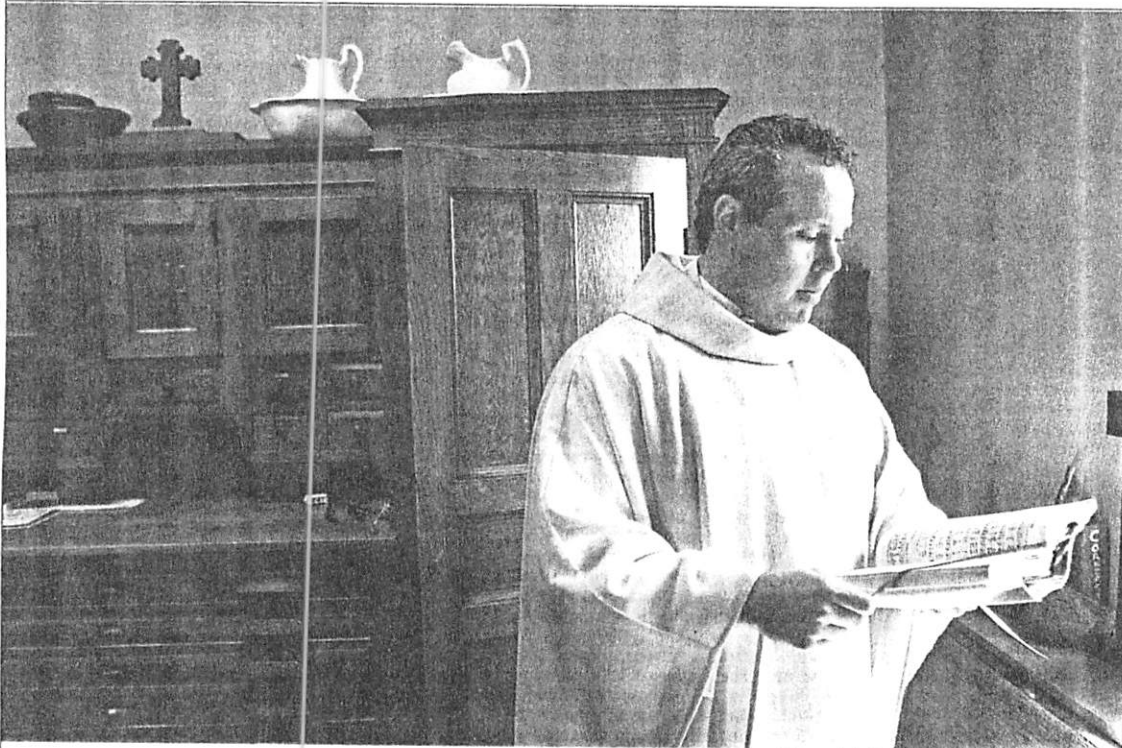


The New York Times



Photographs by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

The Rev. Michael Keane prepares for noon Mass at his church of two weeks, Holy Name of Mary in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

Healing a Parish's Double Wound

Priest Takes Over a Flock That Feels Twice Betrayed

By DAVID W. CHEN

CROTON-ON-HUDSON, N.Y., April 10 — He feels like a pastoral pinch-hitter in need of compassion and a compass, the way he was suddenly ordered to lead a parish that he had never set foot in before.

He does not have the keys to the safe or the remote control to the garage at his new quarters here, because the priest he replaced left so hastily. He also feels uncomfortable with his new bedroom and office, which still contain his predecessor's personal effects, like unopened mail, and a computer using screen savers of smiling parishioners. But at least he can rely on what he calls his "transitional desk," a 127,000-mile Dodge

Stealth crammed with holy oils, a copy of the Pastoral Care of the Sick and other ecumenical essentials.

If ever there was an example of someone's being thrust into an awkward situation with awesome responsibility, then it would be hard to top the Rev. Michael Keane, who replaced the Rev. Kenneth Jesselli last week as the pastor at the Holy Name of Mary Church.

Last week, Father Jesselli abruptly left the parish, and is believed to be one of six priests forced by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York to abandon their official duties because of past allegations of sexual misconduct. In a statement read from the pulpit by Father Keane, the archdiocese said only that

Father Jesselli had been asked to leave the parish "due to an allegation of inappropriate behavior from his past."

But as parishioners around the region struggle to adapt, what makes Father Keane's transition all the more delicate is that Father Jesselli had replaced Father Gennaro Gentile, who had himself been repeatedly accused of sexual improprieties, giving this Westchester village a dubious double distinction.

So far, many parishioners say that they are impressed with Father Keane. Some, a little more wary of anyone officially affiliated with the archdiocese, have harsh words for the institutional

Continued on Page B5



Mary Cohen prays for guidance at the church. "It's like being in a darkened room," she said of the scandal. Two priests at the church have left after misconduct allegations.

handling of the scandal. And others toss out words like "disappointed," "outraged" and "confused" when assessing an ever-widening scandal that they feel has unfairly besmirched their village's good name. "It's like being in a darkened room," said Mary Cohen, director of the Holy Name of Mary Montessori School, which is next door to the church. "You don't know what's north, south, east or west. So your best protection is to stay still, and you wait for the light to turn on."

And Father Keane, for one, senses the disappointment, and embraces the doubts as "the most difficult challenge of my life."

"The trust needs to be restored, because people are hurting," said Father Keane, while preparing for noon Mass on Wednesday. "Coming on the heels of the last two, I was expecting some sort of wariness, because you wonder: 'Here comes another one. What's his background?' You do wonder."

With a Gothic-style edifice that soars as the highest structure in this village's downtown, and a roster of 1,200 families, the Holy Name of Mary Church is a dominant presence in this hilly suburb of 7,600 people located about 40 miles north of Manhattan. It came as a shock several years ago when parishioners learned that Father Gentile, a very popular figure in town, was first accused of improperly touching boys in the 1990's. Many credited him with fostering a low-key inclusive atmosphere.

Indeed, as recently as last year, some longtime parishioners still asked Father Gentile to officiate at weddings or funerals — even though one of the accusing families recently settled its lawsuit with the archdiocese. And while Father Jesselli had been at the church for less than two years, he, too, had struck some as a decent, if quiet, leader.

"I have nothing but the highest regard for both these gentlemen, and I had no signs of any impropriety," said James Shevlin, a telecommunications manager who teaches a third-grade Catholic education class at the church. "I think the way most Americans should think, which is, innocent until proven guilty."

Other parishioners or former parishioners, though, said that they gradually grew disillusioned with one or both men. Some said that they transferred out of the church's parish school, which is defunct, or even out of the church itself, said Colleen Coxen, a co-owner of the Coxen Sisters deli here, whose family had at-



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Parishioners at the noon Mass yesterday joined hands at Holy Name of Mary Church in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y. Many have voiced outrage at the archdiocese after two priests in a row left amid misconduct allegations.

tended Holy Name for years but no longer does.

It has come as relief to some that the archdiocese said that the allegations against Father Jesselli were from his past — pre-Croton, presumably. Still, a large majority of parishioners interviewed here said that they had lost faith in the archdiocese's actions and intentions.

"I think the archdiocese is out the window right now," said Suzanne Stevens, a real estate broker who is also a music director at the church. "How dare they — on the heels of Father Jerry — bring in Father Ken? And did they know? They need to answer, and I hope we have a strong enough voice to make some change."

Already, some parishioners have tried to deliver a message. On Sunday, Georgiana Grant, a longtime parishioner who is also a member of the village Board of Trustees, changed her regular weekly contribution from \$20 to \$0 — and wrote the word "zero" on her check. And the flier from the archdiocese announcing Cardinal Edward M. Egan's \$15 million appeal only grated on her more.

And now, into this maw steps Father Keane, who had never been to Croton before, except maybe when passing through along Route 9.

The son of a retired New York City police officer, Father Keane played football and lacrosse while growing

up in Rockland County, briefly studied business at Manhattan College and played drums in a Southern rock-influenced band called Southpaw before turning to the priesthood.

For the last seven years, Father Keane, who turns 41 on Friday, taught religion and psychology, as well as working as a strength and conditioning coach, at Our Lady of Lourdes High School in Poughkeepsie. Then, two weeks ago, he received a call at 9 p.m. from the archdiocese, ordering him to report to Croton at 8 the next morning. It was an emergency. He didn't know why, exactly. He didn't have time, even, to say goodbye to his students.

Last weekend, he was asked to read a form letter during Mass from the archdiocese regarding the sexual abuse allegations. He still has no idea where Father Jesselli — or Father Gentile, for that matter — might be.

On Monday, Father Keane will be part of a special meeting for parishioners to express their opinions about the scandal. And he says that he welcomes a little "righteous indignation," for he, too, has been disappointed by the archdiocese.

"I can see why it's harder to trust institutions," he said. "It's like the government in the '60's, and the church in 2002. If they're planning a tour of reconciliation, we should be Stop One."

But so far, Father Keane has been surprised and heartened by the

warm reception. Some people have offered him dinner, or a room for the night. One parishioner even donated a cell phone, knowing that Father Keane will need to stay connected to many people. And at noon Mass on Wednesday, one longtime parishioner, Helen McGrath, hugged Father Keane, before joking that perhaps she shouldn't have done that.

Beyond the spiritual work, there is also the practical matter of moving from Poughkeepsie to Croton. Father Keane plans to box up some worldly possessions this weekend, but may need to shuttle back and forth for several more weeks, at least — particularly since he made promises to high school students to attend their graduation and participate in a few other pastoral activities as well.

At the rectory in Croton, meanwhile, there are still some things he has to adjust to. On his first day, he literally walked into a closet. He also has many minor questions about whether Father Jesselli owns the couches, the dresser or any number of other objects throughout the Tudor-style house.

After all, vestiges of Father Jesselli still loom. A couple of days after Easter, Father Keane noticed a blue envelope in the office. It had not yet been opened, and it read: "Happy Easter, Father Ken."