

Father John P. Connor

Father John P. Connor, an admitted child molester in his home diocese of Camden, New Jersey, served from 1988 until 1993 as assistant pastor of Saint Matthew parish in Conshohocken. He did so thanks to an understanding described by Cardinal Bevilacqua's assistant from his tenure in Pittsburgh as a "tradition of bishops helping bishops." That "tradition" led Cardinal Bevilacqua to help his friend, Bishop George H. Guilfoyle of Camden, by assigning Fr. Connor to a diocese where parishioners did not know that the priest had molested a 14-year-old student. Bishops Guilfoyle and Bevilacqua agreed to place Fr. Connor first in the diocese of Pittsburgh and later, after Bevilacqua's transfer, in Philadelphia, each time with access to a fresh group of children unprotected by informed parents. When Archbishop Bevilacqua assigned Fr. Connor to duties at Saint Matthew Church, it was with the directive to "educate youth."

Cardinal Bevilacqua tried to justify his actions to the Grand Jury by claiming that he first learned that Fr. Connor's 1984 arrest was for sexual abuse of a minor by reading about it in a newspaper in April 2002. The Grand Jury finds that this testimony was untruthful. In 1985, before he accepted the priest into the Diocese of Pittsburgh, then-Bishop Bevilacqua handwrote on a memo that Fr. Connor could present a "serious risk" if assigned there. In 1993, when Fr. Connor's New Jersey victim threatened to sue the Camden diocese and expose Fr. Connor's abuse, Cardinal Bevilacqua was fully aware of the potential scandal and acted quickly to have Fr. Connor transferred out of the Philadelphia Archdiocese and back to Camden.

Cardinal Bevilacqua's decision to place this dangerous New Jersey priest in a Philadelphia-area parish, coupled with his refusal to inform its pastor or parishioners of the priest's predilections, certainly put the children at Saint Matthew at "serious risk." Indeed, a year after Fr. Connor returned to Camden, a priest and a teacher from Saint Matthew warned Secretary for Clergy William J. Lynn that Fr. Connor was continuing a "relationship" he had developed with an 8th-grade boy at the Conshohocken parish. Monsignor Lynn acted promptly – notifying the Chancellor in Camden and the Archdiocese's attorney, John O'Dea. He did not notify the boy's mother who, in 1994, had no way of knowing the priest she trusted with her son was an admitted child molester.

Father Connor is arrested in 1984 in New Jersey for molesting a minor.

Ordained in 1962, Fr. John Connor was a 52-year-old theology teacher and golf coach at Bishop Eustace Preparatory School in Pennsauken, New Jersey, when he was arrested for molesting a 14-year-old student in October 1984. According to an article in The Philadelphia Inquirer, Fr. Connor befriended the victim, "Michael," when he was a freshman honors student at Bishop Eustace. The priest invited the boy to Cape May for a

weekend to play golf and help repair the roof on Fr. Connor's trailer. The boy's mother agreed, she said, because "he was a priest."

The priest and student played a round of golf and then went to Fr. Connor's trailer. There, the priest served beer to the 14-year-old and announced he was about to have a "religious experience." Michael described the experience to prosecutors as mutual masturbation.

When the priest attempted another sleepover the next weekend, Michael's mother alerted police. With Michael's assistance, they caught the priest in a sting operation and recorded an incriminating phone call with the boy. Father Connor was arrested in the principal's office at Bishop Eustace.

The priest did not, however, go to jail or even trial. Lawyers for the Diocese of Camden negotiated a pretrial intervention with the Cape May Prosecutors' Office. The terms of the deal Connor cut were that he would admit molesting the boy in exchange for having the record of his arrest erased if he were not rearrested within one year.

Michael's mother later complained to a newspaper reporter that, while Fr. Connor's life and career went on as if nothing happened, her son was so humiliated that he fled school, changed his name, and moved far away. In the April 21, 2002, Philadelphia Inquirer article, she referred to the year of his abuse as "the year my son died."

Cardinal Bevilacqua, then Bishop of Pittsburgh, agrees to accept Father Connor into the Pittsburgh Diocese to accommodate Bishop Guilfoyle of Camden, New Jersey.

After his arrest, Fr. Connor spent much of the following year in treatment at the church-affiliated Southdown Institute outside of Toronto. As the priest's release neared, Fr. Connor's bishop in Camden, Bishop Guilfoyle, wrote to Bevilacqua, who was then Bishop of Pittsburgh. In a confidential letter of September 5, 1985, Bishop Guilfoyle asked Bishop Bevilacqua whether he would consider accepting into the Pittsburgh Diocese a priest who had been arrested and was coming out of Southdown Institute, a facility that treated sexual offenders. He stated in the letter that he would call Bishop Bevilacqua with details. Bishop Guilfoyle explained to Bishop Bevilacqua later that he could not keep Fr. Connor in Camden because of scandal.

According to documents from the Pittsburgh Diocese, Bishop Bevilacqua consulted with his personnel aide, Fr. Nicholas Dattilo, and showed him Bishop Guilfoyle's letter. Father Dattilo raised several appropriate concerns about bringing Fr. Connor to Pittsburgh. In a memo dated September 11, 1985, Fr. Dattilo told Bishop Bevilacqua that they needed more information about the nature of Fr. Connor's "problem." Assuming there must be "scandal to necessitate an assignment outside the diocese," Fr. Dattilo wanted to know, "what happened?" He noted that "if the problem is homosexuality or pedophilia we could be accepting a difficulty with which we have no post-therapeutic experience." He concluded: "If, after you have talked to Bishop Guilfoyle you believe there is no serious risk in accepting Fr. Connor, we will do everything we can to keep the tradition of bishops helping bishops intact." (Appendix D-16)

After speaking to Bishop Guilfoyle, Bishop Bevilacqua wrote on Fr. Dattilo's memo: "I cannot guarantee that there is no serious risk." Despite this acknowledgement, and after receiving reports from Southdown that spoke of Fr. Connor's "sexual preference for late adolescent males," Bishop Bevilacqua agreed to give Fr. Connor an assignment in Pittsburgh.

The file contains no further detail about the basis for his decision, and Cardinal Bevilacqua could provide none when the Grand Jury questioned him about the matter. Rather, the Cardinal tried to place blame on Fr. Dattilo (who died recently, after becoming Bishop of Harrisburg): "It's the responsibility of the Clergy office to follow up any kind of concerns." Memos from Pittsburgh's files, however, suggest that Fr. Connor was hired at Bishop Bevilacqua's insistence. Father Dattilo said in his memo of September 11, 1985, to Bishop Bevilacqua: "If, after you have talked with Bishop Guilfoyle you believe there is no serious risk..." Father Dattilo's "recommendation" to accept Fr. Connor, written one day after his bishop responded, "I cannot guarantee there is no serious risk," was less than enthusiastic. Father Dattilo listed, prominently, among the reasons for the recommendation, "what [he] perceive[d] as [Bishop Bevilacqua's] inclination to assist Bishop Guilfoyle and Fr. Connor."

Cardinal Bevilacqua also refused to admit in his Grand Jury testimony that he was aware of the nature of Fr. Connor's crime at the time he hired him. But the Southdown

Institute report, which Bishop Bevilacqua received, specifically warned against giving the priest responsibility for adolescents. Father Dattilo's September 18, 1985, "recommendation" cited the "serious consequences of a recurrence" given "the nature of the incident for which he was apprehended." Bishop Bevilacqua initialed this memo, adding a note that: "He must also be told that his pastor/supervisor will be informed confidentially of his situation." There is, therefore, excellent reason to believe that Cardinal Bevilacqua did know the nature of Fr. Connor's crime when he agreed to accept him.

Father Connor stays in Pittsburgh only so long as Bishop Bevilacqua is there; Archbishop Bevilacqua then finds a parish for him in Conshohocken.

Father Connor began work in Pittsburgh in October 1985 after his release from Southdown. He remained there three years, first in a hospital chaplaincy, then in a parish. From the start he was anxious to return to Camden, but, as reflected in a May 12, 1986, memo from one of Bishop Guilfoyle's aides, Msgr. Buchler, to his bishop, Bishop Guilfoyle repeatedly put him off.

Efforts to find other dioceses willing to take Fr. Connor were unproductive. As noted in the same memo: "Ordinaries of dioceses are beginning to become somewhat 'gun shy' about accepting priests from other dioceses. The potential for legal ramifications are becoming more and more prohibitive." September 1986 memos from Bishop Guilfoyle's aides, Frs. Frey and Bottino, to their bishop recorded that some dioceses, such as Baltimore, were so wary of taking on Fr. Connor that they said they would require the extraordinary protection of an "indemnity agreement" whereby the Camden diocese would agree to "exonerat[e] them from any incident and damages caused by any acts of Pedophilia on the part of Father Connor" After Bishop Bevilacqua left Pittsburgh, Fr. Dattilo revoked Fr. Connor's assignment. A 1988 letter from Fr. Connor to Bishop Guilfoyle recorded that Fr. Dattilo cited "legal complications" and suggested Fr. Connor apply to Philadelphia since Archbishop Bevilacqua had been willing to accept the priest before.

Once again, Archbishop Bevilacqua accommodated Fr. Connor, and gave him an unrestricted ministry. He invited the priest, who he had acknowledged could present a “serious risk,” to minister to the faithful of Saint Matthew parish in Conshohocken. On September 7, 1988, Archbishop Bevilacqua appointed Fr. Connor assistant pastor at Saint Matthew, a parish with a grade school. The Archbishop’s assignment letter, among other duties, encouraged Fr. Connor to “educate youth.”

Cardinal Bevilacqua told the Grand Jury that, from what he could recall of the appointment process, Fr. Connor called the Archbishop directly to request an assignment. Archbishop Bevilacqua then asked the Chancellor, Msgr. Samuel Shoemaker, to handle the appointment. Cardinal Bevilacqua testified that he did not recall telling the Chancellor about Fr. Connor’s history.

Archbishop Bevilacqua and the Philadelphia Archdiocese accepted this dangerous priest readily but did nothing to ensure the propriety of his future conduct. Father James W. Donlon, the pastor of Saint Matthew Church since March 1989, testified to the Grand Jury that Cardinal Bevilacqua never told him about Fr. Connor’s arrest or that he had been treated at Southdown for abusing alcohol and a 14-year-old boy. The Archbishop met with Fr. Donlon for a half hour in February 1989 to familiarize Fr. Donlon with his new parish. Rather than share information that might have aided the pastor in protecting the children of Saint Matthew, Archbishop Bevilacqua chose to say only that Fr. Connor was brought from Pittsburgh to be closer to his family. Moreover, Fr. Donlon was given no guidance as to what activities Fr. Connor should or should not participate in, even though the Southdown report that Cardinal Bevilacqua had received explicitly recommended that Fr. Connor *not* be put in a position of responsibility for adolescents. Since Fr. Donlon received no warning from the Archbishop, he allowed Fr. Connor full access to the youth of the parish. The pastor did not know to be concerned about an especially close relationship that was developing between Fr. Connor and a young boy from the parish grade school, named “Timothy.”

The Grand Jury further heard that Archbishop Bevilacqua also neglected to tell the pastor that Fr. Connor had a history of alcohol abuse and that Southdown had warned that excessive use of alcohol could increase the risk that the priest would act out sexually with

adolescents. Thus, when Fr. Connor continued to drink, Fr. Donlon did not know to be especially concerned.

The Grand Jury heard from Detective Joseph Walsh of the District Attorney's Office that he had located Timothy, the boy Fr. Donlon had noticed Fr. Connor befriend during his tenure at Saint Matthew. Timothy, now 24 years old, was living with his mother outside the parish. Detective Walsh obtained signed statements from Timothy and his mother. Timothy did not say that Fr. Connor abused him sexually, but he told the detective that for several years – from third grade until the beginning of high school – Fr. Connor took him, once a week, to movies, dinner, bowling, and golfing. The priest bought him golf clubs and a bike. Timothy also admitted to the detective that as a boy he suffered from proctitis, an inflammation of the anus often associated with anal intercourse. The Grand Jury saw medical records that documented that Timothy had been treated for this condition. Timothy's mother told the detective she was convinced her son was sexually abused by Fr. Connor.

Father Donlon also told the Grand Jury that it was not until a newspaper reporter called him in 2002 that he became aware of Fr. Connor's arrest for sexually abusing a minor. Father Donlon then complained to Msgr. Edward Cullen, the Vicar for Administration, that he should have been told of Fr. Connor's background. Father Donlon explained to the Grand Jury that he "would have been more careful about everything," meaning Fr. Connor's activities and his association with the school. The pastor did not, however, complain to Cardinal Bevilacqua, because he assumed that the Cardinal did not know about Fr. Connor's background. When asked before the Grand Jury why he made this assumption, Fr. Donlon answered: "Wouldn't he have said something to me if he had known?"

The pastor did not know what Cardinal Bevilacqua's friend Bishop Guilfoyle had noted in a September 12, 1988, memo announcing Father Connor's appointment in Conshohocken: "Certainly no one knows more than Archbishop Bevilacqua about Father Connor's background over these last several years." (Appendix D-17)

Cardinal Bevilacqua defends his actions by falsely denying knowledge of Father Connor's offense.

Cardinal Bevilacqua attempted to conceal his knowledge of Fr. Connor's "background" from the public and the Grand Jury. He told a reporter, according to a story printed July 28, 2002, in the Philadelphia Inquirer, that he did not know that Fr. Connor's 1984 arrest involved a minor until he read it in a newspaper in April 2002. He told the Grand Jurors: "my memory is I thought [the incident] involved an act of homosexuality or possibly heterosexuality with an adult woman." The Cardinal testified that he first learned that Fr. Connor had been at Southdown Institute – a facility that treated sexual offenders – again from a newspaper account in 2002. He insisted that, when Bishop Guilfoyle asked him to take a priest who had been arrested – causing too much scandal for the Camden diocese to keep him – he would not have asked why that priest had been arrested.

Documents from the files of both Camden and Pittsburgh demonstrate, however, that Cardinal Bevilacqua did know, from September 1985 on, that Fr. Connor's arrest involved a minor and that the priest had been at Southdown. Bishop Guilfoyle's initial letter of September 5, 1985, to his fellow bishop, specifically stated that Bishop Guilfoyle would follow up with a phone call to provide Bishop Bevilacqua with the details of Fr. Connor's case. The letter also stated that:

Early in the year [Fr. Connor] was arrested and with government approval went for treatment at Southdown, Ontario, Canada (416-727-4214). ... He has been at Southdown for a good many months and will be released the end of this September."

Furthermore, a subsequent September 12, 1985, letter from Bishop Guilfoyle to Bishop Bevilacqua reflects that the report from Southdown, dated September 3, 1985, was forwarded to Bishop Bevilacqua and explicitly recommended "points" to be passed on to the Pittsburgh Bishop to inform his decision about accepting Fr. Connor.

The report itself states that:

The staff at Southdown does not believe that Jack is a primary pedophile but rather someone who, under the circumstances of extreme loneliness and excessive use of alcohol, acts out sexually with some preference for late adolescent males....However, because of the incident for

which he was apprehended, we would not recommend any ministry that would directly put him in a position of responsibility for adolescents such as a teaching situation.

Memos in Pittsburgh between Fr. Dattilo and Bishop Bevilacqua refer to the Southdown report. Indeed, Cardinal Bevilacqua himself professed reliance on the Southdown report to justify to the Grand Jury his decision to allow Fr. Connor to return to ministry in Pittsburgh in 1985. He told the Grand Jury that the “report from Southdown seemed to say it was a minor – that he could be restored to some kind of ministry. That’s what I gathered from the report.” Yet he testified, also, that he did not know until 2002 that Fr. Connor was *ever at* Southdown.

The Grand Jury finds the Cardinal’s testimony in this regard untruthful. We further find it inexplicable that, knowing of Fr. Connor’s abuse of a minor, Archbishop Bevilacqua chose to accept Fr. Connor into the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, to assign him to a parish with a grade school, and *not* to inform the pastor or parishioners at Saint Matthew of Fr. Connor’s criminal background, even though Archbishop Bevilacqua acknowledged that Fr. Connor could present “a serious risk.” The Grand Jury specifically finds that Cardinal Bevilacqua chose to subject the parish’s boys to that risk in order to help his friend Bishop Guilfoyle avoid scandal. Why he compounded this risk by choosing to keep Fr. Donlon in the dark is not clear, unless it was simply so that the Cardinal could later claim he knew nothing.

When Father Connor’s New Jersey victim sues the Camden Diocese in 1993, Cardinal Bevilacqua promptly transfers the priest back to New Jersey.

In September 1993, Fr. Connor was suddenly transferred back to Camden. He did not request the transfer, and no reason for it was given to Fr. Donlon. The impetus for his transfer is well documented, however, in Archdiocese files. Those records also confirm that Cardinal Bevilacqua was well aware in 1993 that Fr. Connor’s victim in 1984 had been a minor, and indeed that Bishop Bevilacqua had known that in 1985.

Detailed notes by Msgr. James E. Molloy, Assistant to the Vicar for Administration, record that on July 21, 1993, Cardinal Bevilacqua consulted Msgr. Cullen concerning Fr. Connor. The Archbishop told the Vicar for Administration that he had

received a phone call from Bishop McHugh of Camden, warning that Fr. Connor's victim from 1984 had hired an attorney and was preparing to sue the Diocese of Camden and Bishop Eustace High School. Monsignor Cullen told his assistant the next morning that Fr. Connor had gone to Pittsburgh under Bishop Bevilacqua and then to Philadelphia based on this incident in Camden. As church officials moved urgently to manage the crisis, Msgr. Molloy was instructed to gather whatever records the Archdiocese had.

Monsignor Molloy kept minute-by-minute notes of his actions on July 22, 1993 – all of which were devoted to Fr. Connor's situation. Monsignor Molloy spoke to the Bishop of Camden who updated him on the incident itself and what had happened with Fr. Connor since. The Bishop instructed his Chancellor, Joseph Pokusa, to read to Msgr. Molloy the September 3, 1985, report from Southdown that Bishop Guilfoyle had had sent to Bishop Bevilacqua in Pittsburgh. Monsignor Molloy noted that, according to the letter, the Southdown staff did "not believe [Fr. Connor] was a primary pedophile but rather that he acted out under stress." The letter recommended "against ministry which would involve him with adolescents."

Msgr. Molloy recorded that, at 10:05 p.m. that night, he called Msgr. Cullen to update him and to inform him that he would try to contact the Archdiocese attorney John O'Dea in the morning. At 3:20 P.M. the next day, July 23, 1993, Msgr. Molloy wrote that he briefed Cardinal Bevilacqua and Msgr. Cullen at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary. Monsignor Molloy's only notation about the briefing was that he reminded them of Southdown's recommendation, sent to Bishop Bevilacqua in 1985, that Connor not be in ministry involving adolescents.

On July 27, 1993, Msgr. Molloy met with Cardinal Bevilacqua, Msgr. Cullen, and Bishop McHugh. At this meeting Msgr. Molloy was instructed to "contact Pittsburgh to get any letter sent to AJB [Anthony J. Bevilacqua] from Camden while AJB was in Pittsburgh." The reason that these incriminating letters had to be obtained from Pittsburgh, rather than Camden, was not stated. Camden officials had already gone through their files and read the most relevant letter to Msgr. Molloy.

The bishops decided that Fr. Connor should be transferred back to Camden.

The Diocese of Camden reportedly settled out of court with Fr. Connor's victim in 1993. Since then, according to documents from Camden, Fr. Connor has twice been sent to Saint John Vianney — the Philadelphia Archdiocese's hospital where priest sexual offenders are treated. The Camden Diocese offered him early retirement in February 2002.

Monsignor Lynn is warned in 1994 that Father Connor continues a relationship with an eighth-grade boy in Conshohocken.

On November 15, 1994, Fr. John Kelly, a parochial vicar at Saint Matthew, Conshohocken, called Secretary for Clergy Lynn. The priest reported that Fr. Connor, a year after he had been transferred back to Camden, was still visiting 8th-grader Timothy — the same boy who, Pastor Donlon testified, Fr. Connor had befriended while assigned to Saint Matthew. Father Kelly told Msgr. Lynn that Fr. Connor visited Timothy weekly, took the boy on trips, and gave him gifts. A few days later, Sister Margaret Gradl, I.H.M., who taught 8th grade at the parish school, also called Msgr. Lynn about Fr. Connor's relationship with Timothy.

Monsignor Lynn, obviously concerned, called the Camden Chancellor, Msgr. Pokusa, and the Archdiocese attorney, John O'Dea, to notify them of Fr. Connor's "imprudent" behavior. Archdiocese files indicate no attempt to notify Timothy's mother.

On April 10, 1995, Fr. Kelly again reported that Fr. Connor was back in the parish and still in Timothy's life. Monsignor Lynn responded: "I told Father Kelly that all I could do was inform the Camden Diocese, as I did before, that Fr. Connor was back in the picture with this young boy here in Conshohocken." Monsignor Lynn did not explain why he could not warn the boy's mother that allowing her son's relationship with Fr. Connor might not be prudent.

Father Connor was subpoenaed to appear before the Grand Jury in order to afford him an opportunity to answer the allegations against him. By letter of his attorney, Fr. Connor declined to appear or testify.