

BishopAccountability.org

Accused priests took in minors

When Fathers acted as fathers, complaints often followed

By Claudia Rowe and Michelle Nicolosi
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http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/186975_priest19.html

[See also [profiles of the 11 priests](#) examined, maps and photos of the [Washington church properties where abuse is alleged](#) with synopses of the charges, and in-depth reports on two priests: [Rev. Edward T. Olszewski](#) and [Rev. James Mitchell](#).]

Buried deep in the thousands of sexual abuse allegations against Roman Catholic priests lies a startling, little-known fact: Dozens of clerics accused of molesting minors lived with children, often serving as legal parents or guardians to boys who called their rectories home.

The Seattle Post-Intelligencer has found four priests in Washington, later removed from ministry for alleged sexual abuse, who had boys living with them in church-owned properties.

Across the nation, sometimes the church knew of the unorthodox living arrangements but did nothing; in other cases, church officials say they had no notion that minors were living in rectories.

In at least three instances -- one on Whidbey Island, another in Ohio and a third in Detroit -- boys were placed in priests' homes with the knowledge of Catholic Charities, records and interviews show.

In many cases the victims, now grown men, say they endured the abuse because they had nowhere else to go.

Often, the parenting priests appeared as rescuers, removing children from lives of extreme hardship and offering to raise them in middle-class comfort.

They promised an otherwise unattainable education or proffered adoption as a way to secure U.S. citizenship.

Most of the victims interviewed by the Post-Intelligencer said that once they were ensconced in the priests' quarters, they saw few options for escape.

"I didn't know which was worse -- either I was going to be beaten by my ex-father, or I was going to have this other abuse," said P.J., now 34, who recently filed a lawsuit claiming that the Rev. Arthur Mertens, then of St. Patrick's Parish in Walla Walla, raped him repeatedly, starting at age 12.



Mertens

"Either way I was screwed. I chose what I felt was the lesser of the two, and that's how I ended up at Father's house."

The Rev. G. Barry Ashwell was a state-licensed foster father to at least five children on Whidbey Island, one of whom accused him of sexual abuse and settled with the Seattle Archdiocese in 1996.

Recently, another man has stepped forward with similar charges stemming from his own weeklong stay with the priest.

Ashwell has vehemently denied all the allegations, placing blame for the entire episode at the feet of church officials.

"It wasn't my bright idea," he said of foster parenting, when contacted at his Whidbey Island mobile home. The parish council, he explained, decided that it made sense to take in needy boys because the rectory had so much extra room.

Another priest, the Rev. James Mitchell, brought two teenagers to Vancouver, Wash., from war-torn Colombia.

According to a complaint filed by one of the boys in May, he promised them U.S. citizenship via adoption and then subjected them to years of sexual abuse.

Mertens and Mitchell, both of whom have been removed from active ministry, did not respond to requests for comment.



The Rev. John Cornelius with some of the 13 boys he cared for in the 1980s. None of them has claimed abuse, but 20 other men have accused Cornelius of abusing them.

A fourth priest, John Cornelius, achieved national renown for taking in as many as 13 children. None has alleged any impropriety.

But in the last two years, more than 20 other men have lodged sexual-assault complaints against Cornelius, resulting in his removal from the priesthood.

Greg Magnoni, a spokesman for the Seattle Archdiocese, said the church's understanding of child abuse and its prevention is radically different from what it was during the 1980s, when the Washington cases occurred.

The thought of such an arrangement today would be ludicrous, he said.

"The context that led to the church allowing priests to have legal custody of children was a long tradition of outreach to the vulnerable, and certainly children are those," he said.

"When some of these men came forward to serve these young people, they were not only not looked at with suspicion but were applauded. It was only when we became fully aware of the risks of adults

supervising children without proper safeguards that we began to act and put policies in place."

Many Catholic leaders said that priests who live with children are an anomaly, and that it has long been understood that rectories, places of quiet consultation, are unsuitable for kids.

"I think generally that (priests raising kids) probably would be frowned upon," said Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Priests are charged with devoting themselves fully to the church and may not have time to be good parents, she said.

"Children cannot be an afterthought."

But Richard Sipe, a former priest who has spent the past 30 years studying sex within the priesthood and has testified in hundreds of clerical abuse cases, said priest guardianship often had an ugly underside.

Priests living with children "is an old, old tradition, an old way around the law of celibacy," he said.

"The church has always known this went on and turned a blind eye."

Church officials, including those in Seattle, say they frequently had no idea that their priests were living with children until months, even years, had passed.

A jury in Detroit convicted the Rev. Edward Olszewski of indecent liberties with Albert Green, who moved in with the priest when he was 11.

Officials at the Detroit Archdiocese say they never knew of the arrangement, but in a recent interview, the priest said Catholic social services of Wayne County, Mich., placed half a dozen children with him.

Mark Furnish, who claims that he was abused by the Rev. Robert O'Neill of Rochester, N.Y., says the priest had a teenage boy living with him during the 1980s. A spokesman for that diocese, Michael Tedesco, says that no one in his office ever knew about guests living at the rectory.

But reached recently by phone, O'Neill said that the guest mentioned by Furnish stayed with him for about a year -- with parish permission. He was 20, the priest said, not a teenager, and their relationship was platonic.

"I had a number of people living at the rectory. The first person who came was a college student. He was recommended by the diocese, as a matter of fact," O'Neill said.

"I had just taken over a parish. It was very lonely there being by myself. ... I've never had anyone under the age of 18 living there."

In May 2002, Rochester stripped O'Neill of his right to minister "because of what we thought were credible allegations of abuse," Tedesco said.

A lawsuit recently settled for \$500,000 with the Albany Diocese in New York claims that the Rev. Dozia Wilson lived with a boy whom he abused for years while acting as the child's legal guardian.

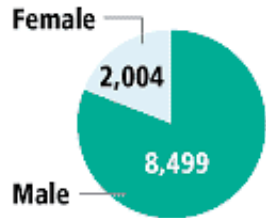
Ousted from Albany after accusations of sexual impropriety, Wilson resettled in Massachusetts, the lawsuit says, with his young charge in tow.

The Boston Archdiocese declined to comment on the case. Wilson could not be reached.

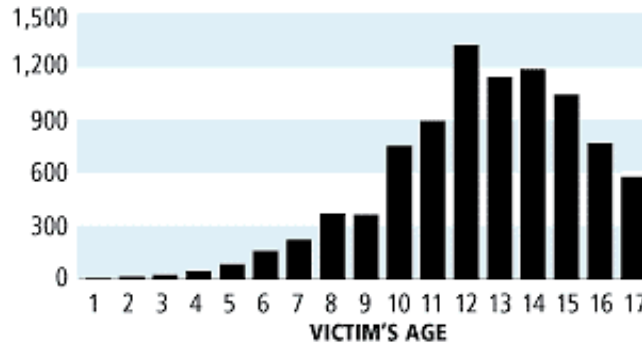
National abuse claims against clergy

According to a recent study of sexual abuse claims against Catholic clergy, 120 accusers said they were living in the home of a priest or in a church-related residence when they were abused; 40 percent of the alleged victims said they were abused in the priests' homes. Totals don't add up because some respondents didn't answer all questions.

GENDER OF ALLEGED VICTIMS



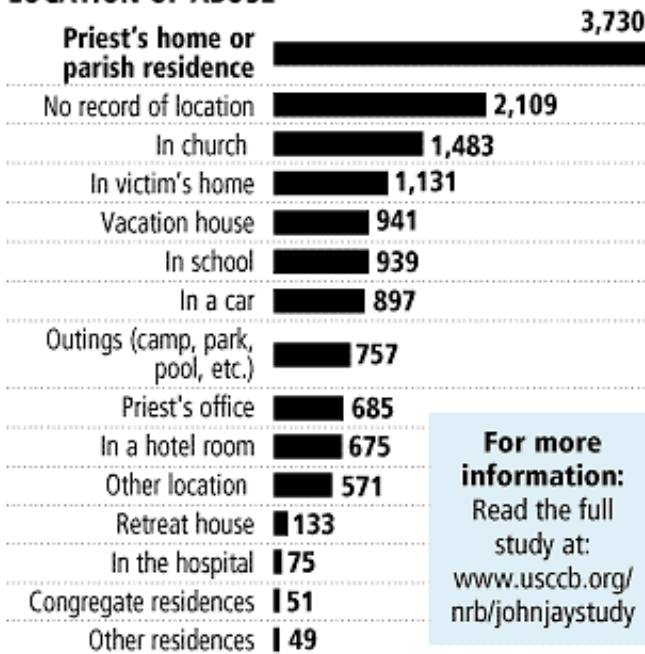
VICTIM'S AGE AT FIRST INSTANCE OF ABUSE



VICTIM'S LIVING SITUATION

Both parents	5,905
Mother only	843
Boarding school	172
Orphanage	159
Other	92
Father only	81
Home of priest	67
Church-related residence	53
Grandparents	53
Brother(s)	29
Foster parents	29
Other guardian	17
Sister(s)	14

LOCATION OF ABUSE



For more information:
Read the full study at:
www.usccb.org/nrb/johnjaystudy

Source: John Jay College of Criminal Justice study

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

A lack of oversight

The church does not keep statistics on the number of priests who adopt or raise children. But a study of sexual abuse claims against Catholic clergy released by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice last February found that 120 accusers said they were living in a rectory or other church residence when they were abused, and about 40 percent of all alleged molestations reportedly took place in priests' homes.

"There's just a complete breakdown of managerial responsibility," said Tim Kosnoff, a Seattle lawyer handling several clerical-abuse cases, including P.J.'s lawsuit against Mertens.

"The priests were out there, and they could pretty much do anything they wanted -- bring kids into the rectory, adopt children, whatever. There was no one watching, and if they did things that were improper, these were not viewed as doing damage to children, but as sin."

The Vatican's Code of Canon Law has no rule explicitly prohibiting priests from living with minors -- the assumption being that its impropriety is obvious, said the Rev. Robert J. Kaslyn, a professor of canon law at the Catholic University of America School of Canon Law.

It has always been up to each diocese to nail down specifics, and in recent years many have scrambled to adopt new language barring minors from spending even one night in a rectory.

In Seattle, priests have been restricted from one-on-one ministry with children since 2002, which would include having minors spend the night in a rectory, Magnoni said.

Spokane's code of conduct specifically states: "Priests must not provide overnight accommodation for individual minors where there is no other adult supervision present. Immediate family is an exception to this mandate."

Other dioceses, such as Los Angeles and Boston, have had rules on the books far longer.

But church watchers and lawyers litigating clerical abuse cases say that even these formalities do not always safeguard children.

"It is commonplace -- ordinary -- for ... priests to take on parental roles with the explicit and implicit approval of their supervisors," said Jeff Anderson, a lawyer who has handled more than 1,000 clerical sexual abuse cases. "It's just culturally allowed in the unique culture of the Catholic Church."

Nevertheless, some onlookers did quietly question the arrangement.

In 1984, when James Mitchell arrived at St. John's in Vancouver, Wash., with two teenage boys, his supervisor, the Rev. Michael O'Brien, thought it looked more than a little odd, although he initially hesitated to speak out.



Mitchell

"Because of the story that he'd actually adopted the boys, and they'd come from situations where they were in danger for their lives, it seemed like a noble thing," he said. Only months later, during a walk with one of the boys, did the elder priest hear his account of what had been going on behind Mitchell's bedroom door.

He reported this to archdiocese officials in Seattle, and within weeks Mitchell was removed.

Presents and promises

In each case of abuse investigated by the P-I -- both nationally and locally -- the pattern was essentially the same: A priest would curry favor with the boy or his family by buying gifts, paying for trips, dangling the promise of money or in some cases, offering adoption as a way to secure U.S. citizenship.

Cornelius gave cars, clothes and cash to several boys who later accused him of sexual assault. Olszewski took Albert Green on at least one lavish trip to Las Vegas. Dozia Wilson of Albany took alleged victim Joseph Woodward -- who lived with him briefly -- on trips to Boston, California, Disney World and Hollywood strip bars, according to a lawsuit filed against the priest.

Two of the Washington priests -- Mitchell and Mertens -- promised to adopt their alleged victims as a way of providing them with U.S. citizenship.

The mother of one of Ashwell's alleged victims said the priest promised her son "stocks and bonds."

In many cases, the boys stayed because they had no other choice.

A man who filed a lawsuit against Deacon Glen Shrimplin of Toledo, Ohio, said that Shrimplin had a foster child living in his home for eight months and that more than a dozen boys regularly spent nights and weekends there.

Despite Shrimplin's ongoing abuse, the boys kept returning, he said, because they simply couldn't go home. The plaintiff, identified only as John Doe, said he and the others had only two options: Shrimplin's house or the streets.

"I beat myself up for going back, but I didn't have anything," he said. "He knew which kids to prey on. ... He knew we were caught between a rock and a hard place."

Shrimplin could not be reached for comment but has previously denied abuse.

In Spokane, P.J. described a similar situation: His mother was breaking up with a violent boyfriend, and she was only too happy to accept Mertens' offer of a home where the boy would be sheltered from the man's rages.

For six months, P.J. lived with the priest at St. Patrick's, spending his school days at Washington Elementary and his nights in the rectory. The two traveled together -- to Oregon, to the Tri-Cities, and to Mertens' mother's home in Spokane -- where the priest molested P.J., then 12, for the first time, he said.

All the while, Mertens was lobbying Bishop Lawrence Welsh for permission to adopt the boy. In 1985, Welsh responded with a note saying that he "had reservations" about the proposal.

Years earlier, according to P.J.'s lawyer, another teenage boy confronted the bishop at a social event, claiming that Mertens had molested him, and asking that the priest be removed from ministry. That victim received a settlement from the diocese in 1994.

Greg Arpin, an attorney for the Spokane Diocese, suggested that the earlier allegation might have given the bishop pause when considering Mertens' request.

"I've been reflecting and praying over your letter," Arpin said, reading aloud from Welsh's note to Mertens. "Some things have come to mind that I would like to discuss with you."

Permission to adopt P.J. was never granted, but Mertens, who sat down recently with P.J.'s lawyer, said the boy continued to live with him in the rectory, even after an associate pastor notified authorities that a child was sleeping with the priest.

Welsh, who had himself been arrested and accused of picking up a 15-year-old male prostitute in Chicago, took no action. He died in 1999.

Mertens, now living in a retirement home run by the church, has not responded to requests for comment, but Kosnoff, the Seattle lawyer, said that during a recent interview the priest, at once defensive and contrite, admitted to molesting the boy.

According to the lawyer, Mertens told other priests that he was sexually abusing a child and could not control his urges.

None of them ever encouraged him to seek professional help or contact the bishop, he said.

Years later, in 2002, the priest sent P.J. a letter, which Kosnoff provided to the P-I.

According to a recent lawsuit filed by a man who wishes to be identified only as P.J., Spokane priest Arthur Mertens molested P.J. for years starting when he was 12 years old. Mertens tried to adopt P.J., who lived in the priest's rectory for six months. According to P.J.'s attorney, P.J. received this letter in 2002.

Dear [REDACTED],

I have been holding off as long as I could, but the time has come to tell you this.

Because the public news about priest abuse scandals has become so intense, the media has been fishing for everything that has ever happened. So it is only a matter of time that the old case against me that was quietly settled in 1992 - will be made public.

I will be humiliated, and will have no control over what is said. However, if I am questioned I will insist that no one else was involved, so no one else should be approached or questioned.

[REDACTED]

I shudder to see you come this direction at this time because the news in this area might be carrying my name. They won't let this die in the past.

I believe in God and in prayer. Whatever happens to me God will at least be there too.

I will always pray for you.

...A flawed man who has been honored as Dad.

A. Martens

"Because the public news about priest abuse scandals has become so intense, the media has been fishing for everything that has ever happened. ... I will be humiliated, and will have no control over what is said," it reads in part. "However, if I am questioned, I will insist that no one else was involved, so no one else should be approached or questioned. ...

"They won't let this die in the past," the note continues, concluding, "A flawed man who has been honored as Dad."

The damage done

On Whidbey Island, the Rev. G. Barry Ashwell was a legend. Where other priests rotated through parishes every few years, Ashwell remained at St. Augustine's for more than two decades, and between 1980 and 1993 took in at least five children as a licensed foster parent for the state.



Ashwell

"Dedicated," "competent" and "trustworthy" are words some parishioners have used to describe him.

But Ashwell has been the target of two legal actions charging child sexual abuse, and a third claim is now in settlement negotiations. Two of the three come from boys who stayed with Ashwell at St. Augustine's rectory.

Louis, who asked that his last name not be used, was 14 years old when Juvenile Court authorities and the state Department of Social and Human Services placed him under the priest's care in 1980.

According to documents obtained by the P-I, Catholic Charities applied to the state for foster-care funds to support Louis at Ashwell's rectory.

Leon Preston, a court officer monitoring Louis' progress, noted that 10 months with Ashwell had

provided the teenager with emotional support he had desperately needed, resulting in a remarkable turnaround. The boy's behavior had been "miraculously changed" by his relationship with the priest, Preston wrote.

But Louis' mother, Jeanne, has a different assessment.

"At first, I thought, 'Isn't this great, a priest. So nice. This will really be helpful,' " she said.

The rectory had impressed her as a safe and wholesome place for children, with its bright yellow handouts on St. Augustine's letterhead listing the rules of the house -- subject to the laws of the Archdiocese of Seattle, they said -- no lying, no stealing, no illegal substances and no girls in the private quarters.

"But then things started to seem fishy," she said. "It was like he started wooing my son." The priest tried to block all contact between her and Louis, while developing what seemed to be an unusually intimate relationship with him, she said.

A set of studio portraits he had taken of Louis was particularly troubling. Jeanne thought the photos seemed like something a lover would commission. They seemed inappropriate, almost seductive.

"Later, Louis told me the father would make him lie in bed with the lights out and his eyes closed so he could masturbate over him," she said.

Other boys who stayed at St. Augustine's during the same period say Ashwell's advances were common knowledge.

One man now in settlement negotiations with the archdiocese says that when his mother dropped him off for a few nights' stay at the rectory, a boy already living there issued a dire warning.

"He told me to lock my door and to not get into a room alone with Father Ashwell," said K.S., a corporate food service worker in Seattle, who asked not to be named.

The youth's advice proved prophetic. On his first night there, as K.S. was washing up in the bathroom, Ashwell walked in.

The man shook and his face reddened as he described the humiliation that followed until, speechless at the memory of the priest's demands, he fell silent.

The church settled with Louis in 1996, even though Magnoni, the Seattle Archdiocese spokesman, said his accusations were never substantiated.

Ashwell, who has denied all allegations of abuse, refused the archdiocese's request that he undergo a psychologist's forensic evaluation, and he was permitted to continue ministering -- organizing a passion play for Oak Harbor middle school students in 1997.

In 2000, he was transferred to St. Aloysius Parish in Buckley in Pierce County as part of a routine personnel rotation, Magnoni said, which was why the community there was never apprised of Louis' claims.

The following year, Magnoni said, Ashwell was removed from active ministry after the diocese received another claim of sexual abuse.

Now living in an Oak Harbor retirement community with his mother, the aging priest, whose ministerial status is pending a final decision from Rome, appeared exasperated at any mention of the foster-parent period.

"I had 10 years of them coming in and out of here, five court placements, one from King County Juvenile Court and four from Island County DSHS," he said.

"I was their last chance. But now I'm in all kinds of trouble because of it. Most of them weren't even Catholics. Now I'm in a fight for my life with the archdiocese."

Many of the alleged victims say they've been fighting their entire lives for even a little taste of what their surrogate fathers took from them: normal emotions, normal relationships.

Albert Green, now living in Lynnwood, said that when a lawyer asked him at trial whether he preferred to date men or women, his lawyer stopped him from answering -- but he was going to say neither. He's not interested in being with anybody. That part of him is broken.

P.J. described a similar aftermath.

"It's affected every relationship that I've been in as far as trust because I don't trust anybody," he said. "It's non-stop."

In Toledo, Deacon Shrimplin's alleged victim said the effects weigh on him daily, even now, decades later.

"You don't know what he did to me, what he took from me, my innocence."

FIRST OF TWO PARTS

TOMORROW: Two men who have accused parenting priests ([Rev. Edward T. Olszewski](#) and [Rev. James Mitchell](#)) tell their stories.

ALSO SEE:

[The 11 abuse cases the P-I examined](#)

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