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Expressing Regret

Pastor: 'Should have done more' to prevent abuse

By Carol Eisenberg and Eden Laikin
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Twenty years before he was drummed out of the priesthood for molesting boys, the Rev. Brian McKeon told the pastor of his first church that he had acted "inappropriately" with a teenager.

Nothing, however, was done.

"I thought it was just a one-time thing," said Msgr. Edward Donnelly, then the young priest's supervisor at St. Anthony of Padua Roman Catholic Church in East Northport.

[Photo captions: Former priest Brian McKeon. Edward Donnelly.]

Donnelly talked with the boy, but never asked him or McKeon what actually happened. "I didn't want to know," he said, adding that "such things can run the gamut." Nor did he tell the boy's parents or officials of the Diocese of Rockville Centre because, he said, "I didn't want to get involved."

During the next 20 years, McKeon would molest at least six other teenagers, and attempt to molest several others, according to two attorneys who represent their families.

"I know, in hindsight, probably I should have done more." Donnelly said. "And I am sorry about that."

For the victims, the apology came too late.

"We're not talking just one or two instances of indiscretion," said Douglas McNally, an attorney who has talked with six victims, including the one McKeon told Donnelly about. "We're talking about someone who was a serial abuser."

McKeon was not removed as a pastor until after a parent from The Church of the Good Shepherd in Holbrook complained to the diocese in June 1998 - long after McKeon had left Holbrook. When the priest returned from a treatment center in Canada, he was reassigned to Nassau University Medical Center and allowed to continue performing occasional Masses at St. Anne's in Garden City, which was his last parish, and as a fill-in priest at Mission Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Mattituck.

Two more parents would go to the diocese before McKeon was removed from priestly duties in November. He was told to resign shortly after one of the parents placed fliers on the windshields of about 100 cars in the hospital parking lot saying: "Father Brian McKeon ... Is a Known Pedophile and the Diocese of Rockville Centre Refuses to do Anything About it."

McKeon did not return repeated calls for comment on this story, but in an interview last month, he acknowledged that he had made "a mistake" more than a decade ago by inappropriately touching boys. He said he has not been involved in any incidents since, noting, "I was wrong and I admitted I was wrong."

McNally described McKeon as a charismatic preacher who would turn into a predator and betray longstanding friendships when he was drinking.

He told the story of a father from Holbrook who had welcomed McKeon into his family, feeding him, giving him money, even taking him on a family trip to Ireland.

McNally said the father was stunned to wake up one morning in the mid-1980s to find the priest asleep alone in the bed of his adolescent son. . The boy, then 13 or 14, seemed disturbed, but refused to answer his parents' questions.

The man said that when he confronted McKeon, the priest acknowledged that after having had too much to drink, he had let himself into the house. McKeon told him he had climbed into bed with the sleeping boy, fondling him until the boy woke up. The boy was so alarmed then that he sprang out of the bed, and went to sleep in the camper outside. McKeon apologized profusely, the father said, and blamed what had happened on alcohol.

"Not knowing about any other incidents, they were prepared to see this as an isolated episode," McNally said.

The realization that there was a pattern came gradually, and almost by coincidence, McNally said, when families from St. Anthony in East Northport got to know families from McKeon's next assignment at Good Shepherd in Holbrook, in large part through the priest.

"People talked, and it got to the point where they realized that this was much bigger than just their family," McNally said.

By all accounts, the priest's modus operandi involved three elements: Family friendships, sports and alcohol. "Whatever you wanted to play, he had it," said the father of one victim, who asked not to be identified. "He was like a Pied Piper.

"The kids looked up to him and just followed him everywhere."

McKeon's car was packed with baseball bats, gloves, Frisbee disks and a Boogie surfboard, while his room at the rectory had a Nintendo set. He bragged to the kids about how he shared Mickey Mantle's birthday, and he took them to the beach, to ballgames and on camping trips to the East End.

Inevitably, he, as well as the teens, would be drinking, McNally said.

"If you're 13 or 14, you want to hang out with this guy," said a father. "First, he's a priest and your parents admire him. And second, he's got all the toys you want to play with."

Another victim said McKeon gave alcohol to the teenagers who visited him at the Holbrook rectory. He recalled that he drank so heavily on one visit that he had to lie down in a rectory bedroom.

A short time later, McKeon excused himself from the others. "My friends related that after some time, they went looking for him," the man said. "Brian had come into the room I was in and was in bed with me. They pulled him out of the bed."

The man said he has no memory of what happened because he had passed out.

"Alcohol was a major part of every incident that's been related to me," McNally said. "And on the rare occasions when he was confronted, he would apologize profusely and blame it on the alcohol."

Though McKeon's preaching continued to earn praise, his drinking worsened to the point where he began to have run-ins with police. In 1991, he was evicted from a Montauk campsite and charged with disorderly conduct; in another East End incident several years later, he was arrested for hurling potatoes at passing boats.

Some parishioners at Good Shepherd in Holbrook complained about McKeon's drinking, but not about sexual abuse, said the Rev. Thomas Spadaro, pastor and McKeon's supervisor there from 1982 to 1990.

"Since the allegations were published," he said, "many people have come forward and said, 'How is this possible?' They knew him, as I did, as someone who was attractive and hard working, and who

did good things."

Victims say they are not surprised by that reaction because many said they had loved the priest as if he were a member of their own families.

"It was like a Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde thing," said one woman whose husband had been molested as a teenager. "It sounds like a contradiction to say he was a good priest, but the priestly side of him - when he was not drunk - was compassionate and deeply spiritual. He married us and baptized some of our kids. But then, there was this monster who would come out when he was drunk."

She said she considers herself a victim, along with her husband. "This is a deep, deep wound in the circles in which Brian was involved."

A Holbrook man whose son was victimized also blamed McKeon for destroying their relationship. "I'm his father. I was supposed to protect him. And here, I invited this monster into my home."

Meanwhile, many at McKeon's last parish, St. Anne's of Garden City, were stunned and angry when they learned several weeks ago why McKeon had left suddenly in 1998.

"We weren't told the truth," said parishioner Greg Cooper. "We were told only that he had a drinking problem and he was overwhelmed with running the parish. Had we known the truth, we never would have allowed any children to go near him when he came back."

No one in Garden City, the hospital or Mattituck has come forward publicly with complaints.

Donnelly, now the pastor at Holy Family Catholic Church in Hicksville, said that he wished that he had dealt differently with McKeon's admission 20 years ago.

At the time, he said, his focus was the boy.

"I just wanted to let [him] know that he should not feel guilty, that it was not his fault. And I told him, Father Brian was wrong and ... that he really regretted it," Donnelly said.

Though he did suggest McKeon get counseling, he admitted, "I didn't tell him he had to go ... and I didn't follow up on it."

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