

# New York City Atheists

April 2002

Visit our Web site: <http://foody.org/atheist.html>  
E-mail us: [atheist@foody.org](mailto:atheist@foody.org)

## Events

### Come to our April meeting

Sunday, April 28,  
3:30 P.M. (new time)  
Moonstruck East diner,  
upstairs  
449 3rd Ave. (corner of  
31 St.), Manhattan  
Agenda: American Atheists affiliation; spending

For more information, contact Josh Karpf via e-mail at [atheist@foody.org](mailto:atheist@foody.org), or Joe Zamecki at the American Atheist Center, (908) 276-7300.

*Also of atheist interest:*

### Evolution debate

Tuesday, April 23,  
6:30 P.M.  
American Museum of Natural History,  
Kaufmann Theater  
Central Park West at  
79th Street

\$13.50 admission, reservation required; call Beth Lamont of the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York at (914) 588-5284.

### Starry Nights at Planetarium; Next Meeting in April

Although the Museum of Natural History's Friday evening jazz café was as bright as day on April 5, only half of the New York City Atheists members who attended could find each other in the large and noisy crowd, despite me (Josh Karpf) watching the room for fellow heretics. I apologize for not better describing a meeting spot or my own appearance, and I promise to be more specific when arranging future events.

Come to New York City Atheists' next meeting on April 28, the last Sunday of the month, at 3:30 (note new time) at the Moonstruck East diner. We will discuss American Atheists' recent convention, whether to affiliate formally with American Atheists, and how to spend our treasury to help New York City Atheists grow.

## Catholic Church Loses Most of State Health Care War

As this newsletter goes to press, the New York State Legislature is expected to approve a Women's Health & Wellness Act that includes a "conscience clause" (or, as the ACLU calls them, "refusal clauses") that would only narrowly exempt some religious employers from mandatory health insurance coverage for contraceptives. The Roman Catholic Church had lobbied hard but unsuccessfully for a larger exemption that would benefit any Catholic institution.



"The fact that the Senate embraced only a limited conscience clause has been seen by many Capitol observers as a sign that the Catholic Church's influence in Albany may be eroding," said the *Daily News*. Assembly member Deborah J.

Glick of Manhattan, the bill's sponsor, said, "It's apparent that the cardinal is not an expert on women's health. It's inappropriate for a church to get between women and health care providers." The state's Catholic Conference said the measure amounts to "a violation of religious freedom."

At a recent local lecture, Glick described the legislative battle. She ridiculed Cardinal Edward Egan's March 12 visit to Albany, calling his campaign against contraception coverage "dissonant." She said the original religious exemption was so "sweeping and broad" that "somebody running a restaurant who had very deep religious beliefs, and a good lawyer, probably could have qualified," but that the exemptions in the final version were "much reduced." I asked how she felt about the religious exemptions. She said she opposed them, but that she was "a pragmatic legislator as well." Another audience member asked her to comment on the priestly pedophilia scandals, which she did with great humor. We spoke after the lecture (see photo), and I mentioned New York City Atheists' interest in church-state separation, and thanked her for her hard work.

Sources: "Egan Rips Coverage for Birth Control," *Daily News*, 3/13/02; "Cardinal Lobbies in Albany Against Bill for Contraception Coverage," *New York Times*, 3/13/02; "Health Measure Impasse Broken," *Times Union*, 4/3/02; "Birth Control Flap Near Deal," *Daily News*, 4/4/02.

## New York City Atheists

# Sex-Abuse Scandals Reach Full Boil

### Help Oppose Cleric Named for CUNY

Governor Pataki has nominated a top Roman Catholic Church official, John Bonnici, to be a City University of New York trustee. Bonnici, a priest, is director of the Archdiocese of New York's Family Life/Respect Life Office.

A Pataki aide says that the empty CUNY board position "has traditionally been filled by a member of the clergy, and [Bonnici] was strongly recommended by Cardinal [Edward] Egan." Bonnici may endanger CUNY health centers offering contraceptive services, and measures protecting the rights of gays.

Why must control of any public institution be reserved for clergy, especially a conservative one who could promote his church's anti-choice, anti-gay, anti-democratic policies? Please tell your New York State senators to oppose confirmation. You can find their contact information (and identity) online at <http://www.senate.state.ny.us> or by calling the Senate at (518) 455-2800.

At first, New York City media treated this year's priestly pedophilia news as relatively distant, centering on the Boston trial of priest John J. Geoghan. Geoghan's conviction in January of molesting a 10-year-old boy was almost buried in the flurry of more local February coverage about Upper East Side synagogue cantor Howard Nevison, who is charged with raping a pre-teen nephew but not with any sexual abuse in his capacity as clergy.



Geoghan is accused of sexually abusing more than 130 boys over 30 years as the Roman Catholic Church ignored repeated warnings. The wider Geoghan testimony implicated Brooklyn bishop Thomas Daily, who had been an auxiliary bishop in Boston. In January, the *New York Post* was alone in fingering Daily on the 50th anniversary of his ordination by calling him a "perv-linked priest" for helping to shuttle Geoghan between Massachusetts parishes.

"I am not a policeman -- I am a shepherd," Daily was quoted as saying in a 1980 deposition.

The *Post* was also alone in August 2001 when it said that New York cardinal Edward Egan had reportedly obstructed sexual-abuse lawsuits against priests when he was bishop of Bridgeport several years ago.

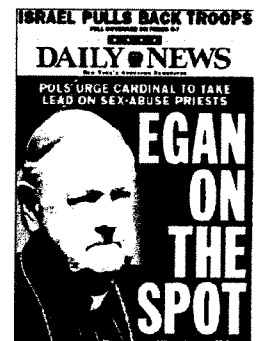


Yet in March, after Geoghan, all media became interested in regional dioceses' past treatment of accused priests, including Bridgeport. They raised the issue of Egan's past conduct when he refused this year to cooperate with law enforcement officials who wanted to investigate past allegations of clergy sexual abuse. And both Egan and Daily became poster children for church policies that had for decades sheltered molesting priests who would have been arrested and investigated immediately had they been lay employees.

In mid-March, motivated by the Geoghan news, three nuns publicly

complained that in 1996 the Diocese of Brooklyn, led by Daily, had failed in its promise to act aggressively after they reported that priests had sexually abused adolescent boys in a local parish 20 years before. One of the priests had been forced to relocate to Florida and was forbidden pastoral duties. The diocese never informed the nuns or the victims of its action, and it did not notify law enforcement officials, who might have wanted to investigate whether there had been further sexual abuse. "The idea was to protect the church," said one of the nuns. "We wanted them to protect the children. We didn't hear that at all."

Local Catholic leaders refused to address the issue for several days. The first to speak was Long Island's Island's bishop William



Murphy, of the Diocese of Rockville Centre. He refused to identify diocesan priests who have been targets of allegations. However, he said that in

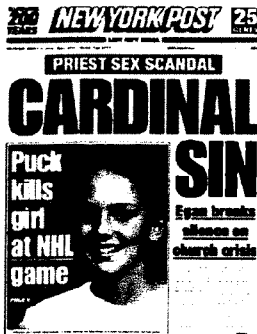
November he had asked priests -- including Brian McKeon, who admitted molesting several boys a decade ago; and Michael R. Hands, who recently pled guilty Nassau County for sexually assaulting a boy between the ages of 13 and 15 -- to apply for laicization, a long process of petitioning the pope for removal from the priesthood.

"I know, in hindsight, probably I should have done more. And I am sorry about that," said McKeon's supervisor, Edward Donnelly, when reviewing his inaction in the mid-1980s. "I didn't want to know. . . . Such things can run the gamut. . . . I didn't want to get involved." McKeon was not told to resign until shortly after a frustrated parent placed fliers on the windshields of 100 cars in a church hospital parking lot, saying "Father Brian McKeon . . . Is a Known Pedophile and the Diocese of Rockville Centre Refuses to do Anything About it."

Murphy said that if future allegations were serious, a priest would be removed from his pastoral and administrative duties. Murphy condemned the media for "turn [ing] the tragedy of sexual abuse of minors into a forum to call the life of the church and the church's teachings into question as they have done in other places."

St. Patrick's Day (whose Manhattan parade was led by Egan) came and went. Several politicians, from Mayor Michael Bloomberg to state attorney general Eliot Spitzer to Senate majority leader Joe Bruno -- New York's most powerful Catholic politician -- urged Egan, who continued appearing in public to lead masses, to end the archdiocese's silence. "Church Silence Now Deafening," said the *Daily News*.

Then the *Hartford Courant* shouted what the *New York Post* had only



whispered in August: secret court documents, which Egan and the Bridgeport diocese had successfully fought to keep sealed, confirmed that Egan, while bishop of Bridgeport, had allowed several priests facing multiple accusations of sexual abuse to continue working for years. The files, leaked to the *Courant*, showed that "Egan failed to investigate aggressively some abuse allegations, did not refer complaints to criminal authorities and, during closed testimony in 1999, suggested that a dozen people who made complaints of rape, molestation, and beatings against the same priest may all have been lying." In addition to Egan, other Bridgeport diocese administrators "deliberately shuffled pedophile priests among parishes to give them a 'fresh start,' and . . . admitted destroying records of complaints against some priests."

For two days the New York archdiocese refused to respond to the new flood of media queries, referring them all to the Diocese of Bridgeport. Then, in a short statement and a longer pastoral letter distributed to local Catholics, Egan finally called sex abuse against children an "abomination," and said he would thoroughly investigate such accusations, remove abusing priests from ministry, and urge victims to take their cases to police. But he defended his conduct in Bridgeport, and condemned the *Courant*. He said that if the archdiocese had "reasonable cause that abuse has taken place, and the victim or victims do not oppose the reporting," it would contact authorities in the future. He also said that there were no current allegations of sexual abuse against any priest in the archdiocese.

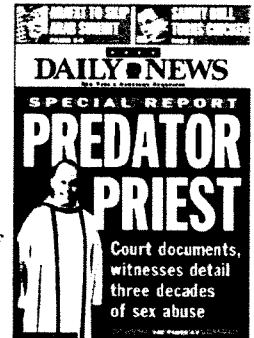
Local district attorneys -- Robert Morgenthau of Manhattan, Robert Johnson of the Bronx, and Jeanine Pirro of Westchester -- separately criticized Egan. "Any citizen who has knowledge of a crime against a child should report it to law enforcement authorities," said Morgenthau, who began drafting legislation that would require anyone, including

priests, who knows of child abuse to report it. "No one is above the law when it comes to the abuse of children," said Pirro, who was seconded by Mayor Bloomberg.

Meanwhile, despite Egan's professed new vigilance, Henry Mills, a priest accused in a lawsuit of raping a 17-year-old parishioner

five years ago during a counseling session at Christ the King Church in the Bronx, after which he received therapy at an upstate facility, continued to celebrate mass at his current Washington Heights church. And the *Hartford Courant* reported that a psychiatric hospital, the Institute of Living, where Egan had referred priests accused of sexual misconduct, said that the church had failed to provide full details of the priests' pasts and then used the hospital's reports to justify returning them to work.

Eager to revise the 1973 law that exempted clergy from reporting child abuse, the New York State Legislature's Senate and Assembly introduced several proposed bills, although with provisions to protect the confidentiality of the confessional. The Republican-controlled Senate and the Democratic-led Assembly agreed to add clergy to the list of professionals required to report such child-abuse allegations, such as doctors, nurses, and day care workers. But Republican senators, citing the five-year statute of limitations for child abuse, opposed the Assembly's requirement that the church to examine 20 years' worth of



records and report old abuse to district attorneys any knowledge it has of abuse. Assembly Democrats said that the provision was necessary to address the long-term behavior of sexual abusers. Suffolk County district attorney Denis Dillon, a devout Roman Catholic, broke with his fellow regional DAs by opposing mandatory reporting by clergy of child sexual abuse, calling the problem a gay one, not one of clergy or pedophilia. The *New York Post* headlined Dillon's position as a "State of D.A.-nial."

As Easter approached, Brooklyn bishop Daily waited over a week before addressing the issue. While Daily stalled, a New Jersey priest, Timothy Lambert, dramatically accused Brooklyn priest Joseph Byrns of molesting Lambert when the latter was an altar boy. Lambert said that when he took his claim to the Brooklyn diocese in 1998, Daily called the charges unfounded, covering up for a predator just as he was accused of doing for Geoghan. From his pulpit, Brynes again denied the charges, saying that Brynes was to be pitied and prayed for.

When Daily finally spoke, he said he had acted in good conscience in Boston, but that "in hindsight I profoundly regret certain decisions." He defended his decision to exonerate Byrns, and said that while diocese officials would review old charges of priests accused sexual abuse, information about them would not be turned over to prosecutors. "Not every allegation proves credible," Daily said. "And I also need to be concerned about the way the media is using this tragedy . . . to discredit our beliefs and values. . . . Some of these guys are dead. A man's got a right to his reputation even when he's dead."

A few days later, Bishop Murphy of Rockville Centre said that Long Island church officials had given law enforcement authorities the names of all priests accused of sexual misconduct with minors. But Daily still insisted that he had no intention of turning over names of such priests. Egan, meanwhile, maintained that he would report accused priests to civil authorities only if he judged that the allegations had merit. Murphy's

acquiescence was less open than its sounds, since the church would have controlled the list. Also, the Suffolk County district attorney to whom he would hand it, Dillon, is "a staunch and activist Catholic with close ties to the diocese," including a former membership "in the super-secret and arch-conservative lay organization known as Opus Dei," according to *Newsday*.

"I firmly believe our policy has served us well, and that we have taken responsible steps to protect our children," said Daily. "No institution in our country . . . has done more than the Catholic church to understand and address this horrific form of violation of the young that exists in every segment of our society."

On Long Island, the Catholic church's record of understanding and addressing this horrific form of violation was newly illustrated by charges against Eugene Vollmer, a Floral Park priest who had already been accused by two former altar boys of sexual abuse in the late 1970s and early 1980s in parishes in both Nassau and Suffolk counties. One of the two had said Vollmer had sodomized him at least 50 times, gave him marijuana to smoke, church wine to drink, and pornographic videos to watch, and that the diocese had ignored his complaint. Now three more alleged victims came forward, in response to which the Diocese of Rockville Centre said that Vollmer "had his faculties to exercise the priesthood removed" -- a day after *Newsday* began investigating him. Until that point, Vollmer had been an associate pastor at St. James Church in Seaford.

Meanwhile, local Roman Catholics themselves voiced their dissatisfaction objectively in

polls. 89% of New York City Catholics opposed archdiocese's reporting policy, 53% of Catholics disapproved the way Egan has handled cases of child sexual abuse by priests (14% approved), and 65% disapproved of the way the church hierarchy has addressed the sex abuse scandal, according to the *Daily News*, which called the survey "a stinging rebuke to Edward Cardinal Egan's policy that church leaders will report abuse claims only if the church believes them to be true and victims give their consent." A *Newsweek* poll found 77% of all Americans, and 75% of American Catholics, felt the church had been too lenient. Le-Moyne College, which is Roman Catholic, said that 85% of American Catholics wanted civil authorities to handle allegations of clergy sex abuse.

But the same polls still showed overwhelming loyalty to the church by the same American Catholics, who disagree with many of the Vatican's teachings on sexuality, from its ban on artificial birth control to its insistence on priestly celibacy. When Egan said he would expel clergy found guilty of sexual misconduct and urged victims to call the police "directly and immediately," his continued refusal to work with police meant that the *New York Post* could still title a related article "Flock: It's a Positive First Step," even though one of the three people quoted said, "I would first go to the cops. I wouldn't even consider going to the archdiocese."

Some defenders of the church, ranging from Vatican officials to Egan-ordained priest Andrew Walter of Connecticut (who was ejected from a church seminary when a church-approved treatment center diagnosed him as

"They had the great advantage of dying at prayer in church."

-- Cardinal Edward Egan, about a priest and an elderly parishioner shot to death in March.

as "homophobic" and having a "histrionic personality disorder"), blamed gay clergy, even though researchers in the psychology of sex abusers say that adults' molestation of boys is not a function of a gay sexual orientation.

Egan and Daily continued to condemn sexual abuse of children by priests, and spoke of all priests' wide range of charitable activities, including ministry after the World Trade Center collapse. Yet criticism of their inaction remained strong. A week after refusing to cooperate with authorities and saying that they had not even been tracking abuse cases, they began to reverse themselves. Egan gave Manhattan DA Morgenthau a list of around three dozen accused priests, cases as old as four decades. "New Stance for Church as Armor Is Cracked," said the *New York Times*. But DAs complained that the list didn't cover all the likely cases in the New York archdiocese, since it didn't include priests who are employed by religious orders.

Four days later, the archdiocese said that six priests on the list had been "asked to leave their current assignments" and "are not to represent themselves as priests."

Egan also announced that in the future, the archdiocese would recognize abuse reports only in writing, and that after archdiocesan officials interviewed an accused priest, an advisory committee would decide whether to report to police. But several district attorneys attacked Egan's plan. "If the archdiocese gets an abuse allegation, they should report it to the civil authorities and not play law enforcement," said Sullivan County DA Stephen Lungen. Dutchess County DA William Grady said that the archdiocese rule alerting accused priests of allegations would give perpetrators the chance to destroy evidence, and that not all victims were mentally prepared to submit written complaints. Bronx DA Robert Johnson's office said that "an oral allegation should be sufficient for referral to the district attorney."

Public dissent against Egan's limited concession included a protest outside of St. Patrick's Cathedral, which included two sisters who claim they were raped by a Trenton priest years ago.

After Egan's partial about-face, Daily finally agreed to meet with Brooklyn and Queens prosecutors. Brooklyn DA Charles J. Hynes, who unlike other DAs pressed only for cases no older than five years, which are still within the state statute of limitations on sex crimes, said, "It's just a meeting of the minds. We don't know what the content is going to be at this time."

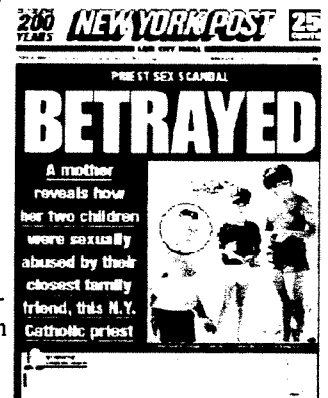
Before the meeting, Daily went from refusing to surrender names to agreeing to share names of priests in old cases. "We have spoken to diocese officials, and they don't have any cases within five years, and we believe it," said a Hynes representative. "If they get a case, we expect they will let us know." Then, a week after the meeting, Daily said the diocese would give area prosecutors the names of priests accused of sexual abuse over the past 20 years, and that it would continually review its files.

In early April, weeks after Long Island's Murphy said there were no "credible" allegations of sexual abuse against any local active priests, the Rockville Centre diocese removed Angelo Ditta, once parish priest at St. Margaret of Scotland Roman Catholic Church in Selden, from active duty based on a complaint it knew of since 1997. "The district attorney's office should have been notified in 1997," said Suffolk district attorney Thomas Spota. "The case might have been prosecutable then. This diocese seems to think they will decide what is a crime and who is a criminal, and that is just not their function."

Two weeks later, Matthew Filippi, the former music director of the same church school, was arrested for allegedly raping an 11-year-old music student. And the family of a boy allegedly fondled and urged to watch pornographic movies in 1996 by Rockville Centre diocese priest Brian Brinker said that Murphy had "said he saw no reason why this man should not continue with his duties" as a parish priest, and that both diocese and police had ignored their complaints.

A few days after Ditta's removal, Spota announced that he would convene a grand jury, the first of its kind in the nation, to investigate child sex abuse by Rockville Centre diocese priests.

Prosecutors from eight New York counties have told the New York archdiocese that they need to know immediately about allegations of sexual abuse of children by priests. And the church is beginning to understand that the sheep are nervous about their shepherds. The New York archdiocese is encouraging priests substituting for accused clergy to announce to congregations, "Your pastor, Father X, has been asked to leave the parish at the present time due to an allegation of inappropriate behavior from his past. Please keep Father X and me in your prayers."



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