

Father Michael C. Bolesta

The case of Fr. Michael C. Bolesta, who was ordained in 1989, might at first seem distinctive: the Archdiocese hierarchy appeared unusually responsive to the allegations against him. The Grand Jury finds, however, that its intent – as usual – was to shield a sexually abusive priest from criminal prosecution. And the effect – once again – was to facilitate the priest’s continued predations.

When a group of parents in July 1991 accused Fr. Bolesta of improper sexual behavior with as many as 10 teenage boys, Cardinal Bevilacqua’s delegates, Msgrs. James E. Molloy and William J. Lynn, were immediately dispatched to interview the complaining parishioners at Saint Philip-Saint James Church in Exton. In response to a separate request by the parents of grade school children in the parish, the Archdiocese sent a counselor to talk with the 7th- and 8th-graders, some of whom had been involved with Fr. Bolesta as altar boys.

The reason for this unusual show of concern? The parents had taken their complaints to the Chester County District Attorney, and county detectives had arrived unannounced at the church rectory. The detectives informed Pastor John Caulfield that the accusations against Fr. Bolesta were numerous, including “a lot of touching” and grabbing at least one boy’s genitals. They asked pointedly what the Archdiocese was going to do about it. The pastor immediately notified the Secretary for Clergy, John J. Jagodzinski, and offered his opinion that the parents would drop the criminal charges if the Archdiocese acted.

In contrast with their normal practice, Church officials this time sought out the names of victims. But the victims whom Msgrs. Lynn and Molloy sought out were those whose parents had gone to the District Attorney. In conducting their interviews, they did not press reluctant victims for the details of their encounters, but did ask what the parents wanted the Archdiocese to do. Their purpose, clearly, was not to discover or prevent criminality. It was to stop a criminal investigation from going forward.

The parents told Msgr. Molloy they wanted to be sure that Fr. Bolesta would never again be assigned where he would have access to children. The Cardinal’s delegate repeatedly assured that “the practice is when there is doubt, we err on the side of caution.” Apparently reassured, the parents did not pursue their criminal charges. Meanwhile, Msgrs. Molloy and Lynn kept Fr. Bolesta apprised of the families’ intentions and the Archdiocese’s efforts to avert legal action, informing him at one point: “we are not completely out of the woods yet as far as a lawsuit is concerned.”

The true extent of Church officials’ concern for Fr. Bolesta’s victims – past and potential – became clear when assignments were made the next spring (in 1992). After his delegates had reassured victims’ parents that “every caution will be exercised” in future assignments, Cardinal Bevilacqua appointed Fr. Bolesta parochial vicar at Saint Agatha-Saint James, a parish in West Philadelphia. Among his pastoral duties was to minister at Children’s Hospital of Pennsylvania.

The Archdiocese investigates complaints, previously ignored, because parents report Father Bolesta's behavior to law enforcement.

On July 17, 1991, just hours before Cardinal Bevilacqua was to celebrate 7:00 p.m. Mass at Saints Philip and James Church in Exton, two county detectives came to the rectory to investigate allegations of sexual abuse brought against the parish's associate pastor, Fr. Michael Bolesta. The detectives, Steven Mills and Donna Carroll, interviewed the pastor, Fr. John Caulfield. The detectives told Fr. Caulfield that parents of parish children had reported "a lot of touching going on." One boy had said Fr. Bolesta had "grabbed him by the balls." The detectives wanted to know what the Archdiocese was going to do about it.

Father Caulfield had, in fact, received similar complaints from parents 10 months earlier. He had done nothing in response. Now, with the police at his door, he immediately reported the detectives' visit to Cardinal Bevilacqua's Secretary for Clergy at the time, Msgr. John J. Jagodzinski, who, in turn, forwarded the information to Msgr. James E. Molloy, an assistant to the Vicar for Administration "for [his] urgent attention." In a memo, Msgr. Jagodzinski emphasized and seconded Fr. Caulfield's opinion that "if the Church acts on this, the matter is likely to be dropped by the parents."

Monsignor Molloy, assisted by Msgr. William J. Lynn, conducted a prompt investigation. They initially interviewed the families of five boys who had told their parents about Fr. Bolesta's unwelcome touching and his persistent efforts to see the boys undressed. Four of these boys – "Nicholas" (age not recorded), "Chuck" (16 years old), "Jamie" (age not recorded), and "Jason" (16 years old) – worked at the parish grade school, painting, cleaning, and performing other maintenance jobs. One – "Dave" (13 years old) – was a younger brother. In interviews with these boys' families, Msgrs. Molloy and Lynn learned of at least five other boys who were said to have had similar experiences with Fr. Bolesta in the previous two years: "Gerry," "Luis," "Noah," "Nate," and "Eric."

The interviews, recorded in memos by Msgrs. Lynn and Molloy, seemed designed to let the parents have their say and to find out what they knew and what they wanted the Archdiocese to do, not to get at the entire truth. The interviews with boys were all conducted in the presence of their parents. Sometimes only the parents were interviewed.

One parent, whose child had been mentioned by the other boys, said she was grateful for the opportunities Fr. Bolesta had offered her son – baseball games and swimming – and had no complaints. The Archdiocesan managers did not ask to interview her son. When another parent told them that her son did not want to ruin Fr. Bolesta’s reputation – and worried what other boys would think because he had spent more time with the priest than had other boys – Msgr. Molloy suggested to the mother that “if others ask questions, it is important to tell the truth but not necessarily all the details.”

What came out was that the boys had discovered they were all experiencing the same things, but always one-on-one with Fr. Bolesta – constant invitations to go swimming, suggestions by the priest that they swim in the nude and shower with him, games of one-on-one basketball in the pool in which Fr. Bolesta touched them all over, the priest’s pulling towels off them after they showered and throwing them back in the pool nude, and inappropriate conversations about masturbation. When the boys began to hear each other’s stories as they worked at the parish school, they realized that Fr. Bolesta’s actions were purposeful and not innocent.

Two boys discovered that they both had been asked to try on shorts and shirts in front of the priest in his bedroom. One was told that the clothes were for Fr. Bolesta’s cousin; the other that they were for the poor. As the boys compared notes, they discovered they had been trying on the same clothes.

Father Bolesta manipulated the boys into swimming with him even when they did not want to do so. He told one boy that he needed him to work, but when the boy arrived at the church, the priest told him there was no work to do, that they were going swimming. Father Bolesta offered one boy a ride home after work, then insisted on taking him swimming at the indoor pool of a parishioner who was away. Both boys protested that they did not want to swim because they did not have their bathing suits. The priest then tried to get them to swim nude. He lured one reluctant boy to swim by telling him that a whole group was going. It ended up being just Fr. Bolesta.

One boy reported that, while standing in the church, Fr. Bolesta reached between the boy’s legs and grabbed his genitals. Archdiocese memos record that another boy was touched “on his butt” as he fixed an air conditioner. To an adolescent whose mother was in the hospital, Fr. Bolesta recommended masturbation as a good way to relieve stress.

Yet another boy he invited to go overnight with him to Canada to pick up vestments. When the boy declined, Fr. Bolesta had the vestments mailed.

Eventually, the boys shared their concerns about Fr. Bolesta with Richard Mitch, a man who supervised their work at the grade school. Alarmed, Mitch advised them to tell their parents what the priest was doing. Several of the parents, knowing that Pastor Caulfield had failed to act on earlier allegations, reported Fr. Bolesta's behavior directly to the Chester County District Attorney.

Archdiocese officials work to keep outraged parents from pressing charges.

With Fr. Caulfield, Msgr. Jagodzinski, and the Vicar for Chester County, Msgr. James McDonough, all advising that the Exton parents would likely drop their criminal complaint if the Archdiocese acted, Msgrs. Molloy and Lynn conducted unusually extensive interviews. They also showed particular interest in finding out which parents were talking to the District Attorney. Monsignor Molloy told one of the families, the parents of Nicholas, that "the Archdiocese is attempting to make contact with all the parties affected by this situation and that it would help to know if anyone who may have contacted the District Attorney's office was from a family whose name had not yet been brought to us."

Monsignors Lynn and Molloy asked the families what they wanted the Archdiocese to do. Several sought guarantees that Fr. Bolesta would never work with children again. Monsignor Molloy assured them that Cardinal Bevilacqua would be fully informed of their concerns. When pushed by one parent what would happen if an evaluation showed even a minimal "ten percent chance of Father Bolesta acting out," Msgr. Molloy wrote: "I stated that when there is so much at stake, if there is any doubt, it is best to err on the side of caution. I assured her that every caution will be exercised."

Father Bolesta left the parish shortly after the detectives showed up at the church in July 1991, but the possibility of criminal charges remained. Throughout the summer and fall of that year, Archdiocese managers made considerable efforts to mollify the families at the Exton parish. When informed in September that boys in the grade school who had had encounters with Fr. Bolesta were still upset, the Archdiocese sent a counselor to the school to meet with them. When the mother of one of Fr. Bolesta's

victims was hospitalized with emotional problems which she attributed to the priest's abuse of her child, the Archdiocese offered to pay her medical bills.

Denying or excusing his own actions, Father Bolesta is sent to Saint Luke Institute for evaluation.

Meanwhile, in an August 1, 1991, interview with Msgrs. Molloy and Lynn, Fr. Bolesta made excuses for, or denied, his predatory activities. Monsignor Molloy, apparently more concerned with avoiding legal action than with the danger the priest posed to parishioners, cautioned Fr. Bolesta "that we are not completely out of the woods yet as far as a lawsuit is concerned." Monsignor Molloy informed Fr. Bolesta that the families interviewed had demanded that Fr. Bolesta "should not be assigned to a place where he would be working with children." The Archdiocese managers asked the priest to go for a one-week evaluation at Saint Luke Institute in Suitland, Maryland. Father Bolesta agreed.

The Archdiocese sought to mislead parishioners about the reason for Fr. Bolesta's absence. According to a memo written by Msgr. Molloy, the priest "agreed that if he were questioned, he could say he was taking time off for health considerations because he has been under stress and needs an assignment that would be less demanding." On the same day that Fr. Caulfield announced Fr. Bolesta's departure from the parish, he informed the parishioners that he – Fr. Caulfield – had been made a Monsignor. On this pastor who had silently ignored allegations of improper behavior by Fr. Bolesta for 10 months – while the priest continued to abuse numerous boys – Cardinal Bevilacqua chose to bestow an honor rather than a reprimand.

When Fr. Bolesta returned from his one week at Saint Luke, he was assigned to live in the rectory of Immaculate Conception in Philadelphia. A Philadelphia therapist, Phillip J. Miraglia, Ph.D., told Archdiocese managers that he agreed with Saint Luke's recommendation that Fr. Bolesta should "be enjoined from any one-on-one contact with youths under the age of eighteen." On April 21, 1992, Msgr. Molloy forwarded this recommendation to the Vicar for Administration, Edward P. Cullen.

Cardinal Bevilacqua ignores recommendations regarding Father Bolesta and the danger he presents to young people.

Despite Dr. Miraglia's explicit warning, and Msgr. Molloy's assurances to the Exton parish families that "the practice is when there is doubt, we err on the side of caution . . . we cannot take chances," Cardinal Bevilacqua appointed Fr. Bolesta as an associate pastor at Saint Agatha-Saint James Church in West Philadelphia on May 22, 1992. In his appointment letter, Cardinal Bevilacqua instructed Fr. Bolesta "*to teach the youth*" (emphasis supplied). One of the priest's primary duties in his new assignment was to minister to sick children at Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania.

Even grade school children knew it was wrong to appoint Fr. Bolesta to another parish less than a year after he had left Exton. Father Thomas F. O'Brien, the counselor who had been asked to meet with 7th and 8th graders in Exton in November 1991, was called back to the school on October 8, 1992. He wrote to Msgr. Molloy that there was "much anger among eighth grade boys" when they learned that "Father Mike" had been reassigned to a parish. Father O'Brien said that the boys "related in detail what he had tried to do with some of them." He told Msgr. Molloy that "the reassignment was perceived as a disregard for what he had done as a priest and a blatant insensitivity or concern for the welfare of other children in other parishes." The 8th graders thought that the children at Fr. Bolesta's new parish should be told "to be more cautious and careful around him."

Father O'Brien said that he assured the students "that the Archdiocese of Philadelphia . . . and indeed every decent moral person is concerned for their welfare and those who would be victimized." As a word of caution to the Archdiocese hierarchy, Fr. O'Brien wrote: "The published reassignment of Father Michael Bolesta in the Catholic Standard and Times was the cause of this issue resurfacing"

Monsignor Lynn, now Secretary for Clergy, responded to O'Brien. Focusing on the mistake of *publishing*, rather than that of reassigning, Msgr. Lynn thanked O'Brien "for your note of caution regarding the publishing of reassignments of priests accused of such actions" Father Bolesta was left in his new assignment.

It was not until July 1994 that some Exton parents discovered that Fr. Bolesta's new assignment included ministering at Children's Hospital, and it was not until they

complained that action was taken. A father, whose 7th-grade son had been taken swimming by Fr. Bolesta, called Msgr. Molloy on July 1. He said he was calling on behalf of “parents whose children were in Children’s Hospital (CHOP) and were outraged that Fr. Bolesta was assigned to a parish responsible for a children’s hospital.” He said he wanted to be able to tell the parents that Fr. Bolesta would not return to CHOP.

On September 15, 1994, Cardinal Bevilacqua reassigned Fr. Bolesta to be Chaplain at Holy Redeemer Health System in Huntingdon Valley. Father Bolesta remained in that assignment until January 2, 2004, when he died at the age of 42.