

# After Accused Priest's Suicide, Shock and Second Thoughts

By PAUL ZIELBAUER

BRIDGEPORT, Conn., May 17 — He spent most of his 37-year career as a Roman Catholic priest here in one of the wealthiest regions of the nation, yet he seemed most content during his two years in a remote Peruvian mountain village.

He was a strict disciplinarian and an efficient business administrator, but he harbored a deep compassion for the poor. And though he struggled mightily to ease the suffering of his Bridgeport parishioners, several of whom were killed on the city's streets, he also stood accused of molesting young boys.

The life of the Rev. Alfred J. Bietighofer, a tall, slim, blunt-spoken man, was full of apparent contradictions, right to the end. Having dedicated his priestly life to dispensing peace, understanding and hope, he chose to take it on Thursday, alone, in violence and despair.

Father Bietighofer, 64 — most who knew him called Father Al — was found hanging from a bedsheet in his room at the St. Luke Institute, a psychiatric clinic in Silver Spring, Md., where he was sent by the Bridgeport Diocese last month. He had arrived there on Sunday after being suspended from the priesthood by Bishop William E. Lori, who ordered psychiatric treatment for the priest after determining that the claims by his accusers, now grown men in Bridgeport, were credible.

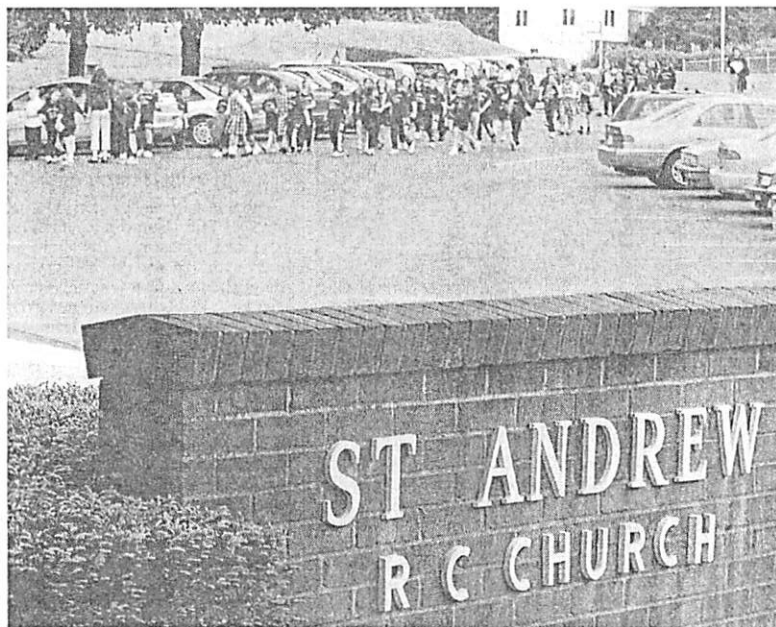
Father Bietighofer's friends, parishioners, colleagues and superiors, some weeping as they spoke, said today that they were crushed by the news. Others were stunned into silence or unwilling to speak about a death they did not understand.

Most of them described Father Bietighofer as an attentive priest, most recently the assistant pastor of St. Andrew Church here, and an effective administrator who in the 1980's worked with Bishop Edward M. Egan to create a new Catholic school system in Norwalk.

Though a stickler for rules who alienated some Catholics with undiplomatic admonishments or impulsive decisions, by all accounts he cared deeply for the most vulnerable of those in his ministry. "He was very gentle, a very nice man with such a pleasant voice — I could listen to him all day," said Maria Bolden, a member of St. Andrew's.

Bernard Helfrich, a former superintendent of diocesan schools who in the 1980's helped Father Bietighofer create All Saints Catholic Schools, an eight-school network in and around Norwalk, recalled him as a diligent and effective businessman.

"Father Al was very easy to be



Agence France-Presse



Associated Press

Bishop William E. Lori of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., speaking about the suicide of the Rev. Alfred J. Bietighofer, whose 37-year career ended at St. Andrew Church in Bridgeport.

with and speak to," said Mr. Helfrich, now retired. "We were taking schools that didn't have parishes and parishes that did have schools and putting them all in one building. He worked very hard. He provided leadership for priests. He had a big job and he did it well."

Bishop Lori, in a news conference at the Catholic Center here this morning, said he and many other church officials were struggling to cope with the grief left by the suicide. "We will never forget what happened to Father Bietighofer," he said. "That is bound to influence what we say, what we do" with any other priests accused of crimes in the future, he added.

Asked about the spiritual consequences of committing suicide, Bishop Lori replied: "Objectively speaking, suicide is a grave evil. But it is impossible for us to know fully what is going through a person's mind and heart."

At St. Francis of Assisi Church in Weston, where Father Bietighofer was assistant pastor before moving to St. Andrew's, a rectory office worker said that she could hardly stop crying today, and that many of the priests had not come to work.

"It's been really hard for the monsignor to work," said the woman, referring to Msgr. Nicholas V. Grieco, who declined to speak to a reporter. "He's been shaken up all

day." Father Bietighofer grew up in an Irish-German family in the Bronx with his mind set on the priesthood, and he was ordained in Bridgeport in 1965. During his career, which spanned 13 assignments to parishes in Bridgeport, Stamford, Norwalk,

## A man of contradictions, right up to the end.

Weston and Chiclayo, Peru, he managed people skillfully and usually found a way to tend to those who needed him most.

Donald J. Irwin of Norwalk recalled that in the hours after his wife died in 1985, the priest was there. "He was the first one to come to my house," Mr. Irwin said. "He made sure that all the priests that knew her were there at the funeral."

Working in the late 1990's as the pastor in St. Charles Borromeo Parish, in a troubled section of Bridgeport, Father Bietighofer struggled to deal with the violent deaths of several young men he had counseled.

"He found it very, very trying and had some sort of a breakdown," Mr.

Irwin said. As a result, he said, the priest was sent to a tranquil parish in Weston, to calm his nerves.

Jennifer Platek, 35, of Weston, who attended Father Bietighofer's Bible study classes, said his harsh tone sometimes gave people the impression that he was angry. "I felt like he was suffering," she said. "He had a lot to say, but his way of saying things was sometimes said in the wrong way."

Mr. Irwin concurred. "He had kind of a severe manner," he recalled. "I remember once he was saying a sermon and he heard some voices in the back, so he stopped and said: 'Some people are speaking back there. Perhaps what they have to say is more important than what I have to say.'"

He could also be a rash decision maker, some acquaintances said. "He made decisions very quickly, without thinking about it," said a nun who answered the door at the St. Charles Borromeo rectory, where Father Bietighofer was pastor in 1998 and 1999. "I'd have to go back to him and ask him to reconsider, and he would say, 'You're right.'"

Father Bietighofer seemed to most relish the simple life and rewarding work he had found high up in the Peruvian Andes, in Chiclayo, where for two years, in 1974 and 1986, he was assistant pastor at St. John Vianney Parish.

"He loved it; he would have loved

to have stayed there longer," Mr. Irwin said. "He was deeply impressed with the simplicity of their faith. And he felt that we here, with all the material wealth we had, were less careful about our spirituality than those people who had nothing."

It was during his tenure as pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church in Bridgeport in the 1970's and 1980's that the abuse occurred, his four accusers say. The men, who were minors then, told The Connecticut Post last month that Father Bietighofer had groped them. Soon after the article was published, he was removed from the ministry.

St. Andrew School officials declined to comment on Father Bietighofer's death. Two students on their way home from school today, a sixth-grade girl and an eighth-grade boy, said school employees held a meeting this morning about the suicide and planned to mail letters to parents soon.

Jenny Pereiro, whose young son attends the school, said she chose St. Andrew's because she believed that it would be a safe place for her child. Father Bietighofer, she said, seemed to be an uncommonly decent priest, not a sexual predator.

"Just try telling a 6-year-old about this," Ms. Pereiro said this afternoon, her eyes welling. "He's very, very close to God, and this would break his heart."

# Cardinal Describes Ouster Of Priest Sued Over Abuse

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

The Archdiocese of New York issued an unusual statement yesterday describing how, within weeks of becoming bishop of Bridgeport, Conn., in 1988, Cardinal Edward M. Egan settled a lawsuit over an abusive priest and arranged for his permanent removal from the priesthood.

The defense of Cardinal Egan's actions was issued in anticipation of what the archdiocese's spokesman said were news reports likely to come in the next few days about the former priest, Gavin O'Connor.

"Bishop Egan's handling of the Gavin O'Connor matter is a textbook example of how to treat a case of sexual abuse of minors by a priest," said the spokesman, Joseph Zwilling. "It is outrageous to suggest anything else." He said the statement was intended to "put the case in context."

Mr. Zwilling said that as soon as Bishop Egan learned of the suit, he flew in January 1989 to Tucson, where the priest was, suspended him and persuaded him to sign a petition to the Vatican seeking the priest's removal from the priesthood, which took effect

that July, the spokesman said.

Mr. Zwilling defended payments to the priest in the interval, saying church law requires bishops to give financial support to priests under them. The diocese also helped the priest to pay "some personal debts," he said. As for the settlement with the family of the victim, he said, "It is wrong and misleading to call settlements 'cover-ups.'"

His statement contained no details of the case. However, an account of the case this week in The Connecticut Law Tribune lays out some of the facts. According to that report, the plaintiff charged Father O'Connor with sexually molesting him from 1977 to 1984, while he was an altar boy at St. Joseph's Church in Shelton and later when the priest was transferred to St. Edward the Confessor Church in New Fairfield, the report said.

The accuser said the diocese paid Father O'Connor a "substantial amount of money" to persuade him not to testify, the account said. The diocese argued that it had the obligation to support him.

# Boston Panel Wants Bigger Lay Role in Crisis

By PAM BELLUCK

WESTON, Mass., May 17 — A panel created by Cardinal Bernard F. Law to help address the sexual abuse crisis in the Boston Archdiocese recommended today that lay people play a greater role in investigating accusations of abuse, counseling victims, starting prevention and education programs in parishes and monitoring how sexually abusive members of the clergy are treated.

In its first report since it was formed in January, the commission, made up of experts on sexual abuse, doctors, executives and advocates for children, issued eight preliminary recommendations. They included setting up "independent review boards" of lay experts that would review and investigate all reports of child abuse and monitor how the church deals with priests. The panel also suggested setting up "child protection teams" of lay people in each parish to review accusations of abuse.

The panel recommended that "a separate, independent program" be set up away from church grounds to counsel victims, receive complaints and help priests who have not been accused of abuse.

"We have an opportunity here to take what's been a horrific crisis and out of that make a model program that could be replicated in other parts of the country," said Suzin

Bartley, a commission member who is executive director of the Children's Trust Fund, a group that works to prevent child abuse.

"If we can do a good job of prevention and education," Ms. Bartley said, "it won't just lower the incidence of abuse by clergy. If we can give parents and children the knowl-

## Cardinal Law is said to support a stronger voice for the laity.

edge, that can help prevent abuse by Uncle Freddy down the street."

The chairwoman of the commission, Maureen Bateman, said the panel had looked at policies on sexual abuse from at least 15 dioceses, including Dallas and Minneapolis, and chose aspects of each. Ms. Bateman, an executive at a financial services company, said Cardinal Law met today for 30 minutes with the commission and was enthusiastic about the recommendations.

"We sense no reluctance at all on the part of the cardinal or anyone in the archdiocese on the role of the laity," she said.

Dr. Ann Burgess, a commission

member who is a professor of nursing at Boston College, said the cardinal did want to make sure that the church was seen by victims as a healing force, and not a perpetrator.

"He wanted to keep the parishioners in the church if at all possible, because there are a lot of parishioners who feel so alienated after something like this happens," Dr. Burgess said. "He stressed that it really is the abusing priest that injured the children, not the church. And that we do all we can to make sure that the church takes a stronger role in overseeing the actions and really preventing all the warning signs."

A. W. Richard Sipe, a psychotherapist and former Benedictine monk who has written several books about priests and sexuality, said the recommendations "sound strong."

"These are attempts," Mr. Sipe said, "and I always applaud attempts to do better."

But, he added, "we do have some reasons to be skeptical of the church's reforming itself."

The commission also recommended that the archdiocese enforce the "zero tolerance" policy that the cardinal announced in January and immediately remove any priest facing a "credible allegation" of abuse. The commission said an independent review board should determine the credibility of accusations.