

Father Gerard W. Chambers

The case of Fr. Gerard W. Chambers illustrates the fact, clearly established by evidence before the Grand Jury, that the Philadelphia Archdiocese had a longstanding policy of transferring sexually abusive priests from parish to parish in order to avoid disclosure and scandal--never mind all the children thereby endangered and abused. Without investigating any accusations against Fr. Chambers, but based solely on a list of his assignments, Secretary for Clergy William J. Lynn was able to advise Cardinal Bevilacqua that an abuse allegation against the priest was probably valid. And what was it about the assignment list that made Msgr. Lynn's inference reasonable? The list showed that the Archdiocese had frequently, constantly moved Fr. Chambers around.

Ordained in 1934, Fr. Chambers was accused of molesting numerous altar boys, and of anally and orally raping at least one, during 40 years as a priest in the Archdiocese. Nearly half of those years were spent on "health leaves" and in treatment facilities. Each time the priest returned to ministry, he was assigned to a parish with full access to children. Once, after three successive sick leaves totaling more than six years, he was assigned as chaplain to an orphanage for boys. When Fr. Chambers was not on sick leave, he was moved from parish to parish. The Archdiocese assigned him to 17 parishes in his 21 years of active ministry.

Church officials in 1994 said they destroyed all of Fr. Chambers' personnel records covering his career in ministry. Beginning in that year, four of his victims came forward to the Archdiocese to talk about their abuse. The victims were from his fourteenth and fifteenth assignments – Saint Gregory, in West Philadelphia; and Seven Dolors, in Wyndmoor. One rape victim tried to commit suicide and has been institutionalized at a state mental hospital. He suffers delusions because he cannot reconcile his faith in the Church with what happened to him. Two of his brothers were also victims of Fr. Chambers and are still haunted by their abuse more than 40 years later. They named several other boys from Saint Gregory whom the priest had abused. One of the brothers testified that he believed Fr. Chambers "sexually abused every altar boy and quite frequently those who weren't altar boys."

The brothers of the institutionalized victim expressed anger before the Grand Jury because they know the Archdiocese could have prevented the abuse that ruined their brother's life. They, too, could tell from the list of Fr. Chambers' transfers that Church officials had to have known of the priest's crimes from the time of his earliest assignments. Father Chambers was constantly transferred, at odd times of the year, sometimes after only months in assignments, and his career was interrupted repeatedly for "health leave." The priest was placed on permanent health leave in 1963, at the age of 56. He died in 1974.

In 1994 the Archdiocese learns of victim “Benjamin.”

Benjamin was 46 years old in March 1994 when he told Msgr. Lynn and his assistant, Fr. James D. Beisel, that Fr. Gerard Chambers had abused him as an altar boy at Seven Dolores parish in Wyndmoor in 1959 or 1960. Father Beisel recorded that the abuse included “hugging, kissing, masturbating” the victim and “mutual fondling of the genitals.” It happened in the church sacristy, at Fr. Chambers’ sister’s house, and in the priest’s car. According to Fr. Beisel’s memo, Benjamin recalled that “Father Chambers plied him with alcohol and cigarettes.” Monsignor Lynn told Benjamin he would investigate the matter and get back to the victim. He offered that if the allegation were substantiated, the Archdiocese might help the victim with counseling costs he had incurred over the years.

By memo of March 28, 1994, Msgr. Lynn forwarded the allegation to Cardinal Bevilacqua and included a copy of the priest’s “profile,” listing his assignments within the Archdiocese. Monsignor Lynn informed Cardinal Bevilacqua that Fr. Chambers had died in 1974. He said that Benjamin had reported that Fr. Chambers was at Seven Dolores only a short time and had “disappeared suddenly, gone overnight.” Monsignor Lynn also stated: “From the attached profile it could be determined that the probability of the alleged abuse is highly possible.” He recommended that the Archdiocese offer the victim assistance with counseling costs.

Notes from an issues meeting on March 29, 1994, record: “Cardinal Bevilacqua did not act on the recommendations as submitted. Rather, the Cardinal directed that Msgr. Lynn notify Benjamin that his request is being reviewed and that further communication will be forthcoming.” In the meantime, Cardinal Bevilacqua directed that his staff “investigate prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law concerning the retention and/or destruction of records of clerical personnel who are deceased.”

Before agreeing to assist Fr. Chambers’ victim, Cardinal Bevilacqua also wanted Msgr. Lynn to research victim compensation policies of other dioceses, as well as payments made previously to victims of other priests in the Philadelphia Archdiocese. The Cardinal wanted to know from legal counsel: “What will happen if we decide not to pay anything to [Benjamin]?”

Eventually, Cardinal Bevilacqua agreed to reimburse Benjamin \$6,890 for counseling if the victim would sign an agreement acknowledging that the Archdiocese was not admitting guilt and promising that he would seek no further assistance. Monsignor Lynn told Benjamin that without “proof,” the Archdiocese could not acknowledge the victim’s abuse. He said the Archdiocese was only required to retain records for ten years after the death of a priest, and that it had disposed of Fr. Chambers’ personnel files.

In 2002 the Archdiocese learns of more victims.

- **“George”**

In June 2002, Msgr. Lynn learned of three more of Fr. Chambers’ victims, these from the priest’s 14th assignment. George called Msgr. Lynn and told him that Fr. Chambers had molested him and his two brothers at Saint Gregory parish in the 1950s. George and his brother, “Francis,” testified before the Grand Jury that Fr. Chambers fondled their genitals in the sacristy, at a house on the New Jersey Shore, and in the priest’s car. At age 59, George said he was embarrassed that he could not tell the Grand Jury about his abuse without many times breaking out in tears. He said he still harbored “more than a fair amount of self-hatred and self-recrimination.”

George said that Fr. Chambers’ abuse of him and his brothers ruined the life of his family when he was growing up. The brothers all had these awful secrets, and although they knew at some level of each other’s abuse, no one talked about it, and no one dared tell their Irish immigrant parents who had brought the boys up to be in “awe” of priests. So the boys “stuffed it down,” he said, and suffered alone. George started drinking at age 13 or 14 years. He said he has been in Alcoholics Anonymous since 1975, but has suffered from depression since then. He said that his second wife has tried to be supportive, but it was hard for her to understand the “repetitive stuff that I go through,” and why he could not get over it.

- **Francis**

Francis testified that, like George, as an altar boy he had endured Fr. Chambers’ fondling his genitals and rubbing the priest’s genitals against him in the sacristy. He also

recalled a particular instance of abuse when he had accompanied Fr. Chambers on an overnight trip to the New Jersey Shore. He told the Grand Jury that he awoke to find Fr. Chambers in his bed with one hand on the boy's genitals and the other on his "rear." Francis spent the rest of the night locked in a bathroom to escape the priest. Although his abuse occurred when he was a young teenager, Francis told the Grand Jury: "It's something that I carried my whole – my whole life." He said he thought about it all the time and still has trouble concentrating.

George echoed Francis's self-assessment. George testified that Fr. Chambers' abuse of Francis "clouded" his brother's whole thought process.

- **"Owen"**

For all of the abuse that Francis and George suffered at the hand of Fr. Chambers, it was Owen's suffering that finally led his brothers to the Archdiocese for help in 2002. Owen was the youngest brother and had been most brutally abused by Fr. Chambers. Although Owen refused to acknowledge or talk about his abuse, his brothers knew of it. In November 2002, a cousin of theirs, Fr. "Edward," was able to get Owen to talk about what Fr. Chambers had done to him.

Father Edward, who was an Irish priest, wrote to the Philadelphia Archdiocese in August 2003 and related how Owen had finally acknowledged his abuse. The cousin wrote that Owen did not use the word "abused" and he would not refer to Fr. Chambers as a priest. Rather, Owen insisted that Fr. Chambers "was not a priest," but "an agent trying to destroy the Catholic Church." He described to his cousin "screaming in the sacristy" because of what Fr. Chambers did to him. He told the name of a sexton who had ignored his cries. He shared delusions with his cousin about "agents making poisonous wafers" and accused the Queen of England and evil men of trying to destroy the Catholic Church.

The cousin described Owen as "very pious." He wrote that Owen "often attended three Masses daily" and "loved to recite rosaries." He told Archdiocese managers:

I feel that [Owen] has suppressed in his subconscious much of what happened to him when he was an altar boy. In the past and even now, he seems incapable of accepting that abuse, such as happened to him, could happen within the Catholic Church and be done by a priest. Other churches, yes, but not ours. His vision of a priest is still that of his

childhood . . . of a saintly man incapable of doing evil. Hence his reference to agents . . . trying to destroy the Catholic Church may be his way of trying to reconcile for himself what happened to him.

Father Edward said that he was writing to Msgr. Lynn and Martin Frick, the Archdiocese's victim assistance coordinator, "in the hope that you may appreciate better the pain and confusion that Owen has experienced as a result of what happened to him when he was young."

Francis testified that Owen's condition deteriorated significantly when he began to read in early 2002 that abuse of minors by Catholic priests was, in fact, widespread. When Owen testified before the Grand Jury on July 9, 2004, he had been at Norristown State Hospital for about a year and was on medication. He was able to recall and finally describe his abuse. He still insisted, though, that he considered Fr. Chambers "a demon" and "a devil" and "not representative of a Catholic priest."

Owen told the Grand Jury that his abuse started when he was 9 or 10 years old, but he probably was 12, given when Fr. Chambers came to his parish. He testified that Fr. Chambers "trapped" him in a closet where cassocks were hung. He said Fr. Chambers put his hands around the boy's neck and tried to force him to perform oral sex on the priest. Owen thought Fr. Chambers choked him partly to make him do what the priest wanted, and then in frustration when Owen refused. Owen told how Fr. Chambers fondled his genitals. He estimated this happened 12 to 15 times.

Owen told the Grand Jury that he tried to tell his mother that Fr. Chambers was a "bad priest," but he described what happened to him in childish ways, for example, saying "he touched me between my legs," and his mother did not seem to understand. Once, when Owen was trying to avoid going to the shore with Fr. Chambers, he told his mother that the priest "touched me here, and he wants to blow me." His mother hit him, which he said did not cause "physical pain, but psychologically was a crusher, because she was sending me down to the shore with an ogre."

It was on that trip to the shore that Fr. Chambers orally and anally raped the 12-year-old. Owen testified that he spent two nights with Fr. Chambers at his New Jersey Shore house. He could not remember precisely what happened on which night, but he

recalled Fr. Chambers' entering the room where Owen was sleeping on a couch. He said the priest was naked and he climbed on top of Owen and put his hands around the boy's throat. He told the boy: "You know I could strangle you right now if I wanted to." Owen said he was "deathly afraid" and tried to "fight him off." The boy, who had been pinned on his stomach, was able to turn onto his back. At that point, he said, the priest sat on his chest and "pressed his penis against my mouth." When the boy refused to perform oral sex, he said, Fr. Chambers smacked him and left the room.

Owen could not remember whether it was the next night or later on the same night that Fr. Chambers returned. The victim described how Fr. Chambers pulled down his pants and performed oral sex on him for about 45 minutes. Owen said he never had an orgasm, but that his penis began to bleed.

Owen further told the Grand Jury that about an hour after this ordeal ended, Fr. Chambers returned, climbed on top of the boy's back, and tried to force his erect penis into the boy's rectum. Owen said that Fr. Chambers succeeded in entering him anally "for about half a minute." After the boy struggled and got "him out of my rear end, . . . he tried for about fifteen, twenty minutes to get back in." Owen said he "wouldn't let him." He then told the priest, "Why don't you kill me now? I got to live with this shame for the rest of my life." Owen told the Grand Jury: "I still feel shame about it today."

Owen did not talk about what happened to him for more than 40 years. As his brother George testified: "[Owen] just stuffed it." George said that, in 1981, Francis tried to get Owen to talk about what happened, warning him: "[Owen] if you don't deal with this molestation, it's going to take you down." Owen testified that it ruined his marriage. His wife, he said, had "heard a little bit of the story," and did not want their children raised Catholic. Owen, still believing that Fr. Chambers was "a devil" and an aberration "not representative of a Catholic priest," remained devoted to his church. Owen and his wife divorced in the early 1980s.

After his divorce, Owen moved back to his parents' home in Philadelphia. There, in 1983, he attempted suicide, slitting his throat and wrists with a razor. Since then, Owen has been in and out of psychiatric facilities.

Between 1934 and 1974, Father Chambers is given 17 assignments and placed on “health leave” for a total of 19 years.

In 1994, when Benjamin began speaking to the Archdiocese about his abuse, the priest had been dead 20 years. Church officials told the victim that Fr. Chambers’ personnel records no longer existed. However, the one document the Archdiocese had retained – a list of Fr. Chambers’ assignments – reveals a great deal. It reveals that the priest was on “health leave” almost as much as he was in active ministry, and that he spent his 21 years of active ministry in 17 different parishes. Having heard the stories of so many sexually abusive priests, the Grand Jury was easily able to recognize this pattern of constant transfer as an indicator that the Archdiocese knew that Fr. Chambers was a chronic sexual offender and moved him from parish to parish to avoid scandal, without regard to how these transfers endangered the children of the parishes.

Interestingly, Secretary for Clergy Lynn also recognized this pattern, and ascribed to it the same significance that the Grand Jury did. Msgr. Lynn found Benjamin’s allegations “highly possible,” based only on a review of this list of assignments. Monsignor Lynn told one of the three brother victims that priests normally spent five years in each assignment. Fr. Chambers often spent less than nine months. His longest parish assignment lasted two-and-a-half years. He was frequently transferred in the middle of the year, rather than in June as was customary – and he was moved to all corners of the Archdiocese. For Msgr. Lynn, as for the Grand Jury, this pattern of transfer was characteristic of how the Archdiocese treated the problems presented by sexually abusive priests.

The Grand Jury cannot know whether Fr. Chambers abused others at any of the many other parishes to which he was assigned, but common sense dictates that it is highly likely that he did so. The three brothers, George, Francis, and Owen, gave to the Grand Jury the names of six other boys who had told them that they also had suffered Fr. Chambers’ abuse – “Daniel,” “Bill” (who in February 2004 had himself reported to the Archdiocese that Fr. Chambers had abused him), “Sam,” “Don,” “Bobby,” and “Hank” (whose sister in February 2004 reported to the Archdiocese that Fr. Chambers had abused her brother). Hank died at age 38 after suffering from serious drug and alcohol abuse.

Francis and George testified to having been abused in Fr. Chambers' car when he took them to visit an orphanage in the Poconos, where the priest had been chaplain. Both assumed there were more victims there. Owen told the Grand Jury that he believed Fr. Chambers had "sexually abused every altar boy [at Saint Gregory] and quite frequently those who weren't altar boys."

The Archdiocese responds to the three brothers.

George, Francis and Owen began seeking help from the Archdiocese in 1995, one year after Benjamin came forward. Their first attempt to report their abuse and its consequences came in a letter to Bishop John Graham, who had been an auxiliary bishop, and was a cousin of the three brothers. Francis wrote the letter Easter week of 1995. In it he detailed Fr. Chambers' abuse of the three brothers. He told of Owen's attempted suicide. He received no response from Bishop Graham or anyone else in the Archdiocese.

Seven years later, in June 2002, George contacted Msgr. Lynn to report Fr. Chambers' abuse of all three brothers. George was primarily concerned for Owen, who had attempted suicide and was in desperate need of help. Msgr. Lynn told George that he was willing to meet with the victims, but that they were also "welcome to go to the civil authorities." This case, where Msgr. Lynn knew the priest had been dead almost three decades, is one of the few in which he ever noted suggesting a report to law enforcement.

When Francis called Msgr. Lynn in August 2002, the Secretary for Clergy wrote to the Archdiocese's victim coordinator, Martin Frick. Msgr. Lynn explained the situation and asked Frick to assist Owen with counseling and housing. In March of the next year, George wrote to complain that no assistance had been provided. It appears that, despite Msgr. Lynn's instructions in August 2002 to go ahead and assist Owen, Frick was insistent on taking some sort of statement from the victim, even though the victim was not emotionally able to give one. Owen's delusions, heard by a priest friend and reported to Frick, that "men were coming in and out of his apartment and putting semen in his mouth," should have been sufficient evidence that he needed help. On March 31, 2003, Msgr. Lynn

again instructed Frick to help Owen, without a statement from the victim, based on the information they had from George, Francis, and the cousin, Fr. Edward.

By August 2003, while still waiting for the assistance he needed, Owen had assaulted his landlord and was committed to Norristown State Hospital. On November 20, 2003, the day before he testified before the Grand Jury, George met with Msgr. Lynn and Frick and, again, asked the Archdiocese to pay for counseling and housing for Owen. The Church officials told him that it would be discussed the next week and George would be notified.

On June 18, 2004, Francis testified that George had recently been notified that the Archdiocese would pay for six months of counseling if and when Owen was released from Norristown State Hospital. After the six months, the brothers were told, Archdiocese managers would review the situation. According to Francis, no housing assistance was offered. Owen told the Grand Jury: "I hope they don't release me until I get over [my] suicidal tendencies."