

Sexual abuse in the Church: an old problem becomes news

By Teresa A. Parsons

Brother John D. Walsh's arrest last August on charges of kidnapping two young boys, sent shock waves throughout the Diocese of Rochester. But his is one of more than a dozen cases throughout the United States of sexual misconduct by priests and religious which have drawn national attention in recent years.

In Rhode Island, one priest has been convicted of sexually abusing children, and two other priests have been charged with similar crimes. In the Diocese of Lafayette, La., a priest is alleged to have abused between 30 and 70 boys over a 10-year period from 1972 to 1983.

Thousand Oaks, Cal.; Portland, Ore.; Milwaukee and White Lake, Wis.; and Boise, Idaho; are a few of the other communities around the country that have been rocked by the news of priests or religious sexually abusing children over the past several years.

Is this an epidemic?

"No," says Father William Perri, S.P., director of the Villa Louis Martin, a treatment program for Catholic priests and religious suffering from psychological disorders.

Father Perri said he has not observed any significant rise in sexual dysfunctions among priests or religious. "This certainly is nothing new, but the problem is receiving more public attention," said Father Perri. "Prior to eight years ago, there wasn't a lot of publicity. Now people read about it and think everything's going crazy, and there's this huge panic."

Nevertheless, Father Perri doesn't term the publicity as negative. "I'm glad we're becoming more upfront about it," he said. "Dioceses are being forced to do a much better job with this kind of situation nowadays."

The fact that Father Perri's congregation, the Servants of the Paraclete, was founded in 1947 attests that priests and religious have suffered from such disorders longer than press reports indicate. An order of men dedicated to treating virtually any physical, emotional or spiritual condition that conflicts with priestly or religious vows, the Servants of the Paraclete were established by Father Gerald M.C. Fitzgerald, a priest in the Archdiocese of Boston who later joined the Congregation of the Holy Cross.

The Servants of the Paraclete opened their first house, the Villa Louis Martin, in Jemez Springs, N.M. Since then, other houses have been added in Albuquerque; Cherry Valley, Cal.; St. Louis and Dittmer, Missouri; Stroud, England; and Rome, Italy. Currently, the congregation claims 32 priests and five brothers.

In their programs, which deal with problems ranging from compulsive eating to alcoholism, from chemical dependency to psychosexual and personality disorders, the Servants of the Paraclete take a "holistic"

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approach. They evaluate each patient emotionally, physically and spiritually, with assistance from a staff of psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists. Aside from evaluation and initial therapy, the order maintains follow-up programs for long-term treatment.

Brother Walsh, a Holy Cross brother and former assistant vice principal of Cardinal Mooney High School, has been undergoing treatment at the Villa Louis Martin since September. Last January, he pleaded guilty to coercion and unlawful imprisonment, both in the first degree, admitting that he forced two boys, ages 11 and 12, into his car last August and had a conversation with them regarding sexual acts and the purchase of drugs. The boys were not physically injured.

Monroe County Court Judge Patricia D. Marks sentenced Brother Walsh Tuesday, March 18, to five years probation with the following conditions: that he serve six months in the Monroe County Jail (with time off for good behavior as defined by law); that he continue his treatment at the Villa Louis Martin; that he refrain from using alcohol or drugs except as prescribed by a doctor; and that he not serve in a future position where he would come in contact with children.

"I am satisfied. I believe it was appropriate," said Assistant District Attorney Terrence Servis. Although he didn't request a specific sentence, Servis said he did point out to the judge the serious nature of the crimes Brother Walsh committed against the boys. Servis said the pre-sentence investigation also revealed that one of the boys has developed behavioral problems since the incident occurred last August.

But the sentence was in apparent contrast to a recommendation by the parents of the boys involved.

Following an interview with the parents, a probation officer wrote in an addendum to the pre-sentence report that: "in regard to the defendant, they feel that as a result of the media coverage, he has lost all respect and

reputation that he had in the past and will now have to live with a felony conviction for the rest of his life. They feel that this is adequate punishment and recommend probation for the purpose of maintaining treatment and seeing to it that he not work with children in the future."

Brother Walsh's attorney, G. Thomas White, said he was shocked by the sentence. "I believe this (sentence) was intended as an appeasement to the public because a brother was involved," White said. "I felt he shouldn't have been treated as a criminal. He should have been treated as a sick person even though he was involved in a crime by definition."

"You order him to continue treatment, then yank him out for six months? What kind of logic is that?" he added.

The *Courier-Journal* asked Judge Marks last week whether she believed sentencing Brother Walsh to a jail conflicted with her requirement that he continue treatment. She responded that although his treatment would be interrupted, programs are available to him through the jail.

But White believes that what the Monroe County Jail has to offer is inadequate for Brother Walsh. "He needs access to people more familiar with his problem," White said.

"Obviously, we will not be able to continue Brother Walsh's treatment for the next few months, but he will be here for five years as part of his sentence, so we hope that will be sufficient time to deal with his problem," Father Perri said. "Up till now, we've been trying to get him ready to go to jail and deal with his fears about that."

"He was prepared for some jail time, but not for six months," White said.

Brother Walsh could be released as early as July 7, 1986, with time off for good behavior, according to White. Because he fears an appeal would further disrupt his client's treatment, White remains undecided on whether to appeal the sentence.

Meanwhile, White added, the local congregation of Holy Cross Religious has consistently supported Brother Walsh's treatment program. "They have been behind

him 110 percent," he said.

That kind of support has not always been forthcoming. In the past, diocesan and provincial officials have more often dealt with such problems by denying them.

A report published last June by the *National Catholic Reporter* alleged that parents warned officials of the Archdiocese of Portland, Ore., about a diocesan priest's improper behavior more than two years before the priest was convicted of sexual abuse misdemeanors. When arrested, the priest admitted that he had been sexually involved with boys for 15 to 20 years.

Once the priest was arrested, parents charge that the archdiocese violated a verbal promise to pay for counseling and therapy for the children. Three parents threatened to sue, but the case was settled out of court.

"A lot of the press has been unfair to bishops and provincials," Father Perri said. "It's a very difficult situation to understand and handle. I know first hand they're much better at handling this problem now. It may be out of fear of liability, unfortunately, but whatever the reason, it's been positive."

"A number of dioceses are calling their priests together for workshops and trying to present the fact that there are possibilities for people with this problem," Father Perri explained. "They are encouraging priests not to be afraid to step forward. A lot of priests are coming forward as a result and saying 'I need help' beforehand."

The Diocese of Rochester has, as a direct result of publicity surrounding these cases, adopted a much more aggressive policy in responding to indications of illnesses or dysfunction among its priests and religious, according to Father James Schwartz, director of the Ministry to Priests program.

"We would immediately refer a person to a psychiatrist or treatment center," he said, adding that the individual would be removed from a pastoral position.

Through the Ministry to Priests program, Father Schwartz said, the diocese is also trying to help all priests deal better with issues of sexuality and sexual integration.

"You can trace this kind of problem through patterns of behavior," he said, "but in the end it can be very deceptive. It's usually someone who's very good with kids and who gets a lot of positive feedback for that."

"Something like this certainly sends shock waves through the community," Father Schwartz added. But he dismissed any connection between the requirement of celibacy and the kind of sexual dysfunction from which Brother Walsh apparently suffers. "This illness affects people who are married, single, celibate or not," he pointed out. "It's just more shocking when it comes from someone like a teacher, a priest or a doctor — the kind of person you want to trust."

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