

The Story of Bernard Prince

According to a recently discovered letter, he continued for more than a decade in a prestigious Vatican post after two cardinals, and perhaps five other bishops, knew he had been credibly accused of homosexual abuse.

by Jeff Ziegler

In 1858, 16 families from Prussian-occupied Poland, promised free land in Canada by a shipping company agent, sold their possessions and sailed across the ocean. “I shall never forget their bitter, despairing cries, when they found here on the other side of the ocean how awfully they had been misled,” a Canadian official wrote in an 1860 report. The official found agricultural work for them on the northern shore of Lake Ontario.

At the intersections of country roads, the settlers soon built wooden crosses, where they gathered on Sundays to pray the Rosary and a litany. “It became tradition to make the sign of the cross when one passed a cross at an intersection,” recounts a history of Canada’s first Polish settlement, Wilno. “Gentlemen would remove their hats also.” In 1875, a Polish priest arrived.

Today Wilno is “a very small village of about 200 people scattered over quite a big area, with a big church and a cluster of buildings on a highway around what used to be the railway station,” says Lynne Postill of Wilno Village Publishing. “The buildings are attractive and well kept and are either restaurants or gift stores.”

“In 1966 when I first went there, I think that the villagers were about 95



Bernard A. Prince, the then-secretary-general of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith, stands to the left at a 1998 meeting in Dearborn, Michigan.

percent of Polish descent, of whom 100 percent were Roman Catholic and 99 percent attended church,” she recalls. “Today fewer are of Polish descent, and fewer attend church.”

Bernard Prince (an anglicized form of Prynz) was born in Wilno in 1934 and raised in a family of five children. “Bernard was a shy young man from a small village with a one-room schoolhouse,” says Postill. After graduating from an area Catholic high school, Prince entered a Trappist Abbey in

nearby Quebec in 1951, choosing the life of the *conversi* (lay brothers)—who spent most of their time in manual labor—rather than that of the choir monks, who chanted the Divine Office. One resident recalls that Prince was the only young man from Wilno in his lifetime to become a Trappist.

According to a horarium of that era, lay brothers would rise at 2:00 in the morning, pray and read privately for two hours, attend Mass at 4:00, have a small breakfast at 5:30, and work until

the 2:00 PM dinner. They would work again from 3:00 until 5:45, join the choir monks for an hour of public spiritual reading and Compline, and retire around 7:00. Like the choir monks, the lay brothers ate no meat or fish and as a rule drank only water.

Six months after his admission to the abbey, Prince received the habit, taking the name Brother Richard. Following his novitiate, he made his temporary profession of vows in 1954, but left in 1957, two weeks before he was to pronounce his solemn vows. "There is no mention in his file of the reasons for his departure," Brother André of Abbaye Val Notre-Dame told CWR in an e-mail.

At the time, a man had to make an irrevocable choice upon entrance into the abbey: to become either a lay brother or a choir monk, all of whom were priests or destined for the priesthood. Brother André speculates that Prince, as a lay brother, may have left the abbey because he desired to become a priest. "But this is purely a hypothesis, since the register does not make any mention or remark on this subject."

"At the time he was in the community, [nearly] 60 years ago, the community numbered more than 170 monks, who lived in strict silence," Brother André continued. "They were seen but hardly known. As for the superiors of that time, who perhaps could have told us something more, they have been dead for a long time."

After leaving the abbey, Bernard Prince entered the seminary and was ordained a priest of his native Diocese of Pembroke (Ontario) in 1963, with the ordination taking place at his hometown parish. Historians one day may judge the abuse committed during Prince's priesthood to be the worst of the clerical scandals of the late 20th century, not because of the number of his victims (though he has been convicted of molesting 13), but because—according to a recently discovered letter written by a bishop—Prince continued for more than a decade in a prestigious Vatican post after two cardinals, and perhaps five other bishops, knew he had been credibly accused of homosexual abuse.

HIS EARLY ECCLESIASTICAL CAREER

According to a timeline published in the *Globe and Mail*—the accuracy of which was confirmed for CWR by Msgr. Douglas Bridge, chancellor of the Diocese of Pembroke—and to

other press accounts, Father Prince was sent to Rome from 1963 to 1966 for studies in canon law after briefly serving at a parish. After receiving his doctorate in canon law, he worked for the chancery office and assisted at other parishes before taking a post at the apostolic nunciature in Ottawa. He was then appointed assistant secretary general of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB), a post he held from 1969 to 1975, and again from 1981 to 1984.

Upon hearing of the allegation, the late Bishop Joseph Windle of Pembroke did not conduct a penal trial or take less drastic actions, such as suspending the priest's faculties or sending him to the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto. Instead, Bishop Windle helped secure for him a Vatican appointment to (in his words) "remove him from the Canadian scene."

In 1968, Father Prince published an article in the initial issue of the canon law journal *Studia canonica*. "Bernard Prince had just completed his doctoral studies in Rome, and his article in *Studia canonica* was based on his doctoral thesis," recalls Father Francis Morrisey, OMI, founding editor of the journal and for decades one of Canada's leading canonists. "Any new publication looks for various contributors, and his text was available. As to how he got his appointments to the CCCCB and to the nunciature, I'm afraid that I have no idea. I was only a newly-ordained priest at the time and was not in 'Church circles.'"

Father Prince's appointment to the CCCCB came one year after the controversial Winnipeg Statement, in which the Canadian hierarchy legitimized dissent from *Humanae Vitae*, teaching that "whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience." (In 2008, the bishops urged Catholics to heed the encyclical's message on contraception, in essence retracting the 1968 statement.) Msgr. Vincent Foy, an ardent Canadian defender of *Humanae Vitae* for more than four decades, says that he does not recall Father Prince taking part in any of the controversies surrounding the encyclical.

Father Prince's tenure at the CCCCB is remembered, however, by stalwart pro-life veterans who have battled legalized

abortion. "I was one of the founders of, and legal counsel to, Campaign Life, the political arm of the pro-life movement in Canada," recalls Gwen Landolt, now the national vice president of REAL Women of Canada. "The CCCCB was not supportive of pro-life concerns. Any request for assistance was met with a dismissive response from Msgr. Prince. Usually his response consisted of no more than one or two sentences. I had the impression that the pro-life movement was an embarrassment to

the CCCCB because of our inflexible and unwavering commitment to the protection of the unborn child. Our views were regarded as being too strident, contrary to the image that the CCCCB apparently wished to project as being more reasonable and moderate."

In 1982, when six Nova Scotia laity knelt for Holy Communion and were convicted on charges of disturbing a worship service, Father Prince came to the defense of the late Bishop William Power of Antigonish, who had ordered the communicants to stand. Noting that the laity knelt for Communion at his home parish, Father Prince told the *Ottawa Citizen* that the Church did not forbid kneeling, but that bishops had authority over the liturgy in their dioceses.

As his ecclesiastical career progressed, Father Prince did not forget his hometown parish, 80 miles west of Ottawa. "He did so much work in Wilno," a local priest told the *Ottawa Citizen* in 2006. "He would come up on his weekends and do Mass at St. Mary's.... He was good to people. Funerals, weddings, baptisms." Wilno residents "fondly remembered [him] as a modern, fun-loving priest," according to a 2006 *Globe and Mail* article—though one Wilno resident, who wishes to remain anonymous, told CWR, "I would not say that everyone loved Father Bernie. He was a patriarch, just like most old-time priests. Yes, he was fun-loving."

It was during these visits to Wilno

that Prince molested adolescent boys—all between the ages of 10 and 16, according to the *Ottawa Citizen*. “Prince is remembered by local residents as being very outgoing,” recalls one of his victims, who cannot be identified because of a Canadian court order. The victim told *CWR*:

He drove big cars—Ford Thunderbirds were his vehicle of choice—and he built a cottage on a secluded lot where he put in a swimming pool in the late 1960s, and he always invited young people, especially boys, to come down to cottage to go swimming. Despite not being the parish priest, many couples, including some from surrounding parishes, asked Prince to officiate at their wedding ceremonies. He was also asked to attend anniversaries and various other parties. He traveled extensively and he organized a number of group trips to Poland, Ireland, Italy, etc.... Most often in public, Prince would wear casual clothes.

ther Prince the director of the Pontifical Mission Societies for English-speaking Canada. Working now in Toronto, he oversaw the work of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, the Society of St. Peter the Apostle, the Pontifical Missionary Union, and the Holy Childhood Association, whose purpose is to educate children about the needs of missionary dioceses.

In October 1990, a 34-year-old man told a Pembroke priest that Father Prince had molested him when he was a minor. Later, the victim spoke with the late Father John Barry, the diocesan vicar general. What happened next, even more than Father Prince’s abuse, is at the heart of the scandal.

HIS VATICAN APPOINTMENT

In his March 2010 letter on the Irish abuse scandal, Pope Benedict noted that “there was a well-intentioned but misguided tendency to avoid penal approaches to canonically irregular situations.” Commenting on a contemporaneous abuse case, Father John Beal, one of the United States’ leading canon law-

wide director) of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith. The details surrounding the promotion were revealed in April 2010, when the *Globe and Mail* published a February 1993 letter from Bishop Windle to Archbishop Carlo Curis, then apostolic pro-nuncio to Canada. Bishop Windle, 75 at the time, had served as bishop of Pembroke since 1971; he retired three months after he wrote the letter and died in 1997.

Bishop Windle wrote:

When Fr. Prince was first proposed for his present position in Rome (on the recommendation of the now Archbishop F. Franck), I explained to the then Archbishop José Sanchez (now Cardinal Sanchez), in his capacity as Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, that, while the charge against Fr. Prince was very serious, I would not object to him being given another chance since it would remove him from the Canadian scene. (Archbishop Ambrozic had already informed me that Fr. Prince was no longer welcome in the Archdiocese of Toronto unless he underwent psychiatric treatment at the Clarke Institute.)

Archbishop Fernand Franck of Luxembourg, now 76, served as secretary general of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith from 1977 to 1990. He told *CWR*: “After his appointment as national director for the Propagation of the Faith, I met Father Prince in Rome, when he attended the general assembly. When I was appointed in 1990 as archbishop of Luxembourg, I recommended him, among others, as my successor. With his appointment as such I had nothing to do; that was completely out of my competence. The reason for my recommendation was his knowledge of different languages. I didn’t know anything about his sexual abuse.”

In 1991, Cardinal José Sánchez was promoted from secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples to prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, where he would be responsible for handling some clerical sexual abuse cases. At the time, the congregation did not have jurisdiction “over cases for laicization (voluntary or involuntary) or over penal actions for dismissal from the clerical state,” explains Father Beal, but “would, however, deal with related issues such as removals of pas-

Prince’s conviction and the recent publication of Bishop Windle’s 1993 letter to Archbishop Curis have dealt a severe blow to the Diocese of Pembroke. “It is fair to say that there was shock in response to both of these events,” says Father Tim Moyle, a diocesan priest and blogger. “Prince was not spoken of as being an abuser, and his charges took virtually everyone by surprise. The same can be said about Bishop Windle’s letter, as we priests were assured that the diocese had never received any reports alleging abuse prior to the charges being laid.”

On one of these trips to Poland, Father Prince became acquainted with the future Pope John Paul II.

In 1985, Father Prince was elected to a two-year term as president of the Canadian Canon Law Society. Father Morrisey recalls that “the members of the society recognized his qualities. One of the conditions to be president, in addition to having canonical knowledge, is to be bilingual (English and French), and he was able to work in both official languages of Canada. Also, at the time, his contacts with various ecclesiastical entities made him a good candidate for the position.”

In 1987, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples named Fa-

thers, told *CWR* that “since involuntary laicizations were deemed impossible to obtain and penal trials were thought difficult to conduct, bishops took less drastic actions to try to prevent further abuse.” Upon hearing of the allegation, the late Bishop Joseph Windle of Pembroke did not conduct a penal trial or take less drastic actions, such as suspending the priest’s faculties or sending him to the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto. Instead, Bishop Windle helped secure for him a Vatican appointment to (in his words) “remove him from the Canadian scene.”

In 1991, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples named Prince the secretary-general (world-

tors, refusals to provide assignment, removals of faculties, suspensions, and issues related to decent support, even though these actions were prompted by accusation of sexual misconduct." Cardinal Sánchez, now 90, did not respond to a request for comment.

Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic, now 80, served as archbishop of Toronto until his 2006 retirement; he "is in poor health and not in a position to comment on this," said archdiocesan spokesman Neil McCarthy. "To my knowledge there were never any allegations against Father Prince relating to his time in Toronto," Mr. McCarthy told CWR. "The longest assignment in Toronto would have been his work with the pontifical mission societies, essentially an administrative position with an office based in Toronto, which was a Vatican appointment, not an appointment by the Archdiocese of Toronto."

"I also took the precaution of informing the bishops in whose dioceses Fr. Prince had previously worked of what had been brought to my attention and a copy of this information was forwarded to the Nunciature," Bishop Windle added in his letter. "They include: Archbishop Ambrozic, Archbishop Spence, Archbishop Wilhelm, Archbishop Gervais, Bishop O'Mara, and Bishop Tonnos since each of them was involved directly or indirectly with Fr. Prince."

All of these Ontario bishops are retired or deceased except for Bishop Anthony Tonnos of Hamilton, who "states categorically that he knew nothing of any misbehavior of Bernard Prince in 1993," according to a diocesan statement. "Bishop Tonnos first learned of the allegations against Bernard Prince when he was criminally charged in 2005."

Bishop Windle also told the pronuncio:

In conscience, and before God, I must inform Your Excellency that I am adamantly opposed to Fr. Prince receiving any Papal Honour or ever being promoted to the Episcopate. The consequences of such an action would be disastrous, not only for the Canadian church but for the Holy See as well, given the climate which exists in Canada at this time. I can say without hesitation that all of the Ontario Bishops and the President of the CCCB would support me in this assessment....

[T]he situation has become more

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precarious since Fr. Prince's appointment to Rome. Recently it has been brought to our attention that there was not one but four or five victims in all (all minors who talk freely among themselves about their involvement with Fr. Prince), and that several lay people...as well as a number of priests...are aware of these unfortunate events....

I wish to point out to Your Excellency that this information is reaching us in bits and pieces, from various sources, including sordid details, but we have no way of assessing the total accuracy of these reports.... One redeeming factor is that it would appear that the victims involved are of Polish descent and their respect for the priesthood and the Church has made them refrain from making these allegations public or laying a criminal charge against a priest. Had this happened elsewhere there would be every danger that charges would have been laid long ago with all the resultant scandal....

I regret both the length and contents of this letter, Your Excellency, but when there is so much at stake for the Church in general and the diocese in particular, given the adverse climate we are currently experiencing, any promotion for Fr. Prince, even for a Papal Honour, but most especially for the Episcopate, would have horrendous results and cause immeasurable harm...a promotion of any kind would indicate to the victim that he is being further victimized and hence we could anticipate that a

charge would be laid and a public trial would follow.

Bishop Windle wrote his letter eight months after the publication of *From Pain to Hope*, in which a CCCB committee reminded bishops that "everyone has a duty to report sexual abuse" to a child protection agency or the police.

Although Father Prince was never named a bishop, Bishop Windle's letter did not have its intended effect, raising questions about what happened once Archbishop Curis received the letter. (Attempts to reach Archbishop Curis, now 86, through the Italian bishops' conference were unsuccessful.) Father Prince had already received one honor: Pope John Paul II had appointed him a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in late 1992. A year after Bishop Windle's letter, Pope John Paul named Father Prince a monsignor and appointed him one of the synod fathers at the first Synod of Bishops for Africa. In 1998, the Pontiff appointed Prince to another five-year term as a consultant to the pontifical council. In 2000, Msgr. Prince was one of three prelates who briefed the media on missions-related commemorations during the Jubilee Year. Prince retired in 2004.

HIS CONVICTION

In 2005, one of Msgr. Prince's victims spoke with Ontario Provincial Police, and the following year the priest was arrested. More victims came forward. In early 2008, Msgr. Prince was convicted of molesting 13 boys between 1964 and 1984; he had pled guilty to 12 of the charges.

"My innocence, poverty, and admiration made me an easy target, and his respected stature in the community and Catholic Church as a priest gave him the perfect opportunity to take advantage of this easy target," one victim said at the time of Prince's sentencing. Msgr. Prince, for his part, said, "I want to sincerely apologize to everyone concerned, for the harm I've caused directly or indirectly," adding, "my wish is to begin the healing process and not frustrate it in any way." He was sentenced to a four-year federal prison term, and Pope Benedict laicized him in May 2009. Agence France Presse reported in April 2010 that the diocese has settled six civil suits against Prince, with 10 more in litigation.

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"If there is one thing that I am sure of, knowing as I do the principals from the diocese who are handling these matters, it is that they are committed to a fair and just settlement for Prince's victims," adds Father Moyle. "Not so much in financial terms (no one in the diocese will answer that question—it will be done by lawyers and a judge), but most especially spiritually and psychologically. Father Peter Proulx [the diocesan representative for sexual abuse matters] and Bishop [Michael] Mulhall are men of deep faith, justice, and compassion. There is nothing that they want more than for anyone victimized in this sad scandal to recover the gifts of peace, love, and joy that were stolen from them by Prince." A victim counters: "While the current bishop offered help in the healing of the victims and their families and of the community, over two years after the conviction of Prince, those just remain empty promises."

A century and a half after 16 courageous families sailed across the ocean and founded Canada's first Polish settlement, a native son's acts of abuse, and the subsequent actions of members of the hierarchy, have left deep wounds. "When news first broke about the allegations in 2006, for the most part the community supported Prince and questioned the validity of the charges," the victim told CWR. "As the investigation continued and Prince's subsequent guilty pleas and prison sentence [followed] in 2008, there was a noticeable change in the community's attitude.... Many older residents, who had proudly placed [a picture] of Prince and Pope John Paul II in their homes, removed that picture and in many cases, burnt it." ■

JEFF ZIEGLER writes from North Carolina.

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