Is Nothing Sacred?

The controversial case of Father Gilbert Gauthe has raised Acadiana's consciousness about child sexual abuse. There are hopes that the increased discussion will lead to more effective treatment and prevention.

By BARRY YEOMAN
Photos by MICHAEL CAFFERKEY

He smiles and sleeps.—Sleep on
And smile, thou little, young inheritor
Of a world scarce less young: sleep on
And smile!
Thine are the hours and days when
both are cheering
And innocent!

Lord Byron wrote those words in the early 19th century; they are spoken by Cain, the son of Adam, to his infant son Enoch.

Byron's words gauge our feelings about childhood as accurately as they did more than a century ago. Childhood is a time of innocence; we teach our children to trust and to see the world as good and nurturing and protective. We want our children not to have to face the trials and traumas of "real life" until they absolutely must. But lately, we've confronted the fact that not all children live the pristine lives of poets' dreams.

With the recent indictment of a Vermilion Parish priest on 34 counts of sex offenses involving children, parents in Acadiana have had to deal with a reality so harsh that it has been a taboo discussion for much of history—sexual abuse.

Across the country and across Acadiana, sexual abuse of children has become a widely discussed phenomenon, even though, in the recent past, the issue rarely surfaced publicly.

Though most professionals agree that sexual abuse of children is not actually on the rise, there has been a rise of knowledge that children are often sexually exploited by strangers, acquaintances and even their own relatives. As a result, a once taboo topic has stepped into the public spotlight.

As a nation, we have heard about an alarming number of sexual abuse cases in the past year. A New York prosecutor confesses to fondling his colleague's 10-year-old daughter. The heir to a pharmaceutical firm pleads no contest to sexually assaulting his 7-year-old stepdaughter. A Los Angeles day care center, run by a 76-year-old woman, is shut down amid charges of sexual abuse.

We have seen the topic treated frankly by the nation's media, most notably by ABC-TV, which broadcast the pioneering "Something About Amelia," a TV movie about a 13-year-old incest victim from a middle-class American family, last January.

But the issue may have seemed far away to families sitting in their living rooms across Acadiana. "People denied there was any problem in Acadiana. Nobody would do that to our children. We have good people in our community. It was total denial, and that's normal," says Katherine Stout-LaBauve, coordinator of University Medical Center's Rape Crisis Center.

According to other experts interviewed by The Times, however, many parents, if pressed, would have conceded that sexual abuse could happen here. But still, the subject was rarely discussed.

Then tales of sexual abuse began to make headlines in Louisiana. Two coaches from Lafayette High School pleaded guilty last year to sex offenses involving a teen-age girl; it was just one of several stories about alleged abuse by teachers.

More recently, the state of Louisiana removed children from a number of New Orleans-area day care centers on the suspicion of sexual abuse.

But the case that hit home most poignantly involved a priest in Vermilion Parish accused of sexually abusing 11 altar boys between 1978 and 1983. Gilbert Gauthe pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity to 34 criminal charges last week in Lafayette. He also

"Talking about sex and sexual abuse is tough, but there's been a much greater willingness to talk about it lately."

—Glee Breithaupt
Family Tree executive director

"The beautiful thing is that we don't have to keep it a hush-hush thing, a deep dark secret."
—Harriett Taylor
Primary school counselor

The child pictured on the cover is a professional model.
The impact beyond Louisiana's borders is far more serious. For most of our state business leaders who have an interest in diversified economic development, the Journal very merely reconfirms old prejudices and, outside of specifics, tells nothing new. And that's the problem. Louisiana will have a hard time diversifying its economic base at a time when state and federal investment as long as the image sticks that business can't be done without greasing every other politician's palm. And that's the problem. With the way the Journal is doing business that way the Journal story is a convenient "how-to" guide to those who pay off how much, for others it's all they need to know to steer them away from doing business in Louisiana.

Edwards strongly disagrees. On the way out of one of his economic development lunches, he claimed the whole series was part of an anti-Sunbelt campaign by Northeastern newspapers. "I think that kind of negative reporting is an effort to stop the growth of the Sunbelt's manpower and industries from the Northeast area into the Southern region," he said.

Hmm. If that's true, it will be interesting to see what kind of hatchet job the Journal does on Texas, Florida and North Carolina.

Edwards says he doesn't fear that the Journal stories will hurt Louisiana business leaders. He's sure, will "recognize negative newspaper reporting always has a motive, and I think they will make their own judgment."

The governor's main efforts now seem to be concentrated on bolstering his business image inside the state. It's the business leaders alreadyLouisiana, not those in New York and Houston, who hold the real key to Louisiana's future. These are the ones that Edwards needs to get bullish on Louisiana. But since many of them already feel they've "heard enough bull" from Edwards, it's a major missionary task that the Wall Street Journal has not made any easier.

States such as Tennessee and South Carolina have been a retreat of their rationale for the taxes he and the legislature base in March. It's uncharacteristic of Ed to dwell so long on an unpopular subject, and even the theories of prosperity message, as well as of his recent State of the State TV address, low back over that some tedious ground, reminding business leaders how Ed had to raise taxes to straighten out the financial mess in which Dave Treen left the state. The positive prosperity stuff comes at the end, almost as an afterthought, and it's very lean on specifics.

The hopes of any economic development program depend on a united front from state and local leaders. But just as the governor is trying to build solidarity behind his economic development program, the state's leading business lobbyist, Ed Stiebel in the Advisory Council on Business and Industry, is spending most of his time and $100,000 to sink the corporate income tax, constitutional amendment in which the Wall Journal is taking pot shots on one side and the Wall Street Journal bombarding and strafing on the other, the governor's new prosperity program appears still timed and fueled as launching a Safe Streets campaign in Beirut.
The case of Fr. Gauthe
What price innocence and experience?

In a region where the Catholic Church is one of the primary institutions in people's lives, priests take on a significant role. They are regarded as figures of high authority. Even more strikingly, they are regarded as people whose words are trusted—fully. If Gi...
rarely exists. Rather, the most common perpetrator is someone the child has come to trust—usually a relative.

"It's the people within the family unit," says D. Cooper, superintendant of student services for the Lafayette Parish School Board. "It's the people within the family unit that are the most vulnerable."

Cooper estimates that 90 percent of the cases the school board handles involve students who have been sexually abused by relatives. Often the victimizer is the family member responsible for their removal.

Also, more often than not, the child is lured, not forced, into sexual activity. "Most children are not physically hurt," says the Rev. Jerome Scourby of Our Lady of the Lake University. "The child is enticed or bribed or tricked into this unwanted touch. Most of the time it starts out very gradually with each casual touch, and then it escalates into more serious behavior."

"If touching doesn't physically hurt the child, it has a better chance of going on. The offender knows that," she adds.

Another stereotype that is breaking down is that all abusers are men. With increased frequency, children report being molested by women. "It's not unusual," says LaBauve. "We're seeing more and more teenage girls and women who are abusing children. We're getting calls about 14-, 15-, 16-year-old girls who are bringing children in that they think they're supposed to be babysitting."

Most reported abuse cases still involve men, but women are "catching up," she says.

THE STATE OF LOUISIANA is beginning to take a new approach to sexual abuse that occurs within families. By 1987, according to cooper, child protective services are being moved to the state Department of Health and Human Resources. Child abuse allegations are investigated by the DHHR's Child Protection Centers in each parish.

In the past, the state has approached sexual abuse almost purely as a criminal offense, according to cooper. That approach has allowed professionals to recognize that sexual abuse, especially incest, is a complex family issue rather than simply criminal.

"Each family is considered individually in its capacity for change," says Lee Hadnot, a social worker for the Lafayette Parish Child Protection Center. "I don't have a blanket A-B-C-D schedule I can follow for every case.

State social workers look first at the family's cooperation level when trying to decide how to handle an incest case, according to Hadnot. Does the perpetrator want to participate? Does the child want to remain at home?

If the case worker decides the family is willing to cooperate, DHHR will arrange "family-oriented therapy," Hadnot says, either with a private psychologist or a public mental health center.

As a "last resort," the state agency will seek court-ordered removal of the child. Hadnot says the district attorney may go forward with criminal charges.

Unfortunately, Hadnot says, the Child Protection Center must invoke its "last resort" frequently. "We have, in general, taken the attitude that removal is needed at the point of
If touching doesn’t physically hurt the child, it has a better chance of going on. The offender knows that.”

—Katherine Stout-LaBauve
Rape Crisis Center coordinator

Disclosure more [often] than it’s not needed at the point of disclosure,” partly because having the victim in the house may impede an investigation.

A child who remains in the home after reporting sexual abuse might be “pressured to retract the statement or feel guilty,” Hadnott says.

Discussing sexual abuse is difficult, especially for a parent. But, as community organizations are pointing out, the best way to curb abuse is to talk about it.

Last month, representatives of the Rape Crisis Center and the police department began to visit Lafayette Parish schools—both public and private—as part of a new Child Protection Program. The program, sponsored by the Lafayette Parish Medical Society Auxiliary, is designed to teach children how to prevent both abductions by strangers and molestations by trusted acquaintances.

The program began Oct. 9, with Our Lady of Fatima serving as the pilot school. Parents from 300 of Fatima’s 625 families showed up for the parent education part of the program, according to Terry Olano Anseman, who heads the program.

The student education portion of the Child Protection Program (which is based on a Family Tree program) is divided into two parts: Stranger Danger,” in which police discuss abduction, show movies and organize role-playing; and “Friendly Foes (Personal Body Safety),” in which rape crisis volunteers focus on the sanctity of one’s body and the need to say no to people—even relatives and friends—who want to violate that sanctity.

As a final part of the Child Protection Program, children were voluntarily fingerprinted.

“The kids handled it beautifully,” Anseman says of the Fatima pilot program.

Anseman, who estimates the program will take two years to reach every school in the parish, says that she is “sure we’ll have some controversy.” But she thinks the Child Protection Program is necessary. “We train our children for fire drills. Why not train them for something else that might happen to them?” she asks.

Earlier attempts at sexual abuse education have failed to get off the ground, according to Anseman.

“If we had tried to do it two years ago, I don’t think the parental acceptance would have been there,” says Dr. Wayne Vasher, superintendent of Lafayette Parish schools. “They’d have said, ‘You’re teaching my child too much about sex.’ ”

The Lafayette public school system has a program of its own designed to cut down on child abuse, including that of a sexual nature. Called the Primary Guidance Program, its purpose is to make counselors available to elementary school students.

“We never had counselors in the primary grades until three years ago, when we started the Primary Counseling Program,” says Betty Cooper, who administers the program.

Cooper and Vasher agree that as soon as counselors were made available to students, the children began to open up about their problems. “First, second and third graders are asking to see the counselor,” Cooper says. Each counselor has a mail slot where students can slip their names if they need help. “Even a first grader can do
Advice to parents about abuse

How can a parent tell if a child has been sexually abused? The University Medical Center Rape Crisis Center and Lafayette Parish Medical Society Auxiliary have compiled a list of physical signs of sexual abuse as well as behavioral changes that may indicate sexual abuse.

Physically, a parent should look for four things: vaginal discharge, bloody underpants, pain and itching in the genital area, and difficulty in walking or sitting.

Behaviorally, the list is longer. Any of the following changes should alert the parent to possible abuse:

- sleep disturbances such as nightmares, bedwetting, fear of sleeping or fatigue from lack of sleeping;
- eating problems such as loss of appetite, obesity or swallowing problems;
- fear of certain people or places;
- excessive bathing;
- re-enactment of abuse using dolls, drawings or friends;
- withdrawal, clinginess and fear of separation;

- returning to younger behavior;
- acting more sexually mature than is appropriate for the child's age; and
- excessive anger or acting out.

A parent suspecting abuse should not react strongly; the child will pick up the strong reaction. Although the parent may be angry or upset, the child should know that the anger is not directed at him or her.

What a child that has been abused needs most is comfort, love and assurance that he or she is still OK. The parent should make clear that the child is not to blame, whatever the circumstances.

The parent should listen to the child and let the child know that the parent believes him or her. Young children have vivid imaginations but would very rarely invent a sexual assault. The parent should ask gentle questions and not pressure the child to talk.

If a child has been abused, the parent should seek medical help for the child. In addition, the parent should contact the Child Protection Center (264-5244) or rape crisis line (233-RAPE).

that," she says.

So far this school year, counselors have had to deal with eight to 10 cases of sexual abuse. "That's too many," Cooper says.

Harriett Taylor—who counsels in St. Antoine, Broadmoor and L. Léo Judice elementary schools—says that the Primary Guidance Program is successful because there are no taboos. "The approach we use is to let the child know that whatever they need to express is acceptable," she says.

"The beautiful thing is that we don't have to keep it a hush-hush thing, a deep dark secret," she adds. And the openness is leading to prevention of child abuse.

Because of budget problems, the school board has cut part of its Primary Guidance Program. Twelve schools no longer have counselors. The remaining counselors are instructing teachers about how to deal with abused children, but as Cooper notes, a teacher "might not have time to sit and talk with a kid for two hours."

ONE PERSISTENT MYTH about sexual abuse victims is that their psyches are irreversibly damaged. Professionals in Lafayette say that's not the case.

"A child can lead a happy, normal life with help," says Stout-LaBauve. "With therapy, they really feel good about themselves again."

Counselor Campo, who works mainly with adults, says that sexual abuse generally causes a great deal of "psychic damage." But the damage doesn't have to be permanent.

Even after therapy, Campo says, there may be "residual sensitivities that are more or less permanent. [But] what doesn't have to be permanent is the almost paralyzing terror of adult intimacy that exists for such victims."

"It's possible—in fact, very likely—for a person trying to recover from this thing to achieve the ability to have a satisfying intimate relationship and a satisfying sexuality," Campo says. "But you get it the same way you paddle upstream in a river: You keep paddling and you don't quit."
Case
(Continued from page 17)

(to the original complaint, in which Simon indicates the church even fur- ther by claiming the hierarchy tried to sweep Gaute’s child-molesting ac-
tivities under the rug in the late 1960s or early 1970s.)

The amendment, filed Oct. 25, claims that ‘‘some ten years prior to the acts [in Vermilion Parish], Gaute was assigned to priestly duties in New-
ter.’’

Iberia.’’ While carrying out such priestly duties...Gaute similarly sodomized, fondled, sexually touched and other-

The amendment further charges: ‘‘On receipt of complaints [from parents], church officials made a stud-

The amended complaint read: ‘‘After Gaute was transferred to Vermilion Parish, New Iberia, Louisiana and transferred from Vermilion Parish, with full knowl-

In an interview with The Times, Simon said that the church, by ‘‘refus[ing] to accept the respon-

‘‘The modus operandi is, ‘Put a lid on it, keep it a secret, and when things calm down, transfer.’ They were so determined to keep it a secret that they didn’t give a s--- about these kids,’’ Simon says.

Neither the Diocese of Lafayette nor the Archdiocese in New Orleans would comment on the suit. Thomas A. Rayer, the church’s attorney, said he has not seen Simon’s amendment.

Attorney Simon told The Times that the church’s comments came during settle-

ment discussions involving the church and parents of former altar boys. Rayer says, ‘‘There have been negotiations and settlements that have been filed in court. They have been very expensive.’’

Rayer would not discuss the settle-

ments. Documents viewed by The Times, however, indicate that at least one of the settlements ran to more than $100,000.

Meanwhile, Gaute was indicted in Lafayette on Oct. 18 on 34 criminal charges: 11 counts of aggravated abuse against nature; 11 counts of pornography involving juveniles; 11 counts of enticing, aiding or permitting a child to perform a sexually immoral act; and one count of aggravated rape.

Gaute was arraigned last week from a mental in-

stitution in the Northeast, pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity to all 34 counts. The state has 45 days to file briefs, and the criminal case could go to trial as early as December. He is now housed in the Lafayette Parish jail.

The most interesting aspect of the Gaute case stands to be the church’s role in the civil case. Like Paul Newman in ‘‘The Verdict,’’ attorney Simon will be trying to establish not only Gaute’s guilt but also the guilt of a seemingly omnipotent institution.