

Monsignor Francis A. Giliberti

Monsignor Francis A. Giliberti, ordained in 1970, was said by his students at Cardinal O'Hara High School to run a "sort of boot camp to stop masturbation" at his beach house in New Jersey. His methods, he bragged to one student, included walking in on boys while they were masturbating.

The priest abused at least two students who went to him for help, fearing damnation because of their "masturbation problem." One victim described how Msgr. Giliberti insisted on "inspecting" the boy's penis to determine whether it was "traumatized," ordered him to make himself erect, and offered to perform oral sex. The priest told the other student he could introduce him to gay men. These activities took place in the mid-1970s, and were reported to the Archdiocese in 2002.

Both victims who came forward were traumatized by Msgr. Giliberti's abuse. One doused his penis with lighter fluid and set it on fire, his self-loathing was so intolerable. The other lived through years of suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, and failed relationships. Both were incensed by what they saw as the hypocrisy of their Church.

Following these allegations, Cardinal Bevilacqua permitted Msgr. Giliberti to continue as pastor at Nativity B.V.M. in Media without restrictions on his access to children and without informing the parish of the allegations against him. On April 25, 2002, one week after the first victim brought his detailed accusations to the Archdiocese, Cardinal Bevilacqua was quoted at a press conference assuring the public that no priest "credibly accused of misconduct with a minor" has remained in ministry. In December 2003, the allegations against Monsignor Giliberti were determined to be credible and he was forced to retire.

"Jay" informs Archdiocese leaders that Monsignor Giliberti abused him at Cardinal O'Hara High School; a week later Cardinal Bevilacqua gives the public false assurances.

On April 18, 2002, Jay, a 40-year-old divorced and unemployed man, came to Archdiocese headquarters accompanied by his parents to tell Secretary for Clergy William Lynn of his abuse 25 years earlier. Monsignor Francis Giliberti, ordained in 1970, had been Jay's sophomore-year religion teacher at Cardinal O'Hara High School in Springfield in 1976-1977. Jay was 15 years old in the spring of 1977 when the abuse began.

With his parents out of the room, Jay told Msgr. Lynn and his assistant, Fr. Vincent Welsh, about the events that led to his molestation. According to Fr. Welsh's notes, Msgr. Giliberti in his theology class led "graphic sexual discussions," but instructed the boys that "any sex outside of marriage is a mortal sin." Jay said that he felt "doomed to hell" at the age of 15 because of masturbation. So, when Msgr. Giliberti offered to help students who

“have this problem,” Jay went to see him one day after school. They discussed masturbation, and Msgr. Giliberti instructed the boy to go to confession as often as he needed.

The priest also invited Jay to stop by his rectory at Nativity B.V.M. and to accompany him to his beach house in Brigantine, New Jersey, during the summer. Jay told the Archdiocese managers that Msgr. Giliberti claimed he had taken others to his shore house and “helped [them] with masturbation problems.”

In one such discussion of masturbation in Msgr. Giliberti’s rectory room, the priest asked the boy to drop his pants. Telling Jay that his penis might be “traumatized,” Msgr. Giliberti proceeded to inspect it. According to Fr. Welsh’s notes, the priest “held [the student’s] penis, peeled back [the] opening and stroked him.” Monsignor Giliberti said he needed to see the boy’s penis erect and instructed him to go into the bathroom “to get erect.” The boy tried to obey, but could not.

Jay said he felt confused and ashamed, but he continued to meet with Msgr. Giliberti. He accompanied the priest to his beach house on several occasions. The teacher served his student beer. They discussed girls, and Jay’s masturbation “problem.” One time, Msgr. Giliberti asked the boy to strip and show the priest exactly how he masturbated. Jay said he complied and “showed him quickly.” Other times, the priest offered to sleep with the boy and to perform oral sex on him.

Jay told Msgr. Lynn and Fr. Welsh how he became overwhelmed by shame and fear. He felt he could not trust his own instincts for appropriate boundaries. He made a mold of a penis and brought it to the rectory to show the priest. When Msgr. Giliberti told him that, as a boy, he had exposed himself to his sister, young Jay “followed his lead,” doing the same to his sister. As an adult, Jay said he abused his wife, touching her in unwelcome ways as she slept.

Jay said he told no one about his humiliation as an adolescent. He said he had “wanted to be perfect” for his “very ethical” parents. So he took out his shame and guilt on himself, one day dousing his penis with lighter fluid and setting it on fire. He eventually told his parents about Msgr. Giliberti’s abuses, sparing them the specifics.

At Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, which he attended for two years, he also told two priests. They advised him to “let go” of it – that it was his word against the Church’s.

After Jay told the Archdiocese managers the details of his abuse, his parents joined the conversation. They expressed their outrage and sense of betrayal. They told how much their family had suffered. Jay’s father described how he had “watched [his son’s] life go down [the] tubes.” Jay’s wife had divorced him, and he had lost a good job. The parents had brought him to the Archdiocese offices in the desperate hope that, by telling his story and confronting Msgr. Giliberti, as he asked to do, their 40-year-old son could finally overcome his shame and move on with his life.

Monsignor Lynn twice told the parents what he had already told Jay: that their son was the only person to ever make allegations against Msgr. Giliberti – a point he often emphasized in conversations with victims (even on occasion when it was not true). Monsignor Lynn had to know from his experience with numerous victims how desperately they wanted to know they were not the only ones.

When the Archdiocese managers interviewed Msgr. Giliberti later that day, he denied ever having abused Jay, though he remembered the boy coming to him for confession. He told Msgr. Lynn and Fr. Welsh that masturbation was only a secondary issue and that there were “2 other things” that were troubling the student. The priest said that “the seal” of confession prevented him from explaining further.

Cardinal Bevilacqua allowed Msgr. Giliberti, whom he had appointed as pastor at Nativity B.V.M. in June 1991, to remain there, even though it had a school attached to it. Msgr. Giliberti was still pastor when Cardinal Bevilacqua announced at a press conference on April 25, 2002: “I can assure all the people here in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia that there is no priest in any parish or any ministry whatsoever that was credibly accused of misconduct with a minor.” The press conference took place one week after Jay had reported his abuse by Msgr. Giliberti.

Monsignor Giliberti abuses “Patrick” at Cardinal O’Hara High School.

Patrick contacted Archdiocese managers on September 11, 2002, when he was 44 years old. Like Jay, he had been a student of Msgr. Giliberti’s at Cardinal O’Hara High

School in the mid-1970s. Because Patrick lived in California, his allegations were recorded from a telephone call and repeated in a letter to Msgr. Lynn dated September 17, 2002.

Patrick told Msgr. Lynn that Msgr. Giliberti had been his freshman-year theology teacher. Patrick was 14 years old. The priest held “informal confession” in his empty classroom, and it was here that Patrick confessed his struggles with masturbation. Like Jay, this extremely devout boy had problems reconciling his sexual urges with what he was learning in school – that masturbation was “a sinful act in the eyes of the church.”

Monsignor Giliberti said he could help the boy stop masturbating. He invited Patrick to come to the rectory to talk on several occasions. Patrick wrote that, during these talks, Msgr. Giliberti mentioned that he had a house at the New Jersey Shore “where he took boys my age during the summer months to help them work through their problems.” The priest, he said, bragged to him that he had cured one boy of masturbating by walking in on him in the shower during the act. Patrick had heard that Msgr. Giliberti conducted “a sort of boot camp to stop masturbation.” Patrick was frightened by the prospect and never went to the shore.

In the summer of 1975, however, when he was 17, Patrick confided in Msgr. Giliberti that he was having sexual problems when he tried to become intimate with girls. He told Msgr. Giliberti he thought he must be homosexual.

The priest’s counsel was to offer to introduce him “to half a dozen gay men in downtown Media if I thought I wanted to try it out.” Patrick wrote that, when he registered shock and revulsion, Msgr. Giliberti scoffed: “See you’re not gay! And you can have an erection any time you want.” The priest then pointed to his bedroom and instructed the boy to strip, lie on the bed and “prove it to yourself . . . give yourself an erection.”

Patrick wrote that he submitted “to this unbelievably peculiar command” only because of the “extremely vulnerable state” in which he found himself. He described lying nude in the priest’s chilly bedroom surrounded by the crucifix and religious items as “the most uncomfortable situation imaginable.” When Msgr. Giliberti then walked in and watched as the boy stroked his penis with no success, the boy was devastated. The priest watched as the boy dressed, then heard his confession.

Patrick wrote that he stopped going to church after that episode and never spoke to Msgr. Giliberti again. In 2002, he told Msgr. Lynn that he had been in and out of therapy since he was 21 years old. For years, he said, he suffered through “suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, and failed relationships.” He said he became angry after the episode at the rectory, but that he became angrier still after “reading about the scandalous behavior of some of the priests, and the protection they received from their superiors (at the expense of children!).” He wrote to Msgr. Lynn, “It makes my own experience all the more disturbing to learn that the Church actually protected these pedophiles that hypocritically lived out their sexual fantasies while preaching a morality that bore a crushing and destructive weight on the innocent and ever-so-vulnerable psyche of children like myself.”

The Archdiocese responds by seeking a self-serving “diagnosis” and taking no action.

On October 18, 2002, after Jay informed Msgr. Lynn of his abuse and after Patrick brought a second allegation, Msgr. Giliberti was sent for a psychological evaluation, performed by Kelly Counseling and Consulting.

Monsignor Giliberti’s evaluators found that “test data” could not confirm or deny allegations made against him. Despite separate allegations that the priest’s actions had devastated at least two lives, the evaluators hired by the Archdiocese found, “There is no reason to conclude from the interview [with the priest] or the test data that Monsignor Giliberti is a threat to the physical or emotional health of those to whom he ministers.”

Absent the threat of public scandal – neither victim having threatened to sue or publicly expose Msgr. Giliberti – Cardinal Bevilacqua permitted the priest to continue as pastor at Nativity B.V.M. His parishioners were not informed of the charges against him, and he enjoyed full access to boys like the traumatized ones who, as adults, had met with Msgr. Lynn.

In 2004, the Archdiocese removes Monsignor Giliberti from ministry based on the same evidence discounted by Cardinal Bevilacqua.

On January 14, 2004, the Archdiocese removed Msgr. Giliberti from ministry, finding the allegations of Jay and Patrick credible. Monsignor Giliberti had been allowed to retire three weeks earlier.

After Msgr. Giliberti's retirement and removal, in April 2004, a Florida man named "Gerald" informed the Archdiocese that Msgr. Giliberti had abused him and another boy when the priest was still a seminarian, more than 30 years earlier. Gerald wrote that Giliberti had taken him and five other boys to the New Jersey Shore house of a fellow priest, had shared a bed with three of the boys, and had fondled the genitals of Gerald and a boy named "Joey." The victim explained that he had not come forward earlier "out of fear and shame."

On October 16, 2004, faced with the possibility of involuntary laicization, Fr. Giliberti agreed to live "a supervised life of prayer and penance" at Villa Saint Joseph, a retirement home for priests.

Father Giliberti appeared before the Grand Jury and was given an opportunity to answer questions concerning the allegations against him. He chose not to do so.