

Letters indicate church knew of abuse in 1950s: Servants of the Paraclete founder warned church leaders

News in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

A Catholic priest who specialized in treating sexually abusive priests strongly advised church leaders—including Pope Paul VI—that abusers should be defrocked and possibly exiled to a Caribbean island, according to correspondence recently unearthed by an independent Catholic newspaper.

During the 1950s and '60s, Gerald Fitzgerald, the founder of the Servants of the Paraclete order, repeatedly wrote to Catholic bishops and Paul VI to warn them about the persistence of pedophilia among abusive priests.

“Personally, I am not sanguine of the return of priests to active duty who have been addicted to abnormal practices, especially sins with the young,” Fitzgerald wrote to the pope in 1963. “Where there is indication of incorrigibility . . . I would most earnestly recommend total laicization,” or defrocking.

Fitzgerald’s letters were published March 30 by the *National Catholic Reporter*, which received them from a Los Angeles law firm that represents victims of clergy sex abuse.

Calling the letters “a smoking gun,” the national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests said the letters came from a consummate church insider. “From a bishop’s perspective, there could be no more credible or trustworthy source of information about predators,” said SNAP national director David Clohessy. “Yet dozens, perhaps hundreds, of key church staffers deliberately ignored his crystal-clear warnings.”

The revelations come as the U.S. Catholic Church continues to deal with the consequences of clergy molestation of minors. Catholic leaders have received nearly 15,000 allegations of sexual abuse since 1950, according to annual studies by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The same studies have shown that the church has paid more than \$2.5 billion in costs related to clergy sexual abuse since 1950.

Catholic bishops who transferred priests from one assignment to another rather than removing them from the priesthood have said that psychologists and others who treat abusive priests did not warn them that pedophilia was a serious and persistent problem.

Under current guidelines, adopted in 2002 after the scandal exploded in the U.S. church, any credible allegation results in a permanent removal from ministry, said Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokesperson for the bishops' conference.

Fitzgerald, who founded the Paracletes in 1947 primarily to treat alcoholic priests, recommended as early as 1957 that the church adopt guidelines for problem priests. "We feel that the protection of our glorious priesthood will demand, in time, the establishment of a uniform code of discipline and of penalties," he said.

In 1965, Fitzgerald put a 10 percent deposit on a Caribbean island for "rattlesnakes" who molest children, according to the newspaper. But the idea was nixed by his bishop. -*Religion News Service*