The tragedy of Gilbert Gauthie is not an isolated phenomenon. Across the nation—and in Acadiana—other priests are accused of molesting children.

BY JASON BERRY

Had the tragedy of Gilbert Gauthie been an unheard of aberration in the recent chronicles of the Church, his story would end later this year in a Lafayette courtroom. But in the course of its investigation of the case of the fallen priest, The Times became aware of 12 other cases in eight other states in which Catholic priests have been accused or convicted of molesting boys. Given this evidence that Gauthie could not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon, The Times felt obligated to look into attorney Minos Simon’s public, but unreported, list of 27 allegedly errant priests in the Lafayette diocese.

Through legal documents and interviews with a range of sources including clergy, The Times has uncovered substantial allegations of homosexual activity against 16 priests on the list and three others not named by Simon. Of these priests, at least two, and possibly a third, are no longer serving in the Diocese of Lafayette because of sexual misconduct with children.

Despite the substantial allegations concerning a number of priests, The Times has decided to name only those two whose identity has been confirmed by sworn statements or by law enforcement officials. In these cases, we feel parents have a right to know if their children have been exposed to the risk of sexual molestation. In the other cases, The Times chooses to err on the side of protecting individuals who may otherwise stand falsely accused.

The full story of Acadiana’s fallen priests may never be told. The Diocese alone knows the larger scope, and it is under no obligation to provide facts about the priests unless ordered to do so by the courts.

Sometimes in 1984 a Eunice man approached District Attorney Nathan Stansbury with allegations that Fr. Robert Limoges had made sexual advances against his son. Stansbury says the youngster’s father met with him, but, “It was not his wish to press charges, so we conducted no investigation.”

By the time Stansbury was contacted, Limoges had been transferred from Eunice to Loreauville. In 1984, following the report of the incident, Limoges was apparently removed from his Loreauville parish.

A source familiar with Limoges offers a description that echoes the security obsessions—car radio, burglar bars, and floodlights—of Gilbert Gauthie. “He was a law-and-order type,” the man says of Limoges. He was the police chaplain and, says the source, “He had a beeper for police cases and would ride through town in patrol cars. He wanted people to call him by Skipper. He had a big problem with self-esteem.”

An informal history of St. Anthony Parish in Eunice, drawn mainly from news clippings, reveals telling, even sad, information about the Rev. Robert Marcel Limoges. He provided an autobiographical sketch for the text. Born Aug. 27, 1918 in St. Jerome, Terrebonne County, Quebec, he was nicknamed “Skipper” from his Boy Scout days. “I came from a family of 11 children; five still living,” he writes. “My father’s first spouse died in 1927, after bearing five children. He remarried a year later and had six more children.”

At some point the familial fabric became frayed: “I found myself in the roughest orphanage of Montreal, run by the Chevalier Brothers,” Limoges wrote. “It was during my short stay there that I felt called to the Holy Priesthood (age 11). I was given the duty to assist our chaplain in the distribution of Holy Communion every morning at 6 a.m., going to the old women’s floor, then to the old men’s floor, carrying a lit candle all the while. I was 14 and decided to start earning my keep.”

And so there followed a succession of odd jobs—grocery clerk, knitting mills worker, lumberjack, private investigator and police officer, the Air Force in France and England and North Africa.

But it is the image of the boy, candle in hand, following the priest on his morning rounds that rivets the reader’s gaze. There was Robert Limoges’ personal light, a sense of order and purpose—and yet the patchwork of his life suggests a wandering, troubled man. Not until 1979, at age 49, was he ordained, and this after a 1976 B.A. from St. Bernard College in Alabama, major seminary studies at Notre Dame in New Orleans and St. Mark’s in Union, Kentucky.

His first priestly assignment was at St. Anthony’s in Eunice in 1979. “I feel very much at home in Louisiana, in the Diocese of Lafayette which adopted me two years ago. My heart is truly Acadian. I hope God will give me several years of service among his people in this diocese,” he wrote.

His years of service included creating a stir in Eunice by lodging emotional complaints about sex education classes introduced into the schools.

His personality problems reportedly intensified in Eunice. In 1982 he was transferred to Our Lady of Victory, a small black parish in Loreauville, where he got along poorly with parishioners. At one point, while preaching a funeral, he broke down and wept.

Robert Limoges’ heart lay in Eunice, where at least one family, with many children, had befriended him. According to law enforcement sources, Limoges went camping with a group of youngsters and made sexual advances to one of them. The child went home and told his parents.

A well-placed source says: “A priest was immediately called into that family, and within an hour Limoges was in [Mrgr. Henri] Larroque’s office. Larroque asked him point blank if it had ever happened before, and Limoges said, ‘No, just once.’ They shook hands off right away. Larroque told the family they would cover any and all costs. The family wasn’t coerced. It was handled quietly.”

It is not known how long Limoges was away or what treatment, if any, he received. The 1984 diocesan directory lists his address at a rural post box in Bayou Pigeon. The 1985 National Catholic Directory lists him as “absent, on sick leave.”

THE CHURCH HAS AT BEST A TENUOUS GRASP ON THE NATIONAL PROBLEM OF PEDOPHILE PRIESTS IT NOW CONFRONTS. IT IS AS PERPLEXED AS PEOPLE IN SOCIETY.

I t a summer 1983, Fr. Lane Fontenot of Lafayette was suspended by Mrgr. Henri Larroque for sexual involvement with a young boy, according to deposition statements by the vicar general given earlier this year in the Gauthie case. Fontenot was functioning out of the Catholic Church in Whitinsville, Mass., where Gauthie was undergoing treatment. The 1983 National Catholic Directory lists Fontenot as “suspended.”

An informed source describes Lane Fontenot as “almost a carbon copy of Gauthie.” He says: “He got young boys in Sunset and Lafayette to keep with him. This went on for years.”

Fontenot reportedly molested a youth in New Iberia in the mid-’70s. He arrived at a parish there in 1976 as Gilbert Gauthie was leaving for Abbeville.

By 1978, Fontenot was living in the rectory at Our Lady of Mercy in Opeouasse, a conservative, deep-rooted Catholic community. Again, “He molested many kids,” says a priest who worked with him. “I’ve been told that on certain days, he got boys into the rectory and up into his bedroom and molested them.”

In 1980 Fontenot became pastor of a church in Baldwin. In 1981, the diocesan directory listed him as “on leave” at the Jesuit House at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. He returned to Baldwin the following year, and in 1983 moved to Lafayette where he became Priest in Charge of Spiritual Development. He lived in the Our Lady of Fatima rectory on Johnston Street; he had an office and secretariat at the Immaculata complex on the Beaure Bridge Highway.

“Lane Fontenot gave youth retreats,” another priest says. “He was very outgoing with kids. I was never friendly with him. He had an air of independence, a kind of know-it-all. He worked exclusively with kids.”

“He was quite proud [of his work],” according to a diocesan source. “Then all of a sudden he disappeared. It was after Gauthie, the fall of ’83. Everybody was telling everybody what happened. Even some teachers in Catholic schools heard he was somehow involved with an adolescent. After he left, there was a financial settlement with the family, and some arrangement made for therapy. What the exact terms were, I don’t know.”

Fontenot reportedly spent time at the House of Affirmation in Whitinsville, Mass., a church-run treatment center. He is now living at the Jesuit residential house at Gonzaga.
University in Spokane, Washington, where he spent 1981 "on leave." Exact- ly when he arrived in Spokane the second time is unclear: the 1984 diocesan directory lists him in San Francisco; however, Fr. Frank B. Costello, S.J., rector of the Jesuit residence, told the The Times, "He's been in Spokane since January, 1985.

But in 1985 National Catholic Directory lists Fontenot as "absent, on sick leave," The Times asked Fr. Costello if Fontenot was undergoing psychotherapy. Not to my knowledge."

The Times asked Fr. Costello if he was aware of allegations that Fontenot had sexually molested children. "No, not to my knowledge," he said.

Costello went on to say that Fontenot was a student at Gonzaga and received a master's degree in spirituality in 1981, when he was listed as on leave from Acadia. "I certainly know none of the molesting allegations," Costello concluded. "He's in residence here, between assignments."

"Is he subject to any supervision?"

"He's not under any restriction. He can come and go as he pleases," Costello said.

The Times was not able to contact Fontenot by telephone.

Lane Fontenot's odyssey—from Lafayette, Louisiana, to Massachusetts, from there to Washington state—does not, from the available information, suggest an effective treatment procedure. But his transfers conform to the pattern described in The Times companion story about priests subject to uncertain discipline or professional treatment when their complaints are subjected to their superiors.

There is a clear consensus in the literature that pedophilia is a high recidivism rate among child sex offenders. And, according to Fr. Michael Peterson, a psychiatrist at St. Luke's Institute outside Washington, D.C., the Church has, at best, a tenuous grasp on the national problem of pedophile priests it now confronts.

 Says he: "Suddenly, in the last two years, sexual abuse of children has emerged as a national issue. The Church is as perplexed as the people in society. This is so completely new. I remember a priest who robbed a bank in Maryland. No bishop is equipped to deal with something like that. Imagine if you're a bishop and a parent says, 'Your priest did this to my child.' He's thinking, 'My God, I can't believe it,' it's that kind of milieu they're coming out of."

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Mr. John Money, Professor of Medical Psychology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, one of the nation's leading authorities on pedophilia, believes that "many boys who grow up with a paraphilia [sexual deviation syndrome] seek refuge in the Church."

Pedophilia is an addictive disorder which Money explains as "an abetted method of reining lust in your life. As it is always a one-sided sex act, it is now an all-purpose searching. This explains the extraordinary repetitiveness of the rituals [sexual molestation]. Many pedophiles can achieve orgasm hour after hour, day after day, which mediates to the central nervous system, something firing down to the prostate. That's got to be fluid to be exceeded. There's a total functional difference in the way the sexual brain is regulating the sex organs."

Money considers therapy, even possible annulment as a form of incarceration for sex offenders. He says: "If you put a pedophile in jail [without good treatment], there's not a chance he'll grow up and learn to love a woman, to love a child. Just like a junkie, there's no choice [but to put him in prison]. If you have a pedophile who didn't physically hurt a child, we have to ask ourselves what is better for society. When we let them out, they'll do it again. Every pedophile I've seen in jail says the chances drive them wild. It costs $40,000 a year to incarcerate a Maryland prisoner; it's an awful lot cheaper on an out-patient basis.

Pedophilia is an addictive illness. Like drug addicts, sex pedophiles can't help themselves. Like drug addicts, they cannot even consider themselves cured by the techniques used to treat the disease, they are merely free of it without medical intervention. Both Gilbert Gaute and Lane Fontenot were sent to the House of Affirmation, a Church-run treatment center for troubled priests, in various locations in the United States, including the one in Whitinsville, Mass., where Gaute and Fontenot were sent.

The Times spoke with Fr. Thomas Kane, a psychologist who directs the Massachusetts center. The laws protecting patient privacy, Kane refused to confirm or deny any details about Gaute or any other Acadia priest who might have been sent to the House of Affirmation. He did, however, consent to discuss the facility's general operations.

"Admission is voluntary," he said. "In some cases we agree to have someone on the order of the court, but I want to get away from any notion that a bishop can order someone to commit to one of our facilities. Before admission, there is a thorough psychiatric and medical assessment so we can say to a client, 'Yes, we can help you,' or 'Maybe you should go to a psychiatric hospital.' It also gives a chance to the client to reconsider coming here."

The Times asked Fr. Kane about pedophilia therapy at the House of Affirmation. "There is no general statement I could responsibly give clinical."

"He's read of Affirmation were experiencing more numerous cases of priests who molest children, Kane offered: "I don't think I'm seeing any more of these cases than I have in the past. The line is, is it a greater problem with clergy than with doctors or teachers? I don't know. I haven't seen numbers. But my impression is that the percentage is no higher than in professional circles."

"Historically [pedophilia] has been a troubling question for humanity. I'm not dodging your question. Clergy are human beings. Yes, I think this problem has been around forever. But it's because in our society is there a higher incidence with clergy than with other groups? My impression is no, but I have no reports or studies to cite."

Kane was posed a hypothetical ques- tion: What if a priest were alleged to have sexually molested a child be placed in an unsupervised situation, without psychotherapy?"

He said: "I have been a strong ad- vocate for laws that protect youth," he said. "No one can expect to abuse a young person freely. They shouldn't get an easier ride. If someone breaks
LIKE DRUG ADDICTS, EXPERTS CONTEND, CHILD MOLESTERS CANNOT RID THEMSELVES OF THEIR DESTRUCTIVE APPETITES WITHOUT THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION.

In the two years since Roman Catholic Canon Law has been translated from the Latin to English, its applicability to American civil and criminal law has not emerged as a pressing issue. But as the damages suits filed by victimized families against Gauthier and priests in other states move through the courts, lawyers may tread the Byzantine passages of the code to further their cases.

Canon Code 489 reads: "In the diocesan curia there is also to be a secret archive, or at least in the ordinary archive there is to be a safe or cabinet, which is securely closed and bolted and which cannot be removed. In this archive documents which are kept under secrecy are to be most carefully guarded.

"Each year documents of criminal cases concerning moral matters are to be destroyed whenever the guilty parties have died, or 10 years have elapsed since a condemnation or additional case concluded the affair. A short summary of the facts is to be kept, together with the text of the definitive judgment."

If, as insurance lawyers have said, the Church will stipulate to liability, then discovery probes in the Gauthier case have ended, eliminating requests from the secret archive, if one exists at the Lafayette chancery.

As this article goes to press, nearly six weeks have passed since the insurance lawyers verbally agreed to liability admission. Plaintiff's attorney Simon told The Times, "I served them notice that I am preparing an appeal to the state Supreme Court on (Judge Ware's) ruling that only pedophilia cases have to be divulged. If they produce the [stipulation] document, then my discovery is over. If they don't, I am going forward."

By any objective measure, the events reported in recent weeks by The Times are tragic in scope. The dictionary definition of tragedy closest to contemporary understanding reads: "that kind of drama in which some fatal or mournful event is the main theme ... any event in which human lives are sacrificed."

Shakespearean drama is famous for "the tragic flaw." In it the linings of a character turn in upon the man, deflecting the light of reason and goodness from his vision. Othello's tragic flaw was jealous rage; Macbeth's greed; King Lear's, pride. Pedophilia is not a tragic flaw in Shakespearean terms, but the perverted lust of Gilbert Gauthier and the other pedophile priests seems to have drawn bishops and other Church officials into a pattern of cover-ups. Faced with the plunder of innocence, the hierarchical response exposed a tragic flaw: protect the Church at all costs, even to the point of sacrificing the priests' young victims.

But as Fr. Michael Peterson, a psychiatrist observes, "No bishop is prepared for something like that." Maybe now they are.

Human life is only approximated by drama on the stage, and the sexual tragedy of this diocese does not end neatly with the conclusion of a newspaper report, nor will Gauthier's criminal trial guarantee catharsis. And so, what should people do?

An editorial in the National Catholic Reporter offers one answer: "We think ministerial boards should be established in each ecclesiastical province or state conference to deal with this problem. These boards should be made of
January 1985

Beyond Louisiana: Eleven Other Cases

The tragedies The Times has reported in Acadiana are only a part of a gradually unfolding national canvas.

Portraits of priests accused of sexually molesting boys are being painted in the headlines in other states. In fact, the phenomenon has appeared in so many places that the National Catholic Reporter, an independent newspaper devoted to news of the Roman Catholic Church, has devoted its current issue to the problem. The newspaper’s editor, James E. Nalley, who worked in cooperation with NCR in the preparation of its report.

In a front-page editorial, the paper states: “These are serious and damaging matters.... But a related and broader scandal rests with local bishops... Frequently, local bishops exhibit little concern for the traumatic effects these molestations have on the boys and their families—even though mental disturbances and, in one recent case, suicide have followed such molestations. Only legal threats and law suits seem capable of provoking some local bishops into taking firm actions against the priests.”

Cases of pedophilia among priests nationwide include the following:

• In 1979, a 12-year-old boy died in the Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck, New Jersey, after telling a nurse, “It wasn’t worth living.” The parents of the boy, Richard and Martha Joseph, of New York, have filed suit charging that Franciscan Brother Robert Coalkey sexually molested their son at a Boy Scout camp in New York state in 1978 and then repeatedly in the basement of their church in Emerson.

• The parents complained to the New York diocese saying they were assured by Bishop John Steinberg that no lawsuit would be paid. Later the Franciscans refused to compensate the family reportedly because to do so would destroy their insurance. The boy eventually committed suicide.

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ed that he was forced out of St. Francis Seminary after he complained about homosexual activities involving seminarians and priests, including some faculty members. The diocese also canceled a debt of $9,000 for Brooks' seminary tuition.

*In Bristol, Rhode Island, the Rev. William C. O'Connell, 63, pastor of a local church, was indicted in July on 22 counts of sexual molestation and two misdemeanors. One hundred parishioners have raised $5,500 to assist his legal defense. Despite a 1983 complaint by a mother to Bishop Kenneth Angel of Providence, O'Connell remained pastor of his church. A year later, state authorities received an anonymous letter about the priest, including 15 pornographic photographs. O'Connell was alleged to have taken. Their criminal investigation resulted in the indictment.*

*In Lincoln, Rhode Island, the Rev. P. Henry Leech, 34, was indicted in July on five counts of sexually molesting three teenage boys and one count of his assault. Leech was immediately removed from the parish; his whereabouts have not been made public. No trial date has been set.*

*In Portland, Oregon, 57-year-old Fr. Thomas Laughlin was sentenced to a year in jail on a misdemeanor sex abuse charge in 1983 against one of the local district attorney, the priest's involvement with young boys probably occurred over a 15- to 20-year period. Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, who admitted he was informed of Laughlin's involvement with one boy in 1981, directed the priest to receive counseling. "Power apparently violated a state disclosure law by failing to report the sex abuse incidents to state authorities," the National Catholic Reporter reports. In June 1983 Power transferred Laughlin to another parish. Weeks later, the priest entered a guilty plea while local police were investigating charges.*

The diocese has since instituted psychological counselling for clerics, disseminated information on pedophilia to priests and schools, assumed victims' therapy expenses and made settlements to some of the families involved.

*In Pittsburgh, lawsuits on behalf of an undetermined number of victims' families have been filed against the diocese. However, the suits have been sealed by the court and no details are available at this writing.*