News
march with survivors of clergy sexual abuse and activists near the Vatican

Advocates for zero tolerence of clergy sexual abuse including Tim Law, left, Denise Buchanan and Peter Isely attend a march with survivors of clergy sexual abuse and activists near the Vatican in Rome Sept. 27, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)



by Ryan Di Corpo

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(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Forty years ago this month, readers of the National Catholic Reporter first learned through a series of three articles about a dark secret in the Catholic Church that would ultimately expand into an international sexual-abuse crisis.

Ultimately, the bombshell stories in NCR would mushroom into a controversy that would shake the very foundations of the worldwide Catholic Church and raise questions about the management of the institution, impact the election of popes, spark a crisis of confidence among billions of Catholics and foreshadow a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation in The Boston Globe.

Yet it would be decades before the scandal reached those proportions.

The coverage began in June 1985 on NCR's front page with an overview of abuse cases in several U.S. dioceses. That edition also included at its center a shocking example, the results of a monthslong investigation by freelance journalist Jason Berry into Gilbert "Gil" Gauthe.

Gilbert Gauthe

The case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthe, the Louisiana priest sentenced to 20 years in prison in 1985 for molesting boys, was one of the first nationally publicized cases of priest pedophilia. (CNS file)

A popular horseback-riding, duck-hunting Louisiana priest, Gauthe was exposed as a serial predator who had failed his ethics class in seminary, improved his marks enough for ordination in late 1971 and began molesting boys during his first parish assignment the following year, Berry discovered.

"This was the first case of a pedophile priest to gain national attention," reported the New York Times in 2002.

The investigation was the result of the indefatigable efforts of Berry and the courage of the Times of Acadiana, a Louisiana paper, which co-published the groundbreaking investigation with NCR.

Prior to publication of the investigation, the case was a relatively small local crime news story that eluded major national attention. In October 1984, the 39-year-old Gauthe was indicted in Lafayette, Louisiana, on 34 counts of sex crimes involving

minors. Before his trial, the Diocese of Lafayette and its insurers agreed to pay at least $4.2 million in settlement costs to nine families. Eleven additional civil suits were filed.

Later, after the NCR and Times series, in October 1985, Gauthe abandoned an insanity defense, pled guilty and was sentenced to 20 years in prison "at hard labor" and with no possibility of parole.

> 'The story was not one man who happened to be a priest with a terrible criminal pathology. It was really the story of a cover-up.'
> —Jason Berry
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In 1995, the laicized Gauthe was released, and was re-arrested the following year in Texas for allegedly molesting a 3-year-old boy. Gauthe was later jailed an additional two years in Galveston County for failing to register as sex offender.

The story continues today: Gauthe was again accused of molestation in a new lawsuit filed last year against the Lafayette Diocese, where the case first emerged decades ago.

'Peering into a pretty deep pit'

The criminal case caught the eye of a young reporter, Berry, who was raised Catholic in midcentury Louisiana and educated by Jesuits, first in New Orleans and then at Georgetown. Outraged and preoccupied by the repulsive crimes, Berry decided the real story was being missed after, in November 1984, he read a startling local press report alleging that church officials were aware of the cleric's "sexual activities" years earlier.

"The story was not one man who happened to be a priest with a terrible criminal pathology," Berry said in an interview. "It was really the story of a cover-up."

Rejected by major national publications disinterested in a story about sex crimes and the church, Berry found support in Linda Matys, then the editor of the Times of Acadiana in southern Louisiana.

In an interview, Matys O'Connell (her name after marrying former Times associate editor Geoff O'Connell) said that the Gauthe story was generally known in Lafayette but had not been covered in any depth.

"It seemed really important to reveal … the way that the diocese was dealing with the issue," she said.



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Repressive conditions unite church efforts

On June 7, 1985, NCR published a story about the sex abuse case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthe and an editorial criticizing the church structure that covered it up.

Seeking to co-publish his story to help defray reporting costs, Berry called Tom Fox, the Stanford-educated former editor and publisher of NCR who got his start at the paper covering Vietnam in the 1960s. A tenacious journalist and survivor of sexual abuse by a Catholic priest, which Fox publicly revealed in 2015, this "loving critic of the church" said he would not shirk from running Berry's story if the reporting was solid.

Catholic leaders expressed concern regarding pedophile priests decades before 1985. As NCR has reported, as early as 1952, a priest in New Mexico wrote to several U.S. bishops and the Vatican about clergy sexual misconduct. The priest, Fr. Gerald Fitzgerald, founded a religious group for troubled clergy and later met with Pope St. Paul VI in August 1963.

In private letters made public by a New Mexico judge, Fitzgerald repeatedly suggests transferring priests who have "seduced" children to a Caribbean island to forestall scandal. He considered moving predatory priests to the West Indies outpost of Carriacou, in the Grenadines, but abandoned the idea due to tourism in the region. "It is for this class of rattlesnake I have always wished the island retreat — but even an island is too good for these vipers," wrote Fitzgerald about abusive priests in 1957.

Decades later, NCR published its first report on clergy abuse on Sept. 23, 1983. The article, written by freelance journalist Gordon Oliver, described how Fr. Thomas Laughlin, a priest in Portland, Oregon, had been sentenced to a year in jail for molesting a minor. Despite the explosive nature of these allegations, Oliver said he encountered no resistance from the NCR.

"I think they wanted the information out and they weren't worried about offending people," he said in an interview this year.



Jason Berry addresses a meeting of the Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) in Chicago in July 2014. Berry, who reported on the case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthe for the National Catholic Reporter, said, "It was really the story of a cover-up." (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

Berry's investigation led him to a tranche of revealing documents provided by several lawyers suing the church, including sworn pretrial testimony from Gauthe and church officials.*

Berry spent several months investigating Bishop Gerald Frey, who led the Lafayette Diocese from 1972 until his retirement in 1989. Frey was told about Gauthe's transgressions a decade before his indictment; Frey secretly confronted Gauthe, who acknowledged the accusations were true, but Frey did not remove him from active ministry.

Similar to the pattern The Boston Globe unveiled in 2002, the Louisiana bishop moved Gauthe from assignment to assignment

A year after learning that Gauthe had molested a youth, Frey appointed him chaplain of the Boy Scouts and later shuffled him to another parish where congregants were unnerved by several boys hanging around the priest's house.

"I was peering into a pretty deep pit with a lot of dark figures," Berry recalled. "It was shocking but I wanted to understand it and get to the bottom of it."

"The Tragedy of Gilbert Gauthe" first appeared in The Times on May 23, 1985, followed one week later by its sequel. While Berry described the public's initial reaction to his story as “encouraging,” Matys O'Connell said that the Lafayette community was divided.

Related: Read the 1985 editorial when NCR exposed the clergy sex abuse scandal

Erring on the side of caution, the initial report provided extensive details of how church leaders shuttled Gauthe from place to place. But The Times did not name the church's actions as a "cover-up."

Two weeks later, NCR did.

"Yet the tragedy, and scandal, as NCR sees it, is not only with the actions of individual priests — these are serious enough — but with the church structures in which bishops, chanceries and seminaries fail to respond to complaints, or even engage in cover-ups," reads an editor's note about the investigation on June 7, 1985.

In that print edition, NCR published three articles on clergy sex abuse: Berry's investigation, an article by Washington bureau chief (and later NCR publisher) Arthur Jones about abuse cases in dioceses nationwide and a groundbreaking editorial that called for the creation of diocesan review boards.

The reaction from some Catholics was fierce, swift and withering. NCR readers canceled their subscriptions. Fox was branded by one critic "the son of Satan." Readers wrote letters to the editor lambasting NCR's stories as "disgraceful," "totally uncalled for" and "luridly overdone."

Jesuit Fr. Joseph Fichter, a noted sociologist who served on NCR's board of directors, filed a motion to fire Fox as editor. Fox survived the vote, remained as editor and Fichter resigned.

Reflecting on these events in 2015, Fox wrote that the paper's reporting did not cause an immediate shift in the church, but nonetheless displayed an "aim to give voices to the voiceless and to hold authority accountable."

'This thing is gonna explode'

By the end of 1985, every diocesan bishop in the United States was provided a confidential report warning that the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy constituted an urgent crisis that, from early estimates, could cost the church up to $1 billion in financial damages.

In the mid-1980s, Fr. Thomas Doyle, a Dominican priest then employed as a canonist at the Vatican Embassy in Washington, D.C., received a letter from Msgr. Henri Alexandre Larroque, the vicar general in Lafayette. It alerted the embassy to allegations against Gauthe, and a subsequent missive, Doyle recalled, said that a family had declined to settle and would file suit. Doyle brought the issue to Archbishop (later Cardinal) Pio Laghi, a papal nuncio distressed about the issue, and began to investigate. Doyle recalled Laghi being disturbed by the Gauthe accusations but uneducated about clergy sex abuse. A canon lawyer by background, the pro-nuncio had spent his entire ecclesial career in the diplomatic service, not in a parish where abuse occurred.



Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, pictured in 2012, worked on a report describing the national scope of clergy sex abuse. He warned U.S. bishops, "This thing is gonna explode." (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

Alongside Gauthe's defense attorney F. Ray Mouton and the late Fr. Michael Peterson, who opened a psychiatric hospital in Maryland that treated pedophile priests, Doyle set to work on a secret 92-page report — code-named "the Manual" — describing the national scope of clergy sex abuse and offering suggestions to church leaders. Doyle hoped the report would be discussed during the June 1985 meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Collegeville, Minnesota.

The bishops did discuss "the problem of priest-pedophilia" during a closed-door session, according to an account published later by Doyle. But the conference did not publicly address the Manual itself. Doyle relayed a stark warning to the bishops: "This is bullshit. You're not gonna be able to do this, man. This thing is gonna explode."

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There were nearly 17 years between Berry's reporting on the Gauthe case and the Pulitzer Prize-winning Boston Globe investigation by the Spotlight team that prompted international outrage, detailed complicity and criminality at the church's highest levels and spurred Catholic officials to action in the early 2000s.

What took so long? Berry said that false allegations of sexual abuse against Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the powerful archbishop of Chicago, served to chill coverage of priest misconduct. In 1993, Steven Cook, a 34-year-old ex-seminarian, launched a $10 million lawsuit accusing the cardinal of molesting him in the mid-1970s. But Cook later retracted the allegations. "The issue was dead and the Spotlight newspaper series ignited it all over again," Berry said.

Bernardin and Law

Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin stands with Boston Cardinal Bernard Law during a dinner Sept. 20, 1996, in Boston honoring Bernardin for health care leadership. (CNS/Lisa Kessler)

Michael Rezendes, a past member of the Globe's Spotlight team, said that he was not familiar with Berry's work until he began reporting on John Geoghan, a Catholic priest who raped boys throughout Greater Boston before being defrocked and then murdered in a maximum-security prison. Rezendes said that the difference between

the Spotlight series and the Gauthe case was twofold: The Globe connected the problem of clergy sex abuse in Boston to a "top-ranking prelate" (specifically, Cardinal Bernard Law) and the investigation relied heavily on the church's own internal documents. However, Berry's reporting did connect Gauthe to Bishop Frey, and by June 1985, NCR had condemned "church structures" that allowed child abuse to continue.

"I am aware of Jason Berry's excellent and important work," wrote Martin Baron, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who led The Globe during the Spotlight investigation, in a statement to NCR. "But I was focused at the time on the one case of John Geoghan."

An elusive closure

Pope Francis was elected in part because he was seen as someone willing to address the sexual abuse crisis more effectively than Pope Benedict XVI, according to several accounts, including *The Election of Pope Francis*, by Vatican reporter Gerard O'Connell. During his 12-year pontificate, Francis instituted a "zero tolerance" policy in regards to clergy sex abuse, abolished the pontifical secret for instances of sexual misconduct and mandated that all clergy and religious orders report abuse and cover-ups to ecclesial authorities.



St. John the Evangelist Cathedral in Lafayette, Louisiana (Wikimedia Commons/0ccam)

In 2014, Francis instituted an advisory group composed of clergy and laypeople to address sex abuse directly. And in 2018, the pope defrocked two Chilean bishops accused of molesting minors, bypassing a Vatican trial due to abundant evidence. Recently, Pope Leo XIV has faced questions regarding his handling of abuse cases in Chicago and Peru, though his allies, including Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, have defended how the now-pope handled the matter.

NCR at 60 years

Read more about NCR's first 60 years in the recently published *National Catholic Reporter: Beacon of Justice, Community and Hope*. Click here to learn more about

the book.

Berry says he's seen a shift since 1985 in how the church responds to abuse cases.

"I think many dioceses — because they have been so battered by litigation, scandal and financial losses — are much more inclined to immediately report to law enforcement when accusations like this arise," Berry said. "I think there are more proactive measures." But some journalists and advocates do not feel the same.

Mitchell Garabedian, the attorney who has represented sex abuse survivors for decades and was portrayed in the film "Spotlight," said that the church has not substantially changed its approach. Rather, he said, the institution is mainly concerned with shaping its public image.

"With the clergy sexual abuse crisis, the Catholic Church will design programs to keep children safe, but they really don't implement them," Garabedian said in an interview. He describes a crisis still in "full-throttle" across many states and notes that survivors abused in the 1990s and early 2000s are beginning to come forward.

Doyle, the retired canon lawyer who served in the Vatican embassy to the U.S., said that Pope Francis addressed sexual abuse "as much as he could. The priests who [commit abuse] keep doing it. It doesn't matter what the pope says."

Accusers and priests must alert bishops about abuse claims, Doyle said. However, when informed, most bishops don't do what is needed.

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In an interview, Juan Carlos Cruz, a survivor of clergy sex abuse and a friend of Pope Francis, who appointed Cruz to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, said he does not believe that everyone in the church is solely concerned with its image. But Cruz is frustrated when some bishops do not follow Vatican directives. Cruz said the church needs a consistent approach to combating sex abuse across dioceses.

Four decades after the Gauthe investigation, clergy sex-abuse cases continue to generate international headlines, remaining an open wound for survivors and the church. For Geoff O'Connell, who was raised Catholic, the bishops' response has

been an overwhelming betrayal.

"Anybody who was involved in any way, or touched by it in any way, does not feel any sense of closure," O'Connell said.

*Correction: This story has been edited to clarify the source of documents acquired by Jason Berry.

This story appears in the **NCR at 60 years** feature series. View the full series.