Diocese confronted clergy abuse in 1987

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An editorial in The Plain Dealer warned that a pedophile priest with a criminal past had been secretly employed the previous seven years in the Cleveland Diocese. The story did not name the priest or his parish.

In the 15 years since, substantially more has become known about the mystery priest - and about the cases of other alleged pedophile priests that flared up to embarrass the diocese in the months and years that followed.

All four of the priests whose alleged deviant behavior was made public in 1987 were later sent to new assignments, where some had easy access to children. But not all of their new superiors were told of the allegations.

The Rev. Gary Berthiaume, 1987's mystery priest, was assigned to Ascension Parish on Puritas Avenue in Cleveland's West Park neighborhood in 1979, after leaving the Diocese of Detroit.

Berthiaume brought with him a felony conviction and two sexual-abuse lawsuits for fondling youths in Michigan. He had already served six months in prison and was still on five years' probation.

Cleveland Bishop Anthony Pilla declined to warn parishioners about the pedophile priest he had placed in their midst.

Berthiaume had been "watched like a hawk" during his stay at Ascension Church, with no reports of illegal behavior - a strong indication, Auxiliary Bishop A. James Quinn said at the time, that Berthiaume had been cured of his disease.

But it turned out that the hawk watching Berthiaume at Ascension was the Rev. Allen Bruening - who himself would become the target of several allegations that he sexually molested Catholic grade-school children during his 20-year stay in the Cleveland Diocese.

In a lawsuit filed last year, a former Ascension student accused Bruening and Berthiaume of teaming up to molest him in the school's shower over three years in the 1980s.

Berthiaume left the diocese after the 1987 stories broke. He now works at the Cenacle Retreat House in Warrenville, Ill. Berthiaume did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Bruening was quietly forced to resign as Ascension pastor in late 1984, after another parish family accused him of a pattern of child abuse covering the previous two decades.

On his departure, the Ascension School honored Bruening with a full-page tribute in the school yearbook. Shortly thereafter, Bruening was reassigned to another Cleveland-area parish.

In 1990, the Cleveland Diocese sent him to a parish in Amarillo, Texas, but diocesan officials say the bishop there was fully informed of the earlier Bruening allegations.

No such courtesy was offered to the parish in Biloxi, Miss., that received another of Cleveland's abusive priests in 1989. The Rev. Joseph Romansky had pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of harming a juvenile after four 13-year-olds from Holy Family Church on Cleveland's East Side accused him of giving them money for oral sex.

Two of the boys and their mothers sued the priest and the diocese.

Both families eventually settled with the diocese; the exact amount is protected by a confidentiality agreement.

Romansky's past remained a secret in Mississippi until 1992. When it became known, the bishop of Biloxi sent Romansky back to Cleveland. Since then, he has served as chaplain at the St. Augustine Manor retirement home on Detroit Avenue. He declined comment.

A fourth case publicized in 1987 produced an ambiguous resolution.

The Rev. F. James Mulica, pastor of the Chapel of the Divine Word in Kirtland, was accused of sexually assaulting a 14-year-old named Christopher, who had been doing yard work at the church, in 1981.
The boy and his family said that, in exchange for the alleged victim’s agreement not to sue or press criminal charges, the diocese paid them $50,000 and promised that Mulica would be kept away from children forevermore.

In fact, Mulica was assigned to St. Jude Church in Elyria in 1985 and two years later to Holy Redeemer Church in Cleveland. Both churches had schools.

Only after a reporter began asking questions was Mulica transferred to the Little Sisters of the Poor convent in Warrensville Township, where he remained a chaplain for the nuns and retirees until his retirement in 1992.