Gentile was ordained in May 1971 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan.

Trying to understand how Gentile ended up who he is today requires a journey back to his early days in the ministry, when he left disturbing impressions at the seminary and at St. Mary's in Wappingers Falls.

"It was more like, 'Does this guy have the characteristics that you'd like to see in someone who was ordained as a priest?' I didn't feel Jerry was submissive enough. He wasn't willing to think of others' feelings instead of his own," said the Rev. Richard O'Gorman, who was his mentor at St. Mary's in Wappingers Falls.

'He has a problem'

After completing his apprenticeship there, Gentile was given his first posting as an ordained priest at St. Mary's parish in Poughkeepsie, 13 miles from the Wappingers Falls church.

O'Gorman expressed his concerns in a June 1, 1971, letter to the Rev. Thomas Leonard, who was then field director for education at the seminary in Yonkers. Part of Leonard's job was to place newly ordained priests at parishes around the archdiocese.

"It is my feeling that Jerry still has a great deal of insecurity, and I was a bit surprised and disappointed to find that he was assigned so close," O'Gorman wrote. "I really was hoping that he would be given a chance to get away and grow up on his own.

"I feel that he has a problem, and I feel he will not properly sever his relationship with St. Mary's [in Wappingers Falls] being so close," O'Gorman wrote.

Now pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Bangall, in northeast Dutchess County, O'Gorman said he was unaware of allegations of misconduct against Gentile at that time. He said "the problem" he referred to was Gentile's self-centered attitude, imprudence and inability to keep the proper professional distance from his flock.

"He didn't respect authority," said O'Gorman. "He had this kind of way about him; he liked to appear as a know-it-all. It was difficult to give him direction. I guess I would say he was arrogant."

As an example, O'Gorman cited "the business of having these young kids around without recognizing what other people might think or say."

He said Gentile would frequently gather up a group of children and take them "here and there" without telling anyone beforehand. "It was always, 'The kids this, the kids that,'" said O'Gorman. "As I recall, he talked about kids a lot. The kids were the focus of things."

Leonard, who told The News he had never received a complaint about inappropriate sexual behavior by Gentile, replied to O'Gorman's letter June 11, 1971.

He took note of O'Gorman's concerns and acknowledged that the pastor at St. Mary's in Wappingers Falls, the now-deceased Rev. Charles Brennan, had hoped that Gentile would be sent to Staten Island, "or, in other terms, as far away as possible."

Leonard, now a monsignor at Holy Trinity Church on W. 82nd St., in Manhattan, wrote that he believed the relatively close distance between Wappingers Falls and Poughkeepsie would "become emotionally and intellectually greater as the year continues."

The Rev. Richard O'Gorman, left, said Gentile would frequently gather up a group of children and take

them "here and there" without telling anyone else beforehand.

### Pajama games

O'Gorman's fears that Gentile would not give up his close contacts with parishioners in Wappingers Falls would turn out to be well-founded.

During his short stay in Wappingers Falls, Deacon Gentile had quickly become a trusted figure in the lives of the devout McCulloch family - mom, dad, five children and a sixth on the way.

Religion teacher Dodie McCulloch and her husband, Stephen, a 30-year IBM employee, became so comfortable with Gentile that he was a regular guest at their home, including dinner once a week.

After his ordination and assignment to St. Mary's in Poughkeepsie, Gentile continued with his visits and meals with the McCulloch family.

Over the next 25 years, he baptized the youngest McCulloch child, married three of the couple's other children and baptized many of their grandchildren.

Over those same years, the McCullochs treated him like a son. "When Steve noticed that Jerry's coat was old and worn, the next day he bought him a new one," said Dodie.

It was no surprise in summer 1973, then, that the McCullochs agreed to let Gentile take Stephen Jr., 14, and Tom, 13, on a camping trip to Virginia Beach with a third boy.

Tom told The News in a telephone interview from Anchorage, where he co-owns a bar, that Gentile brought a jug of wine with him on the trip, even though it was against campground rules to have alcohol on the premises.

While his older brother and the third boy were away from the campsite, Tom said, he went into his tent to put on his pajamas. Gentile, he said, followed him in and accosted him.

"He was laughing at first, then it became a wrestling match as I tried to fight him off," said Tom, now 42 and married, with an 11-year-old son. "He tried to pull my pajama bottoms off, and I wouldn't allow it.

"It went on for quite a while," Tom said. "When he realized I was angry and what he wanted wasn't going to happen, it got more serious."

Tom recalled that he began to run out of breath. "I was wrestling with a 200-pound guy, fighting as hard as I could to keep my pants on. I shudder to think what would have happened if I was a more timid or easygoing kid. I was lucky because I stopped it."

When he returned home from the camping trip, Tom told no one of the incident. Embarrassed, ashamed and not wanting to hurt his parents, who were so devout and so close to Gentile, he would keep the horror from them for more than 20 years.

He said he stayed quiet for so long in part because he "wasn't quite sure if it was an isolated incident with me. Everyone loved Jerry. So I kept it to myself."

Tom, who sobbed when he finally told his parents at age 36, said he is still angry. "I'd like to put my fist in his face - as would a lot of other people," he said.

### A hero cop

Former altar boy Karl (Skip) Mannian was honored at the Clinton White House for outstanding community service after he raised \$28,000 for the family of a Mexican immigrant killed in a hit-and-run accident.

He was featured in People magazine and on the "Dateline NBC" program as a hardworking police detective who cracked a big serial murder case.

But behind the limelight, Mannian has another story to tell: an ugly one about Gentile.

The son of a firefighter, Mannian served as an altar boy under Gentile in 1971, at St. Mary's Church in Poughkeepsie. In an affidavit he provided in connection with the lawsuit, Mannian remembered the abuse starting when he was 11 or 12.

First, Gentile invited him into the rectory for lunch and dinner. During and after those meals, Mannian often chatted with Gentile and the other priests.

"After dinner," Mannian wrote in his affidavit, "he would often take me up to his room to teach me to play chess." The game soon included a back massage, which progressed "to full-body massages," Mannian recalled.

He said that on one occasion Gentile asked him to open his pants "so he could rub my lower back. I was uncomfortable with this, but I complied because he was my priest."

Mannian, who did not return calls for an interview, said in the court papers that when Gentile touched his penis, he pushed the priest's hand away. He said Gentile then took his hand and placed it on the priest's lap. Mannian recalled that Gentile was sexually aroused.

"He placed my hand on his erection one more time, and I pulled my hand away emphatically and told Gentile that I have to leave." Mannian said he quit being an altar boy immediately but did not tell his parents about the abuse for several years.

Always with the kids

Gentile stayed at St. Mary's in Poughkeepsie for five years, continuing to stay in touch with some of the parishioners in Wappingers Falls. In June 1976, he was transferred to St. Denis in Hopewell Junction, Dutchess County.

Msgr. Joseph Meehan, who served as pastor at St. Denis from 1976 to 1989, said that while there was no evidence of sexual transgressions, he was concerned about Gentile's close contact with children.

"I think he was foolish," said Meehan, now pastor at Sacred Heart Church in Suffern, Rockland County. "He was constantly taking kids on overnight trips. I talked to him about it. He brought them up to do work on the cottage.

"He had a van," said Meehan. "And he didn't hide that he was taking the kids. I wasn't crazy about it."

Meehan also objected to the fact that Gentile headed to the lake house practically every Friday night, leaving him to handle wedding rehearsals by himself.

Meehan also talked to Gentile "about having kids in the rectory. I told him, 'This is our home, not only your home.'

"The kids would be playing records and tapes," he added. "That ended when I told them they weren't welcome."

Swift moves

In June 1982, after fulfilling a customary six-year assignment at St. Denis, Gentile was sent to St. Mary's parish in Marlboro, Ulster County.

Complaints about him there made their way back to O'Gorman in Poughkeepsie. "The pastor complained to me, 'I got this old school bus that Jerry bought to transport the kids.' It wasn't even

something the pastor had wanted."

In November 1983, after 18 months, Gentile was transferred to St. Eugene's in Yonkers. Six months later, he was off to St. Charles Borromeo in Ulster County. And in May 1984, after only one month, he was transferred to Immaculate Conception Church in Tuckahoe, Westchester County.

In a deposition given in connection with the 1997 lawsuit, Gentile said he asked to be transferred from St. Eugene's and stayed such a short time at St. Charles because he had filled in for an ailing priest.

#### Arrival at Holy Name of Mary

In April 1987, after less than three years at Immaculate Conception, Gentile was reassigned to Holy Name of Mary in Croton-on-Hudson. He stayed there for more than a decade.

During that time, Gentile revitalized the parish. He presided over a \$405,000 church renovation. He established a program for alienated Catholics. He was named Volunteer of the Year by the New York State Health Facilities Association for his work with residents of a Croton nursing home.

He also was accused of inappropriate behavior and sexual abuse.

The Rev. Ron Lemmert, a priest since 1979, was assigned to Holy Name of Mary in 1988, a year after Gentile arrived. He said that sometime in 1993, Gentile told him that parishioner Anne Kennedy had accused him of "sexually abusing male teens."

Lemmert said he told Gentile that "perhaps he should not take any more trips away with unchaperoned male teens."

Gentile replied that another priest at the parish had offered the same advice. Lemmert said Gentile told him he would stop.

"Much to my dismay," Lemmert later wrote, "one week after I had given him this advice, he took four teenage boys unchaperoned on a four-day trip to Pennsylvania. After this incident, my concerns multiplied as he exhibited total disregard for propriety to satisfy his own needs."

In an interview last week, Kennedy said she had complained only about Gentile's abuse of authority.

She said he often took altar boys upstate to perform maintenance work on his lake house in return for community service credits for confirmation or school programs.

"They had to scrub walls, paint, put down a sidewalk, clean the stove," said Kennedy, who often clashed with Gentile.

#### Anonymous letter

Lemmert began to keep a closer eye on Gentile. He said he couldn't believe how many trips his superior was taking with the young boys of Holy Name. Some parishioners were beginning to notice, too.

On Dec. 30, 1995, Lemmert sent an anonymous letter to Msgr. George Thompson of the Archdiocese of New York's personnel board:

"On numerous occasions, the pastor, Gentile, has entertained young teenage boys overnight in the rectory. ... I think it is totally inappropriate for any priest to have teenage boys overnight in the rectory for any reason. In addition, he frequently takes them up to his lake cottage and has also taken them on week-long vacations."

"Whether he is having sexual intercourse with any of those boys or not, this type of behavior creates a lot of scandal, especially in a town of this size. That is why I beg you to look into this situation and talk some sense into this man. ... I think this man needs some serious counseling before he ruins his

whole career."

Before long, it would be Lemmert's career that would be in jeopardy.

The Rev. Richard O'Gorman, left, said Gentile would frequently gather up a group of children and take them "here and there" without telling anyone else beforehand.

"It was always, 'The kids this, the kids that.'

As I recall, he talked about kids a lot. The kids were the focus of things."

[Photo Caption - Decades of Allegations: Tom McCulloch was a child when, he says, Gentile tried to sexually assault him. Tom McCulloch (right) holds picture of himself as a child. Above, McCulloch at 13, on trip where he was allegedly attacked by the Rev. Gennaro Gentile. "He was laughing at first, then it became a wrestling match as I tried to fight him off. He tried to pull my pajama bottoms off and I wouldn't allow it." Photo by Matt Hage.]

[Photo Caption - The Rev. Ron Lemmert, who was assigned to Gentile's Holy Name of Mary parish in 1988, wrote a letter to the archdiocese, saying: "I think it is totally inappropriate for any priest to have teenage boys overnight in the rectory for any reason. ... I beg you to look into this situation."]

Tomorrow: Archdiocese's Blind Eye. Parents' anguish, a lawsuit, and parishioners' pressure to oust Father Jerry.

[Photo Caption - Father Jerry: The Rev. Gennaro Gentile laughs heartily at a 1995 going-away party in the parish hall of Holy Name of Mary Church in Croton-on-Hudson. Gentile was pastor from 1987 to 2000. The Rev. Gennaro Gentile has his arms around Stephen and Dodie McCullough in an undated family wedding photo. The McCullochs have six children, including Tom, who says he fought off the priest's advances when he was 13. Photo by Howard Simmons.]