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## Grand Jury Eyes Priests

Westchester panel weighs sex charges, archdiocese's role

By Heidi Evans and Richard T. Pienciak  
Daily News  
May 16, 2002

A Westchester County grand jury has launched a wide-ranging probe into sexual misconduct complaints against New York Archdiocesan priests and the role church administrators played in handling the allegations, the Daily News has learned.

The investigation is focusing generally on allegations contained in the personnel files of priests that were provided to Westchester District Attorney Jeanine Pirro's office recently by the archdiocese, sources said.

The grand jury also is looking into possibly incriminating information provided by members of the public and victims whose cases have not been publicized, the sources added.

[Photo caption: Investigated. Westchester District Attorney Jeanine Pirro (top r.) is investigating sexual abuse complaints against the Rev. Gennaro Gentile (above), former pastor of Holy Name of Mary Church in Croton-on-Hudson. Howard Simmons / Daily News.]

At least one computer was seized from the rectory of a Westchester parish as authorities investigate possible links to child pornography, the sources added.

The grand jury began hearing testimony May 6 and met again Monday, sources said.

David Hebert, Pirro's chief aide, said he had no comment.

Joseph Zwilling, spokesman for the archdiocese, said he was unaware of the grand jury probe and had no comment. Some priests still working One source said "a handful" of priests are being investigated. Another said some of them remain on active duty.

The Rev. Gennaro Gentile, the subject of a Daily News investigation in March and one of six priests suspended by the archdiocese in April, is among those being investigated by the grand jury, the sources said.

Gentile, known as Father Jerry, has been dogged by allegations of sexual abuse for 30 years. He served at Holy Name of Mary Church in Croton-on-Hudson from 1987 to 2000 and had handled annulments for the archdiocese before his suspension.

In its investigation of Gentile, The News described a chronic pattern of sexual misconduct, citing court documents and interviews with witnesses and alleged victims. Some of those interviewed contended that Gentile had sexually assaulted them in his rectory bedroom, at his remote upstate lake house and even in the family room of one of the victims.

A lawsuit filed against Gentile in 1997 by the parents of two young men was quietly settled in December. The family agreed to a gag order as part of the settlement.

The News also reported in March that another teen's family had been given money to pay for that youngster's psychiatric therapy as long as the family did not reveal the arrangement with the church.

According to sources, several people close to the Gentile case have testified before the grand jury,

which will continue to meet Mondays in White Plains.

Grand jury testimony was given on May 6 by members of the family involved in the 1997 lawsuit, sources said.

On Monday, the grand jury heard testimony from at least three more witnesses, including the victim whose family received the therapy payments and the Rev. Ron Lemmert, who wrote two letters to archdiocesan officials that detailed accusations against Gentile.

Calls to the family of the two men involved in the lawsuit and Lemmert were not returned.

Another of the six priests suspended in April, the Rev. Kenneth Jesselli, replaced Gentile at Holy Name two years ago and helped heal the parish's wounds. It was not known at the time that Jesselli had been assigned to Holy Name after allegations of sexual misconduct surfaced against him at another parish.

Suffolk County District Attorney Thomas Spota also has convened a grand jury to investigate sex abuse complaints against priests in the Rockville Centre Diocese and the way diocesan officials dealt with them.

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