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## Croton-on-Hudson priest removed from parish

By Melissa Klein  
Journal News  
April 7, 2002

<http://www.thejournalnews.com/priests/07priest.html>

Croton-on-Hudson — The priest at Holy Name of Mary Church has been removed from the parish because of "an allegation of inappropriate behavior from his past," according to an announcement read to parishioners last night.

The Rev. Kenneth Jesselli replaced another priest, the Rev. Gennaro Gentile, who had been accused of sexual abuse. A lawsuit alleging that Gentile had inappropriately touched two teen-agers was recently settled.

The announcement of Jesselli's removal, a copy of which was obtained by The Journal News, was apparently a form letter with the name of the priest referred to only as "Father Y" or "Father X."

"On behalf of the Archdiocese, may I say that we are sorry that this action was necessary, and pray that this will not cause you and the parish further pain," said the letter, which apparently was meant to be read to the parish by the replacement priest. "I would also like to remind you that not all allegations have been substantiated."

It was not clear last night if other priests had been removed by the Archdiocese of New York. Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the archdiocese, did not return calls seeking comment, and Jesselli's replacement, the Rev. Michael Keane, could not be reached.

The removal of Jesselli, coming just days after the archdiocese turned over past cases of sexual abuse involving priests to the Manhattan district attorney's office, signifies the church is handling such allegations with an unprecedented seriousness. Cardinal Edward Egan, head of the archdiocese, has been criticized for his handling of cases of sexual abuse when he was bishop of the Bridgeport Diocese in Connecticut from 1988 to 2000.

Gentile was allowed to stay as pastor of Holy Name of Mary after at least four families complained to the archdiocese in the 1990s that he improperly touched boys. One of those families, the Nauheimers of Croton, whose lawsuit was recently settled, said Gentile had massaged the shoulders of one of their sons with oil and had run his hands through the hair of the other son in a provocative way.

Gentile, whom many parishioners credited with giving new energy to the church, left Holy Name of Mary in 2000 and has been working at a church office in Poughkeepsie that deals with marriage annulments.

Mark Koch, a Croton resident, said his family's attendance at church had fallen off after the allegations surfaced about Gentile.

"It definitely left a bad taste," Koch said.

He said the archdiocese's response in removing a priest was the correct one if sexual abuse allegations had been made.

Jesselli came to Holy Name about two years ago and held the title of administrator, not the more

senior title of pastor. He had previously worked at St. Anthony's Church in Yonkers and at St. Francis Xavier Church in the Bronx.

"I've worked with him on committees and so forth," said John Lally, a Croton resident who is a member of the parish council. "I found him hardworking. I found no hint of anything like that. It's a shock."

Lally said Jesselli took some time adjusting to the parish and had suffered from some unspecified health problems. He said Jesselli made himself available to meet individually with parishioners after Sept. 11 and was working on programs with other clergy in Croton.

Lally said both Gentile and Jesselli did "very positive things."

Gaynell Cronin, a pastoral associate at the church, said Jesselli worked well with members of the parish and seemed to enjoy his work.

"We're just all kind of standing together in this bewilderment," said Cronin, a Croton resident.

She said it was unsettling and painful that allegations had been made against the last two priests to serve the church, but that parishioners would continue to support one another.

"They have really stayed together and continued to run programs and continued to reach out to the needy and the unfortunate," she said. "They've continued that through all of this."

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