

Father Thomas J. Wisniewski

In July 1992, Cardinal Bevilacqua's newly appointed Secretary for Clergy, William J. Lynn, documented allegations that Fr. Thomas J. Wisniewski had abused a 15-year-old boy in Nativity B.V.M. parish for three years, beginning in 1984, engaging in "everything sexually two men can do."

The documents in Fr. Wisniewski's file shed light on Cardinal Bevilacqua's policies and practices in dealing with priests accused of sexual crimes. According to these procedures, the Cardinal was made knowledgeable of the case from the start. The procedures emphasized consideration of legal liability and scandal over public safety. They sought to conceal information and avoid law enforcement. They failed to heed recommendations for supervising and monitoring the priest. The procedures enabled Fr. Wisniewski, ordained in 1974, to continue acting as a priest for six years after he admitted sexually abusing a minor.

Monsignor Lynn's memos about Fr. Wisniewski describe a process whereby sexual abuse allegations were to be immediately reported, verbally, to Cardinal Bevilacqua and his Vicar for Administration. The Cardinal wanted his Secretary for Clergy to "act quickly" to remove any admitted molester from his assignment and to have the priest evaluated at the Archdiocese's hospital, Saint John Vianney. But the purpose of acting quickly, Msgr. Lynn noted, was to minimize "legal ramifications." Known victims who did not themselves come forward were not to be sought out or interviewed. The Archdiocesan Personnel Board charged with recommending priests' assignments was not to be informed of "such matters" as sexual abuse allegations and admissions.

Also in Fr. Wisniewski's file was a description by Saint John Vianney therapists of the aftercare and supervision that the Archdiocese would need to put in place if it was to consider permitting abusers to continue in what Cardinal Bevilacqua termed "limited ministry." These recommendations called for, among other things, a resident supervisor who kept a daily log of the priest's comings and goings. In Fr. Wisniewski's case, as in others, the ministry was permitted, but the supervision and aftercare were lacking.

In 1992, Father Wisniewski admits to abusing "Kenneth."

On July 7, 1992, "Susan" reported to Archdiocese managers that her ex-boyfriend, Kenneth, had been abused for three years by Fr. Thomas Wisniewski, beginning in 1984 when the priest was an assistant pastor at Nativity B.V.M. in Media. Father Paul Dougherty, who also knew from Kenneth of his abuse, accompanied Susan to the Archdiocese headquarters, where they met with Cardinal Bevilacqua's Assistant Vicar for Administration, James E. Molloy, and his newly assigned Secretary for Clergy, William J. Lynn.

Monsignor Lynn's notes show that the Archdiocese was informed by Susan that Kenneth had been a 15-year-old student at Cardinal O'Hara High School in 1984 when Fr. Wisniewski began his three-year course of sexually abusing the boy. In October 1991, Kenneth confided in Susan and Fr. Dougherty, whom the couple had consulted to discuss marriage plans. Kenneth described to Susan a relationship he thought was "special." Father Wisniewski had given Kenneth expensive gifts, including a VCR and a car. During the course of this sexually abusive relationship, from Kenneth's sophomore year in high school through the beginning of college, Fr. Wisniewski had oral sex with him and attempted to penetrate him anally. The abuse sometimes took place at the Nativity rectory, where Kenneth worked. The priest also took trips alone with the teen to the New Jersey Shore and to Canada.

Father Dougherty told Msgrs. Lynn and Molloy that Kenneth "felt angry and guilty about the relationship." Kenneth was not sure, however, whether he wanted to tell authorities about it. Perhaps most significantly for the Archdiocese, there was reason to believe that Fr. Wisniewski might be abusing another boy. The priest told the Archdiocese managers that, in December 1991, Kenneth "was convinced there were other victims." Monsignor Lynn recorded that Susan also warned that Fr. Wisniewski had been seen recently dining out with a 14- or 15-year-old from Saint Pius X parish in Broomall, to which the priest had been transferred in June 1991.

Susan told Msgrs. Molloy and Lynn that she thought Kenneth might tell the officials what happened if they approached him and told him what they already knew. Father Dougherty noted that Kenneth had been "glad to share his story." Despite these indications that the victim might be willing to speak with them, the Archdiocese managers declined to contact him. In response to an explicit request by Susan that the managers question Kenneth, Msgr. Molloy was evasive, saying that "he would explore that possibility, but that it might violate civil law," a dubious proposition he did not explain.

Later that same day, Fr. Wisniewski admitted the truth of the allegations when confronted by Msgrs. Molloy and Lynn.

The Archdiocese's memos outline procedures for handling abuse cases and reveal Church leaders' misplaced priorities.

Monsignor Lynn kept detailed memos recording the handling of Fr. Wisniewski's case, one of his first as Secretary for Clergy. His memos from this case are informative because, as he learned the job, he explained the Cardinal's policies, and the rationales behind them, in a way that he did not as the process became more familiar.

The first step after receiving the allegation was to interview the accused priest. The next step was to immediately inform Cardinal Bevilacqua – orally. A written report to the Cardinal – for the record – would follow later. After procuring Fr. Wisniewski's admission, Msgr. Lynn noted, he “immediately informed [Vicar for Administration Edward P.] Cullen who verbally informed Cardinal Bevilacqua.”

The Cardinal's protocols apparently did not entail informing the police about a sexually abusive priest. Monsignor Lynn wrote that the usual process – that is, when the priest admitted to abusing a minor –called for “immediate removal from the rectory, a full evaluation and a follow-up recommendation.” This speed was less attributable to a concern for victims than to the Archdiocese's legal exposure: “there is less legal ramifications,” Msgr. Lynn noted, “if they [Archdiocese managers] act quickly.” Similarly, inpatient evaluation at a Church-affiliated institution was designed to serve the Archdiocese. Monsignor Lynn recorded that Fr. Wisniewski was told: “legally, they [the Archdiocese managers] have to cover all possibilities.” Accordingly, Fr. Wisniewski was sent to Saint John Vianney for evaluation on July 14, 1992.

It was not procedure to try to interview victims if their abuse had been reported by a third party and they had not come forward themselves. Despite Susan's request, supported by Fr. Dougherty's belief that Kenneth needed counseling, Archdiocese managers made no apparent attempt to talk to Kenneth. Questioned by the Grand Jury, Msgr. Lynn abandoned the untenable excuse, given by Msgr. Molloy to Susan, that the Archdiocese feared civil consequences and, instead, asserted the dubious claim that they avoided contacting victims in order not to traumatize them.

The Cardinal's procedures also prevented the Priest Personnel Board, responsible for recommending priest assignments, from learning about abuse allegations; the Church officials informed Fr. Wisniewski “that such matters are not brought to the personnel

board....” Nor was Fr. Wisniewski’s parish to be informed of the reason for his absence when he went to Saint John Vianney for evaluation. Monsignor Lynn wrote: “Father Wisniewski was told that the pastor should tell the parishioners that he is on vacation.”

Father Wisniewski’s Secret Archives file also sheds light on Cardinal Bevilacqua’s procedure for deciding whether to return an abusive priest to ministry. Monsignor Lynn initially proposed, in a September 1, 1992, memo, that “consideration to future ministry assignment in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia be based on the results of the recommended treatment at Saint John Vianney Hospital,” the treatment facility where Fr. Wisniewski was sent for evaluation. Monsignors Molloy and Cullen amended the proposal, suggesting that the Cardinal base his decision only “in part” on the therapists’ advice. Cardinal Bevilacqua approved the memo’s recommendation, expressly noting the amendment.

On May 14, 1993, Msgr. Lynn recommended Fr. Wisniewski’s return to ministry despite his admissions to sexual abuse of a boy. The reasons he gave enumerated the other factors Cardinal Bevilacqua thought were important to consider beyond Saint John Vianney’s recommendation. Monsignor Lynn noted that the victim “has never come forward” and “[t]here has never been any threat of legal action.” Absent any warnings of possible scandal or lawsuits, Cardinal Bevilacqua approved Fr. Wisniewski’s return to ministry.

The inadequacy of procedures is exemplified in the limited supervision of Father Wisniewski.

Cardinal Bevilacqua told the Grand Jury that the return of abusive priests to ministry was justified because their ministry was “limited” and “supervised.” The documents in Fr. Wisniewski’s file demonstrate that that was simply untrue. Father Wisniewski and other sexually abusive priests were returned to ministry without sufficient supervision or enforced limitations.

On March 11, 1993, several weeks before Fr. Wisniewski’s discharge from Saint John Vianney, Fr. Wisniewski’s therapist wrote to Msgr. Lynn that Fr. Wisniewski was not a pedophile, but referred to his “ephebophilic behavior.” The therapist also outlined

in great detail the type of supervision and treatment necessary to make Fr. Wisniewski a viable candidate for “ministry-supervision.”

The therapist’s conditions were extensive and designed to prevent Fr. Wisniewski from having the opportunity to abuse other children. He recommended an assignment that would prohibit “face to face or other unsupervised ministerial involvement with male adolescents....” He also called for the priest to have a resident “ministry supervisor,” and stated that Fr. Wisniewski should be required to sign in and out on a “daily log indicating where he is going and when he is expected to return and with whom he will be visiting.” The supervisor would be expected to countersign the log. As for continued therapy, the therapist recommended that Fr. Wisniewski attend sexual addiction support group meetings daily for the first three months following discharge, that he continue in individual psychotherapy for at least four years, and that he have a “comprehensive psychological assessment annually.”

An integral part of the necessary aftercare program outlined by the therapist was the “Ministry Supervision Team,” to include the resident ministry supervisor, the Secretary for Clergy, Fr. Wisniewski’s therapist, and a peer of Fr. Wisniewski. The therapist advised that this group meet weekly for the first few months, then monthly. He emphasized that the supervision and therapy would need to be sustained for a long time. “The team should be mindful,” he warned, “that current developmental resources indicate a full developmental era may be required to effect the behavioral changes needed to develop a healthy, adult style of interpersonal relating.”

Monsignor Lynn forwarded the therapist’s outline for ministry supervision to Cardinal Bevilacqua on May 14, 1993, and again on July 13, 1993. In his July memo, Msgr. Lynn recommended that Fr. Wisniewski, who was still at Saint John Vianney, be assigned to work as an advocate to the Metropolitan Tribunal, the ecclesiastical court of the Archdiocese, and to live in a parish rectory.

On July 20, 1993, Cardinal Bevilacqua approved continued ministry for Fr. Wisniewski, including his work and residence assignments. The Cardinal’s acknowledgement of the importance of supervision was well documented in notes from that date’s issues meeting. But the acknowledgement recorded for the file was not reflected in practice. A month later, a priest came to the Secretary for Clergy’s office to

warn that the pastor at the rectory where Fr. Wisniewski was to be assigned, Fr. John DeMayo, was often absent, and would not make a good supervisor. The warning was ignored.

On September 16, 1993, Fr. Wisniewski began work at the Metropolitan Tribunal and took up residence at Saint Justin Martyr Rectory, in Penn Valley, where Fr. DeMayo was pastor. There the lack of supervision of the admitted child molester became glaringly obvious. Over the next three years, the Archdiocese recorded only two meetings of Fr. Wisniewski's so-called ministry supervision team. No "annual" psychological evaluations were conducted. There is no record of Fr. Wisniewski's participation in any sexual addiction support groups. There is no indication that he ever signed in or out of his rectory or explained his whereabouts and associations.

In May 1995, Cardinal Bevilacqua appointed Fr. Wisniewski Chaplain at Immaculate Mary Home in Philadelphia, to begin in June. His residence remained the same. Seeking to discontinue therapy altogether, Fr. Wisniewski underwent a "follow-up" psychological assessment in November 1996 – three and a half years after his discharge from Saint John Vianney.

Although the therapist wrote that Fr. Wisniewski had made progress and "done good work," he concluded that continued therapy was desirable. He noted, among other things, that "[c]ontinued confusions are apparent with regard to sexual identity," and that "[h]e tends to deny sexual feelings and impulses to a point where they are physically occurring." He attributed Fr. Wisniewski's feeling that therapy had become redundant to the priest's difficulty in probing his problems deeply.

Despite this conclusion that Fr. Wisniewski still had significant issues and should not discontinue therapy, the priest was released from even the semblance of ministry supervision, according to his canon lawyer. On March 11, 2002, Joseph C. Dieckhaus, J.C.L., wrote to Cardinal Bevilacqua:

It must ... be noted that the "end of supervised ministry" was celebrated with a dinner provided by Rev. John DeMayo, then Pastor of Saint Justin Martyr Parish, Narberth, PA soon after the above noted [psychological evaluation].

Dieckhaus noted that Msgr. Lynn was present at the 1996 dinner, but that the event was "not noted in Father Wisniewski's file."

Dieckhaus went on to say: “none of the last three pastors [after Fr. DeMayo] connected with Fr. Wisniewski’s residences at Saint Justin and Saint Callistus [where he moved in June 2001] were informed of any supervised ministry. Neither was this noted to any personnel at Mary Immaculate Home. Furthermore, Fr. Wisniewski was permitted to live totally alone in Saint Justin Rectory for an entire year, with the full knowledge of the Office of Clergy....”

Father Wisniewski’s lawyer correctly noted that the lifting of supervision was never recorded in Archdiocese files. Yet, when Cardinal Bevilacqua in June 2001 assigned Fr. Wisniewski to a new parish rectory, the Cardinal encouraged the priest to “offer assistance at Saint Callistus Parish to the extent that time and circumstances of your primary assignment allow.”

Father Wisniewski is removed from ministry as a result of the national clergy abuse scandal, but the removal is inadequate to protect parishioners.

In February 2002, six years after Msgr. Lynn helped celebrate an end to Fr. Wisniewski’s purported “supervision” – and shortly after the story of abusive priests had become a national scandal – Cardinal Bevilacqua had the Secretary for Clergy explain to Fr. Wisniewski that the Archdiocese could no longer “provide and sustain an adequate level of supervision for Wisniewski and other priests in limited ministry who have abused minors in the past.” The priest was asked to refrain from any public ministry and to move out of his residence at Saint Callistus. No event, such as an increase in new accusations, occurred to explain the sudden shift in the way the Archdiocese dealt with abusive priests, leading us to conclude that the change was motivated solely by Archdiocese managers’ increased sensitivity to the political consequences of continuing to employ known child abusers.

Even after claiming to remove Fr. Wisniewski from ministry, however, the Cardinal followed practices that facilitated continued endangerment of the public. Cardinal Bevilacqua chose not to name the priest or to inform parishioners of the reason for his departure, even though disclosure of this information would have allowed parishioners and future victims to protect themselves and might have encouraged other

past victims to come forward. Archdiocese managers put the avoidance of scandal and lawsuits ahead of their duty to protect the public and to end a sexual offender's misuse of his priestly status.

At least twice after "removing" him, Cardinal Bevilacqua was informed that Fr. Wisniewski was continuing to celebrate Mass and to present himself as a practicing priest. In November 2002, Msgr. Lynn was even warned ahead of time that Fr. Wisniewski planned on saying Mass for a Knights of Columbus group. Monsignor Lynn was told by another priest, Fr. Jim Whalen, that a member of the group had referred to Fr. Wisniewski as their Chaplain. As recorded in a memo, Msgr. Lynn chose to let the known abuser continue to minister rather than risk alerting anyone to his status. The Secretary for Clergy instructed Fr. Whalen "not to create a scene and to let Tom have the Mass if he insisted...."

Father Wisniewski, as of October 2004, was 56 years old. He was living with his mother and had requested permission to continue to do so as part of his "supervised life of prayer and penance."

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