

2004 REPORT: Saint Lawrence Seminary, Capuchin sex offenders, court documents, victim testimony

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The following narrative is section three of a 2004 report submitted for mediation between victims of clergy child sex offenders of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. The full report as well as live links to the court documents and depositions used in this report can be found at the online archive Bishop-Accountability.org at this link:

http://www.bishop-accountability.org/reports/2004_02_10_Isely_TheSexual.htm

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Never dealt with a “real pedophile”

In his interview with the Milwaukee Journal, the archbishop insisted that clergy who abuse children in the Milwaukee Archdiocese are not “real” pedophiles and therefore not dangerous. Other professions may be dealing with true pedophiles—Boy Scout leaders, teachers, and coaches—but not the Catholic priesthood. “In fact,” insisted the archbishop, “I have never dealt with a real pedophile. Really, I haven’t.”

The archbishop was dealing, however, with “real” pedophiles and he knew it.

Will commit “sexual acts against small children again”

One such indisputable pedophile the archbishop knew about was Fond du Lac county priest and Capuchin friar Father Jude Hahn. Hahn was under the supervision of his religious order superior, Father Kenneth Reinhart, and the Milwaukee Archbishop, his canon law ordinary.

Father Hahn was a diagnosed pedophile in 1992 and in 1993 was refusing treatment. According to confidential church records, the priest was telling both treatment and church officials that he intended to sexually assault “small children” again. Nonetheless, in [April of 1993 Archbishop Weakland](#) gave express permission for the priest to live unreported and unsupervised in Milwaukee because, according to the archbishop, “he is not well known in this area.”

Reinhart had ordered Father Hahn into treatment in August 1992 at St. Michael’s Hospital outside of St. Louis. The hospital contained a locked unit for sex offender clergy in which Father Hahn was placed.

Father Hahn broke off treatment and told doctors and Father Reinhart, on separate occasions, that he would “not promise he would not commit sexual acts against small children again.” That

warning did not prevent the Milwaukee archbishop from welcoming the pedophile to his city because he was “not well known in this area.”

Venerable tradition

Father Hahn joined the Capuchins in 1950 and spent his entire professional career as a priest in various staff and administrative positions at St. Lawrence Seminary High School, located in the village of Mount Calvary, just east of Fond du Lac.

The seminary is a boarding school for minors founded in 1859 by Swiss priests seeking to establish the Capuchin Order in the United States. During its almost 150 years, the seminary has graduated thousands of students. Many joined the ranks of clergy across the United States. Father Hahn, who worked in the development office for a time at the seminary, mentions in a 1994 court deposition that the office fundraising registry, which included many alumni, consisted of over 250,000 names.

During their zenith in the 1950's, hundreds of youngsters filled the five minor seminaries located within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee alone. These boys were recruited into a centuries long tradition in Catholicism where devout Catholic parents would place their male children in the complete care of priests and religious inside boarding schools to begin the long training to ordination or vowed religious life.

At any given time in its history, 30 to 50 Capuchins lived with the boys at the seminary. An impressive new church and friary were built to accommodate the large number of priests and brothers in the early 1970's.

During most of Father Hahn's 40 year tenure at St Lawrence, the student body consisted of between 200 to 300 boys, with the freshman class often numbering over a hundred 13 and 14 year olds, principally recruited from the Midwest.

The school, designated on its promotional and fundraising materials as “The Hill of Happiness” and “The Poor Boys' Seminary,” sits atop an impressive sloping hillside created by the retreat of glaciers from central Wisconsin. The campus, including the original main tower built during the last century, is a state landmark that can be surveyed for miles.

Red letter day

Along with his duties at the seminary, Father Hahn was also the associate pastor of Holy Name Parish in Mt. Calvary, one of several archdiocesan parishes operated by the Capuchins. He was the youth director for Holy Name and several other parishes in the area, including churches in nearby St. Cloud and Johnesburg.

Court records show that Father Hahn assaulted youth from these parishes as well as students at the seminary.

One youngster, whose family lived on a farm close to Mt. Calvary, testified it was a red-letter day in 1969 when his mother informed him that Father Hahn wanted him to do odd jobs around the rectory. The child was 11 years old. The youngster's parents and relatives were avid personal and financial supporters of the Capuchins. Their oldest son was already attending the seminary.

Father Hahn instructed the boy to come to the rectory after chores. "He told me I would get not only my pay but that I had been picked for special catechism lessons. "When you complete the lessons," he said, "you will receive a St. Jude medal...your mother will be very proud of you." Some of the older boys at the grade school wore the medal and the boy was eager to join their ranks.

Father Hahn's religious instruction to the 11 year old, according to testimony, consisted of "dozens" of episodes of sexual molestation occurring over a three-year period.

Typically the priest would call the victim's home and arrange to meet the child when the Capuchin would be alone in the church rectory.

In a private den in the rectory's basement, equipped with a bed, Father Hahn would order the child to take off his clothes. He would then instruct the boy to lie down on the bed, face to the wall. "He would usually rub some kind of oil or gel on me and masturbate," according to the victim.

When the assaults were finished, the child would run home and hide in the barn. "I would take my clothes off and rub hay all over my body until my skin was raw, over and over, trying to get the oil and his smell off of me."

Trips out West

Father Hahn also arranged for vacation and camping trips with boys to visit relatives in Washington State or Capuchin institutions located in Montana. Parents would usually consent, glad that their youngsters could spend such formative time with the revered and popular priest.

One victim recalls, "I would stay awake all night with Father sleeping naked next to me. I was terrified, I couldn't move; I didn't know what to do. I would pray to God all night begging for the sun to come up so I could dress and run away to the boys in the other tents."

Court documents show that the Capuchins were aware of Father Hahn's travel with boys and that sexual abuse was likely to take place during the trips.

A handwritten note by the Capuchin provincial summarizes incidents of sexual abuse by Hahn during two such trips, one assault having been reported to the Capuchins by the victim's father.

Court documents show that the Capuchins were worried about faculty trips with students from the seminary as well.

According to the testimony of one former teacher, the seminary's Capuchin dean of discipline assembled the student body one day and "laid out complex rules about what has to be done to be able to travel with a Capuchin." The dean ended his instruction by saying that the new rules would assure that "the fat and ugly kids get taken to town, too."

No insinuations

Trips by faculty were becoming enough of a problem by the beginning of the 1990 school year that Father Reinhart had to tell Mount Calvary friars that such trips would no longer be allowed.

In a personal letter to Father Hahn, his provincial tried to explain to the priest why these rules would have to be enforced, even for veteran Capuchin staff.

Why, then, had Father Reinhart--just prior to the letter--allowed a trip to Montana with Father Hahn and two area youth?

"I agreed to the travel, primarily because everything had been arranged and one of the young men was a relative and there was consent from the parents. However, I would ask that in the future such travel not be engaged in."

In case Father Hahn felt the provincial was singling him out, his superior assured him this was hardly the case. "I have indicated to other friars that I did not want them traveling alone with one or two other young people."

"I am not making insinuations about you," wrote Father Reinhart. "I am simply giving you clear recognition of what is going on in our culture today and the dangers to us and the Church and the province."

Sexual assaults at the minor seminary

Capuchin authorities had been aware since at least 1981 that Father Hahn was committing sexual assaults against youngsters at the seminary.

During the 1981-82 school year, one of only two lay teachers at the seminary, Timothy Scott, reported to school administrators that members of the freshman class were telling him that Father Hahn was sexually molesting them. Father Hahn was the priest in charge of the Freshman class dorm. He had an office with a private bedroom between the students' barracks.

Most Capuchins lived together in the friary located at the top of the hill. But the sprawling campus and its dozen or so buildings also had offices with private bedrooms, such as those for the Capuchin dorm supervisors, the Capuchin in charge of the hospital ward, and the Capuchin athletic director.

Court records, testimony and provincial documents show that sexual abuse was taking place in these isolated offices and bedrooms and Capuchin authorities knew about it.

According to the student reports to Scott, Father Hahn was ordering youngsters to take off their clothes, spanking them, and then becoming sexually aroused. He would require students to take baths with him and sleep with him overnight.

Public disclosure healthy

In December of 1992, an extensive *Milwaukee Journal* investigation was published which reported claims by dozens of former St. Lawrence students that sexual abuse and assaults had been occurring at the seminary for several decades with the awareness of Capuchin and archdiocesan authorities.

Over the next several years the story of abuse at St. Lawrence would continue to make the front page of the newspaper and the national media, leading to a church-funded investigation identifying at least nine Capuchins involved in sexually abusing students at the seminary. Two arrests resulted.

None of the public accounts, much to the Provincial Reinhart's surprise, included the sexual crimes being committed by Father Hahn.

Throughout 1993, Father Reinhart would devote considerable Capuchin resources to covering up Hahn's crimes but at the same time he could issue this public statement and several like it:

As distressful as this is to the church and all the good people involved, I believe it is healthy to have these incidents [of sexual abuse] made public, and I deeply respect those who are victimized for their courage in coming forward. Unless all of us—students, alumni, Capuchin staff and the public—are fully informed we cannot take constructive actions necessary to deal with it.

“Could become another major scandal”

Capuchin authorities were alarmed that the media would discover the priest's decades-long history of criminal behavior at the seminary and Holy Name parish.

Father Reinhart wrote in 1993 while Hahn was in St. Louis for treatment that:

Information about Jude's previous behaviors of the 1980's when he was Associate Pastor, along with being a professor at the seminary, is public knowledge both in the parish that he was Associate Pastor and to the news media in the Wisconsin area. They have chosen not to print this matter up to this point, but it certainly could become another major scandal.

In January, the provincial had written to Father Hahn that, “Over the past couple of weeks a number of incidents of alleged sexual abuse on your part have been brought to our attention by people who may have been minors.”

Although the provincial sympathized with the priest that “you do not like to hear this kind of information,” he asks the friar “not to minimize or deny any of these allegations that have consistently come forward.”

The priest could be assured that the Capuchins would support Father Hahn during these “difficult times,” but that didn’t mean he should take advantage of their generosity. The priest’s credit card bills were soaring: “I recognize there are things that you need, but this is an extremely high cost for anyone.”

Archbishop’s authority requested

By March Father Hahn was refusing treatment. He began pressuring church authorities to grant him a canonical dispensation so he could leave the priesthood and return to the lay state in good standing. This would require the direct permission of his local ordinary, Archbishop Rembert Weakland.

The provincial had ordered the friar to accept a transfer to provincial headquarters in Detroit where “suitable” work would be found for him. But Father Hahn was insistent. He wanted the dispensation. To do so would take a lengthy administrative and investigative process required by Catholic canon law.

In a document entitled [“Summary of Pastoral Attempts by the Religious Ordinary of Jude Hahn,”](#) Provincial Reinhart wrote that, “In December of 1992 and January of 1993, new allegations of inappropriate and sexual behavior came to our attention. These allegations were made with male children under the age of 18, which by United States law is a felony and is punished by prison time. These were presented to him as information I received. He did not deny these.”

The document goes on to detail Father Hahn’s refusal to accept therapeutic help and move to Detroit.

“While there is no immediate public scandal, there is much talk of his behavior in the village in which he had done these behaviors in the 1980’s. I felt it necessary to remove him from that area. I also believed because of legal ramifications in the United States, I could not allow him to function publicly as a priest.”

“Actions against small children”

In a related document concerning Father Hahn’s request for dispensation, Provincial Reinhart wrote:

Jude Hahn has been found psychologically to be a person who cannot accept his own illness as a pedophile. This is a serious disease, which has high moral and legal implications. We have attempted to help Jude in this matter through a therapeutic process and through good spiritual direction. He has resisted this and acknowledges in his conversation with me that he does not

know if he would do these actions against small children again. Such a risk of further actions by a priest and Capuchin in the church would be a serious scandal to the public.

Father Reinhart's mention of "small children" and Hahn's official diagnosis of pedophilia establish that the priest was abusing not only teens but also children much younger.

Archbishop's exemption needed

The provincial wanted Father Hahn's dispensation "rushed" due to the "quickness of the scandal" and the "urgency" with which he was making the request.

To do so, Father Reinhart would need Archbishop Weakland to make a special exemption from canon law to bypass the usual requirements of gathering witnesses and hearing testimony. That way Father Hahn could be immediately released to the lay state.

"I think it is most appropriate that this dispensation be granted for the sake of protecting the Church and the Order from scandal and preserving the good name of Jude Hahn," writes the provincial.

On March 30, 1993 Reinhart informed Father Hahn that his request for dispensation was being processed, looked favorable, and asked the priest to no longer function publicly.

I ask you to accept this in the spirit of obedience and to do so quietly. We do not wish to engage in any scandal to the public in the Mt. Calvary area or any other area. It is our understanding that you are choosing to move to another state and will be leaving this area shortly. It is our hope that we can safeguard your public reputation and that you will continue to be supportive of the Capuchins and the Roman Catholic Church.

With this notification of suspension, I also send you my greetings and best wishes.

"Not well known in this area"

Archbishop Weakland granted the dispensation on April 6, 1993.

In a letter to the Capuchin Provincial, Weakland writes:

Dear Ken,

It is my opinion that there would be no scandal involved if a dispensation were granted to Jude Hahn and if he continued to live here in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. *To my knowledge he is not well known in this area* (author emphasis).

Feel free to use this letter in writing to the Roman Sacred Congregation.

Apparently the archbishop was not yet aware yet that Father Hahn was planning to leave Wisconsin. He did so, with the financial assistance of the Capuchins. He now lives outside Seattle.

No Capuchin or archdiocesan official, including Capuchin Provincial Kenneth Reinhart or Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland, has informed law enforcement in Wisconsin or Washington of Father Hahn's criminal actions against children. To this date, neither seminary alumni, parents, parishioners at Holy Name or residents of the village of Mt. Calvary have been notified of Hahn's criminal activities in Mt. Calvary which spanned three decades.

Archbishop opposes reporting bill

On May 20, 1993 Archbishop Weakland announced that he was hiring a full time coordinator for Project Benjamin.

"I have said it before and I say it again—any form of sexual abuse in the church or in society can never be justified or excused," the archbishop said in a prepared statement.

The new coordinator would "oversee child-abuse investigations, evaluations, treatment and monitoring of priests and ensure reporting requirements are met."

On June 6 the archbishop and his fellow Wisconsin bishops, however, authorized their lobbyist, John Huebscher, executive director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, to testify against a bill that would require them to report sexual abuse of a child.

The Child Abuse Protection Bill would have put clergy on the list of over 20 professions in Wisconsin required to report child sexual abuse, such as doctors, therapists, teachers and dentists.

On the immediate passage of the bill, Archbishop Weakland, the Capuchin Provincial and other religious leaders in Wisconsin would have to report Father Hahn and other sex offender clergy to the police, bringing about the very public predicament church documents show they were so resolutely trying to avoid.

No bishop or religious order leader testified that day. Presenting the position of the bishops, Huebscher argued that "most clergy already report sexual abuse when it came to their attention." Anything, however, told to a member of clergy in confidence should not be reported to civil authorities, whether in confession or other "pastoral communications."

Victims and others testified in favor of the bill, citing evidence of church cover-up and how, instead of being arrested, clergy sex offenders had been empowered to commit more crimes against children.

Most clergy testifying disagreed and maintained there was no need to change the law. They were certain that the vast majority of their professional colleagues would report cases to authorities despite the code of confidentiality if it would help save an endangered child.

The bill was eventually defeated.

Published reports

Public accounts of sexual abuse by Capuchins during the early and mid-1990's were not focusing on the crimes of Father Jude Hahn but other members of the order.

One chronic offender was the former rector or principal of the school, Father Gale Leifeld. Father Leifeld was the main subject of the first published revelations concerning the school in late 1992.

Father Leifeld joined the Capuchins in 1947 and was ordained a priest in 1954. He died of testicular cancer in 1994 at age 66 while facing a number of civil cases against him for sexually abusing former seminary students.

Father Leifeld spent his entire career as a priest in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, at St. Lawrence for 28 years and then as vice-rector of Sacred Heart School of Theology in Franklin. A Shorewood native, the priest also assisted at St. Robert's in Shorewood, a large archdiocesan parish with a popular parochial school.

Throughout the course of his ordained career, a steady flow of reports of sexual abuse made their way to Capuchin authorities concerning Father Leifeld. Neither civil authorities, nor parents or parishioners were ever notified of any of the reported incidents.

The earliest known report came as early as 1966 when a student told two senior Capuchin staff at the seminary that Father Leifeld had sexually assaulted him on several occasions. No action appears to have been taken.

The priest was also the school's director of guidance and one of its most popular spiritual directors. All students were required to meet regularly with a Capuchin for private spiritual instruction. These provided routine opportunities for Father Leifeld and other Capuchin offenders to sexually abuse students.

Ready confessions, career advancement

Until civil cases were filed in the 1990's, Father Leifeld, when caught, appears to have readily confessed to his superiors that he was sexually abusing the particular student who was reporting him.

Father Leifeld's admissions of repeated crimes of sexual abuse had no adverse effect on his career advancement. The priest remained in his various posts at the school with little or no supervision and received steady promotion until, in the Spring of 1976, he was put in charge of the school.

Leifeld would explain to his superiors that his sexual behavior with students was the result of the stress of his difficult job; sometimes he believed loneliness was a factor. Capuchin superiors

would engage the priest in prayer and spiritual counseling. They urged him to fraternize more closely with his fellow Capuchins at the seminary, even if he felt distant and at times unappreciated by them for all his hard work.

“Moral problems”

After years of reports, in 1982 Father Leifeld’s provincial superior, Father Ron Smith, quietly transferred the priest from the seminary after a secret provincial investigation found that he was sexually abusing students.

Smith recalled in a 1994 deposition that Leifeld was removed at the time for “moral problems.”

Although concerned about the priest’s sexual activities with students, Smith worked hard to accommodate Leifeld’s transfer request for a “one man parish” where he could live alone and unsupervised with his elderly father.

For example, Smith wrote the Archdiocese of Detroit in June 1983 asking if Father Leifeld, “a priest in good standing with us,” could be placed in a Detroit parish. “He is looking for a one priest parish in which he would not be burdening anyone else by having his father, who is 81, living in the house with him.”

Father Leifeld finally settled on a position at Sacred Heart in Franklin. His tenure there began in the recruitment office after which he soon found himself promoted to vice-rector, even though he lacked the typically required doctorate degree for such a position.

Father Leifeld was living alone in an apartment in Wauwatosa when in early December 1992 the Capuchin Provincial told him that the Milwaukee Journal was likely to report his sexual activity with students at the seminary.

The priest pleaded with the provincial not to remove him from his job at Sacred Heart. The Sacred Heart rector, Father Clifford, had been removed the previous month for sexual misconduct as well.

What would happen to school morale if he, Leifeld, would also have to leave?

But Archbishop Weakland, under criticism for his role in allowing sexually abusive priests to remain in ministry, exercised his authority over the religious order by directing the Capuchins to remove the priest from his post and requiring him to leave the Milwaukee Archdiocese.

A year later Archbishop Weakland would grant his secret return.

Nearly three decades of abuse

For over two decades students and alumni of St. Lawrence Seminary were reporting to Capuchin school or provincial authorities that Father Leifeld was or had been sexually molesting them.

The sexual abuse would occur on the floor of the priest's office, in his private bedroom, in the movie projector booth, in his car. The abuse would happen on camping trips or during vacation and summer breaks when he would visit student's homes. He would assault students while conducting confession, spiritual direction and counseling sessions. When disciplining some students for breaking school rules, he would sexually assault them. He did so, for nearly three decades, in his role as history teacher, dean of students, movie booth supervisor, Boy Scout leader and eventually rector.

Testimony by former students indicates that Father Leifeld would frequently offer the youngsters cigarettes and alcohol before he would sexually assault them.

The priest routinely plied one young victim with alcohol before each assault during the 1980-81 school year. The next school year the priest announced at a faculty meeting that the youth was bringing alcohol to campus and had a drinking problem and would be ordered to attend AA meetings in Fond du Lac.

Some students were abused for years. One victim, who later became a priest in the Archdiocese of Detroit, reported to the Capuchin provincial that the abuse happened "at least a hundred times," sometimes "two or three times a week," from 1974 to 1978.

Father Leifeld would often develop a close relationship with the parents of his victims who liked and admired him. He could be found regularly visiting student's homes during Christmas and Easter vacation or over the summer break. He would take students for trips in his car where he would engage in sexual contact. If invited to stay as an overnight guest at student's homes, the priest would use the opportunity to commit more sexual assaults. Such was the case for at least three consecutive summers with the youngster who became a Detroit priest.

One familiar tactic employed by the priest was to ask students in confession about masturbation. If a student would confess that he had masturbated, Leifeld would instruct the boy to see him in his office to "discuss his sexuality."

One Chicago student testified in a deposition that on some "20 occasions" during the 1980 school year the priest "would masturbate me and have me masturbate him and make me perform oral sex on him."

According to court records, the youth reported the abuse to a Capuchin faculty member, Father Frank Voris, whose "answer was vague, telling me that the problem is that I am not comfortable with my sexuality. He said and did nothing and nothing further was done about this to my knowledge."

13 year-olds "not believable"

In the Summer of 1974, parents of a freshman from Green Bay became concerned when their son begged them to tell Father Leifeld he was sick and couldn't see him when the priest suddenly appeared over Easter break at the family's front door. The Capuchin had arrived unannounced that morning to take the student for a trip to Milwaukee.

Records show that Father Leifeld had sexually assaulted the student “every two to three weeks” during the previous school year.

Typically the priest would reach into the child’s pants and masturbate the boy until ejaculation. Father Liefeld would then “pull out his handkerchief and clean up.” The assaults occurred in the priest’s office and in his car during an off campus trip.

The victim’s parents insisted the youngster tell them why he didn’t want to see the priest. The youngster “broke down” and told his parents about the sexual abuse. Both parents drove to the seminary that day and reported the abuse to the rector, Father Joseph O’Conner.

According to testimony by the victim’s mother, Father O’Conner told the parents: “No one will believe the word of a 13 year-old boy against a priest.” The boy never returned to St. Lawrence.

Desperate acts of resistance

According to court records, some students tried to physically resist the assaults; most were paralyzed or too afraid.

In one incident, the priest ordered a Chicago area victim to lie down on the floor where Father Leifeld proceeded to unzip the youngster’s pants and grab his genitals. The victim, a 14-year-old freshman, hit the priest. He was expelled the next week.

A Fond du Lac student, who had been instructed to perform oral sex on the priest in the movie projector booth, bit down on the priest’s penis.

The student reported the incident to a senior Capuchin staff member, Brother Kevin Hoelscher, the school’s athletic director. Unknown to the student, Brother Hoelscher was also sexually abusing students.

One former Minnesota student recalled how he was referred to Brother Hoelscher for help after he confided in another Capuchin that he had a sexual encounter with another student from his junior class. After discussing the matter in his office, Brother Hoelscher instructed the student to come into his bedroom, take off his clothes and stand in front of a mirror and masturbate.

In 1982 Brother Hoelscher was removed from the seminary and put into treatment. He left the Capuchins the following year. He is now married with a family and lives in New Holstein, a few miles from St. Lawrence.

Brother Hoelscher appears to have simply taken the report from the Fond du Lac victim back to Father Leifeld.

Armed with the report, Father Leifeld, according to the student, called him to his office and “was in a rage.” Again the priest attempted to assault the student, this time in the presence of the boy’s twin brother. The twin began screaming. A lay administrative assistant walked in and interrupted the assault.

Father Leifeld had yet to receive his official appointment as rector and apparently had not realized that there was an adjoining door to his new office that provided easy secretarial access to the room. "He always locked the doors before the assaults in his old office," recalls the victim. "He locked one door, must have not realized that the secretary's door was still unlocked. I guess even rapists make mistakes."

The secretary who happened upon that particular assault never reported the crime to the police but the Capuchin authorities were notified and the sexual abuse appears to have stopped, at least for these two youngsters. "I thought the Capuchins were taking care of him and I could push everything out of my mind and pretend none of it happened, that it was all over," testified the victim. "Believe it or not I didn't hate Father Leifeld, I just wanted him to get help."

It was a sentiment echoed by many former students.

Psychological retaliation

Other students testified that if they defied the priest he would order them into psychological testing.

Father Leifeld would call the student into his office, hold the test results in the air, and notify the youngster that he was "mentally ill" and "sick." These sessions could go on for months. Sometimes the priest would page the youth from class and begin the ritual all over. Students were never allowed to see the results of these tests. Parents were never informed they had been administered.

One former Milwaukee student being sexually abused by the priest recalls being so distraught by the harangues that he was determined to end his life. "I believed him when he told me I was mentally sick and depraved." After Leifeld left the seminary in 1982, the student requested the test result from the new rector and was told he was "normal."

Temper problems

Sometimes the Capuchin would lose his temper and physically assault students.

A former student from Appleton recalled how the priest, after writing to his father that the youngster was failing his classes, took him to the basement of the administration building one evening. "He threw me against the wall and punched me in the stomach three times. He threatened he would throw me out of school if I didn't do my homework."

As for reporting the incident: "There was no one to report this to because he was the rector at the time," recalls the former student.

A Lansing, Michigan youth told school authorities in 1978 how the rector was having sexual contact with him and had done so "at least 50 times" since the boy entered the seminary two years earlier. The student testified how, as the sexual abuse was occurring, he could hear his friends "talking as they walked down the hall that was on the other side of the bedroom."

He said he was afraid to report the abuse at first because homosexual contact between students was grounds for immediate expulsion.

Reports indicate that in 1978 Father Leifeld immediately expelled two students who were discovered having sex. The very next day he took the Lansing victim to his room and sexually abused him.

When the student told the priest he wanted the sexual contact to end, Father Leifeld pinned the student to the bed and violently began masturbating him. The student begged the priest to stop. The Capuchin persisted.

Archbishop contacted

The distraught youngster reported the sexual assault in confession to Father Joseph Diermeier, the vice-rector.

The next day Father Diermeier contacted Archbishop Weakland to see if he could take the matter out of confession. He was told that he could but would need to ask the student to do so. The youngster agreed and recounted the sexual abuse to Father Diermeier and Brother Dismas Seward, the school's dean of discipline. Brother Seward testified that he and Father Diermeier talked to Father Leifeld, who admitted to the sexual contact. Seward reported the abuse to the provincial, Father Ron Smith, who also interviewed the student.

Father Leifeld agreed to seek spiritual counseling with a Capuchin. Father Deirmeier was appointed rector of the school after Leifeld's departure in 1982. Brother Seward remains the school's dean of discipline to this day.

Transfer delayed

Another victim reported Leifeld in 1978 to the Capuchin director of the senior class, Father Brian Braun, who confronted the priest.

Reports of fresh assaults continued into the early 1980's when the Capuchin Provincial launched a secret investigation into the priest's behavior. It was determined that a transfer was in order for the priest.

According to provincial records, however, Father Leifeld needed to remain at the school for at least another year while his designated replacement, Father James Buser, could complete the graduate work necessary for state certification.

Court records show that Father Leifeld continued to sexually abuse students during this time period.

“Complicating the work of the seminary”

In February of 1981 Father Leifeld's provincial superior, Father Ron Smith, on concluding his investigation of the Capuchin, wrote to the priest that he was "satisfied that there have been no more behaviors or activities such as I brought to your attention in December." Father Smith, before his election as Capuchin Provincial, was a long time administrative colleague of Father Leifeld's at the seminary.

Provincial Smith goes on to say to Father Leifeld, however, that:

In the course of doing my study I was unhappy to find some generalizations due, in part, to your activities; these generalizations were based upon your actions, and being the Rector, have complicated the work of the Seminary staff and faculty. In other words, some former students have concluded that a large percentage of the Capuchins in our Province engage in certain activities, which actions are condoned or allowed by the Religious Supervisors.

Father Smith writes that he does not know how many students or former students "feel this way" but there are "some significant ones, who are still interested in the Order, but who are wary."

They are confused and somewhat skeptical. It seems as though our support of you as Rector of the seminary creates the impression that we also support all your activities! This impression disturbs me very much! And it is an ongoing cause of concern to me personally, and to the [provincial] council.

Grateful for "attention to individual students"

In May of 1982, in a formal letter of transfer, Father Smith thanks Father Leifeld on behalf of the Capuchins for "the many years of service at St. Lawrence." The provincial praises the priest for his tireless performance as "rector, dean of students, director of counseling and guidance, and teacher."

"You gave much attention to individual students and spent many hours advising them."

Father Smith apologized for any "difficulties" he may have created for the priest by his "own lack of communication."

It was time to move on. "If there are things in the past," writes the provincial, "that are burdensome, I hope that by God's grace and the support of others, you will let the burdens of the past remain in the past and look forward to an enjoyable and relaxing sabbatical and future."

Prognosis "not bright"

But "things" would not remain "in the past" for Father Leifeld or the Capuchins.

Provincial records show that reports concerning the priest continued to find their way to provincial headquarters in Detroit.

In 1989, after one former student threatened the Capuchins with legal action if Father Leifeld was not removed from ministry, the new provincial, Father Ken Reinhart, ordered the priest to submit to a psychological evaluation.

In his evaluation Father Leifeld admitted to sexually molesting “maybe” half a dozen boys at the seminary, mostly between the ages of 13 and 15. He told the evaluation team that “all the boys freely and willingly participated in these sexual experiences.”

The Capuchin also told evaluators that since leaving St. Lawrence he had been involved sexually with two adult females he was counseling for marital problems.

The priest could not explain his behavior and saw no pattern to his sexual activity. Although Father Leifeld insisted that he stopped sexually abusing youngsters 15 years earlier, provincial records show assaults as recent as six years before. Even so, writes the evaluation team, “It is perplexing to think that a man could molest children for a span of 15 years and then stop and not have done any molesting for the past 12 years.”

Perhaps that is why the psychiatrist on the team concluded that Father Leifeld was a “very poor historian regarding his sexual activities with teenage boys.” The report repeatedly indicates that the priest’s memories seem “quite blurred as to his specific actions” with youngsters.

Regret or contrition was not in evidence. “The examiner was...quite impressed by the distinct lack of remorse or guilt admitted to by Father Leifeld.”

The report concludes that the priest’s “defensiveness and resistance” do not make him a good candidate for treatment. “The research does not paint a particularly bright prognosis for such an individual.”

There is some reason to believe that impulsive sexual activity could occur again if Father Leifeld does not learn to deal with his sexual impulses differently. Unfortunately, Father Leifeld might be resistive to such a recommendation because his usual way of dealing with such problems is to simply deny their existence.

“No hard feelings”

The 1989 report also includes a “spiritual evaluation” conducted by the former provincial, Father Ron Smith.

Father Smith’s remarks are short. He concludes that Father Leifeld “appears peaceful and content” but “lonely.” He respects the Capuchin’s desire to “put things in the past.” As for recommendations about what the priest should do next: He should “seek out” a spiritual director, “make efforts” to spend more time with friars, and continue his “good friendships” with various families.

Then current Provincial, Father Reinhart, in a May 1989 letter to Father Liefeld, endorsed Father Smith's recommendations. He suggested too that he find a mental health counselor, a spiritual director and "devise ways to get closer to the Capuchin community." He would be allowed to stay at his job at Sacred Heart and live alone. He continued his pastoral ministry at St. Robert's with families.

Father Reinhart requested that the priest supply the names of the "individuals referred to" during the evaluation. He regretted any "hard feelings" the "whole uncomfortable process may have caused between the two of us."

No "network of individuals"

In another letter from Father Reinhart to Father Leifeld during this time, the provincial is decidedly upbeat.

He reports that the Capuchin attorney, Bob Bichler, was "very pleased and impressed" with his recent meeting with Father Leifeld. The priest had supplied the names he was requesting.

"I, like you," writes Reinhart, "wish there was some way we could put all of this behind us and go on with our lives. It is regrettable that one has to be haunted with mistakes of the past. At the same time, you recognize, as I do, that it is not the spirit of our society [to do so]."

On the legal front, the provincial confides that:

There have been no real further developments since I spoke to you in relation to any individuals. I think we have a better picture of the total situation at this time and it seems Bob [Bichler] is more confident...It seems to me there is probably not much of a network out there between individuals and to deal with the present situation with a certain firmness and strong limitations would be to our advantage in the long run.

"Justified mistrust"

The next year, 1990, provincial records indicate that the Capuchins are upset with Father Leifeld over persistent "rumors" that he is in possession of a private trust fund set up for his father. "All such funds must be handed over to the order," writes Reinhart, "as required by his vow of poverty."

Capuchins, like all religious order priests, brothers and nuns, are forbidden to own any private property.

The trust, according to the priest's superior, is a "direct violation of your vows." Not only had Father Leifeld violated his vows by not turning in information about the trust, he had also done so by refusing to sign a legal last will and testament.

Maybe that is why, according to Father Reinhart, “yours is one of the highest personal budgets in the province.”

The withholding of information, according to Reinhart, “verifies at least to some degree my reason for distrust and suspicion in you.”

The provincial is incredulous: “I have gone out of my way and expended much time and energy and the province expended a significant amount of finances in attempting to resolve past situations and to protect your good name.”

Still unresolved

In July of 1991, the provincial writes to Father Leifeld again. The issue of the trust fund is “still not resolved” and “another report of abuse had reached” Detroit. “A recent legal advisor also commented about the necessity for friars who are in your type of situation to be living in a community environment,” writes Reinhart.

Still, Father Leifeld was permitted to live alone and unsupervised.

A year later, the provincial informs Father Leifeld that he has talked to “at least nine former students” sexually abused by the Capuchin. The provincial lawyers have the names of “five or six” more. Two victims, he tells the priest, have been reimbursed approximately \$3,000.00 each for counseling costs.

Father Leifeld, according to the provincial, followed through on only one of the recommendations from his 1988 psychological evaluation and occasionally visited a Capuchin for spiritual direction.

“Articles against us”

In January 1993, Reinhart writes to Father Leifeld that the “Milwaukee Journal...along with other vicious media...is still investigating matters and plans to do more articles against us.”

He promises to pray for the priest. He asks for Father Leifeld to in return: “Pray for us as a province as we, too, experience a trauma as a group and as individuals.” The ordeal of being subject to criminal, civil and media scrutiny has brought the two Capuchins, sometimes at odds, closer together: “I respect you as a brother.”

There was still, however, the matter of the trust. “Expenses are being incurred for attorneys and public relations firms for pending lawsuits, including many that are being prepared against you because of your actions.” The trust must be turned over. “I know this sounds crass and cold at this time but it is a harsh reality that we now face.”

Helpful witness

During an October of 1994 deposition, Father Leifeld admits to abusing youngsters at St. Lawrence Seminary. When pressed, he confessed that his actions may have caused “spiritual damage” to his young victims but is quite certain that he caused no psychological or emotional harm.

He warmly recalls his days at the seminary but has difficulty remembering the names of students he assaulted or dates of those assaults.

About half way through the testimony, getting lost in a tangle of names, the priest offers a helpful suggestion. Identifying the victim from his state of origin would make identification easier: “Let’s call that one ‘Michigan one’ and the other one ‘Michigan two.’”

Welcomed back to Milwaukee by Archbishop

Knowing that Father Leifeld’s sexual behavior was about to become public in December 1992, Archbishop Weakland exercised his authority and ordered the Capuchins to remove the priest from his post at Sacred Heart. The Capuchins placed him in a church operated facility for sex offender priests in New Mexico.

By the Spring of 1993, a new provincial, Father Anthony Scannell, replaced Father Reinhart. Father Scannell made a public promise that the priest would never return to Milwaukee. Father Scannell had spent most of his Capuchin career in public relations for dioceses in California but returned to the Midwest when elected to the Detroit based position.

By this time, Archbishop Weakland, at the request of a new Capuchin Provincial, was ready to grant Father Leifeld’s return and permit him to live in an apartment in Milwaukee across the street from an elementary school.

In a letter from Weakland to Father Scannell, the archbishop writes:

Just a note to put in writing what I am sure Bishop Sklba said to you personally on the phone. I have no problem with Gale Leifeld’s living here in Milwaukee with Father Alex Luzzi. I hope that will work out well for him.

Unfortunately, Father Leifeld would not be able to perform public ministry at this time.

I think that this is most important, because any kind of public appearance would mean the whole story would be resurrected again in the press.

The Milwaukee Archbishop closes his letter by mentioning that he “had a delightful visit at Calvary a couple of weeks ago and found the spirit there quite good.”

In an October 1993 letter to Father Leifeld and his new elderly Capuchin housemate, the provincial writes that Father Liefeld was “going to have to notify [his housemate] whenever he was leaving the house and where he was going.”

This is regrettable, declares the new provincial: "I always hesitate to do something like this for adults but...it is the only way I can allow Gale to live in quarters that, although they are not really private, are not strictly speaking one of our community residences."

Reconciled with God

Weakland's fears materialized, however, after a Milwaukee television station obtained and aired portions of Leifeld's deposition which had been videotaped.

Graphic testimony by the priest appeared that evening on televisions across the area. Father Leifeld could be seen leaning back in his chair, arms stretched comfortably over his head, trading barbs with the plaintiff's attorney, all the while confessing to sexually assaulting youngsters.

News reporters attempted to interview the priest at his new private residence but the Capuchins had moved him once again.

Father Leifeld was then placed in a Capuchin monastery outside of Wausau and found himself living in a community with other friars, something he had successfully resisted for well over a decade. He died in the early Spring of 1995. In a private service at St. Robert's attended mostly by Capuchins, the homilist assured his fellow Franciscans that, "despite the stories," the priest had died "at peace and fully reconciled with God."

As for his victims, all the civil cases and any hope for justice against Father Leifeld and the Capuchins were dropped a few months later when the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled, by a margin of one, in favor of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee that the first amendment barred claims against the church for such actions as negligent supervision.

"Gentle Giant"

The December, 1992 Milwaukee Journal investigation also named Father James Buser, another Capuchin on faculty at the seminary, as the subject of numerous accounts of sexual abuse and assault of minors.

Father Buser was a Port Washington native who joined the Capuchins in 1963. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1971. Outside of a year of study in Germany, Buser spent his entire career teaching and training youngsters to prepare to enter religious life and the priesthood at St. Lawrence.

He was appointed the seminary's vice-rector and was designated to replace Father Leifeld as rector.

Father Buser was always Father Leifeld's top choice to replace him and he urged provincial authorities to agree. Father Leifeld's deposition testimony praises his Capuchin colleague for his intelligence, commitment to religious life and his capacity to handle stress well. Father Buser first needed to complete a year of administrative study to obtain the necessary credentials to run the school.

Father Buser died unexpectedly before Christmas of 1981. The funeral service packed the seminary church. Mourners filled the pews and were pouring out of the chapel and into the vestibule. At 6'4", the priest had towered over most students and was a physically strong man. Because he never shaved, following the traditional rule of the order, a vast beard flowed over his chest.

The Capuchin eulogist at the funeral was Father Buser's close friend and seminary official, Father Charles Robinson. Father Robinson struggled to comprehend the seeming senselessness of the unexpected loss, not only to current and past students of the seminary, but to all the future youngsters whose "life would never be touched and transformed by the 'gentle giant' of St Lawrence."

Abuse reported to rector

Court records, depositions and provincial documents show that Father Buser had repeatedly raped, sodomized and sexually molested students at the seminary right up until the time of his death. Most of the priest's victims came from the freshman class. Before his appointment as vice rector, Father Buser, like Father Hahn, was the freshman class director and dorm supervisor.

These crimes were brought repeatedly to the attention of Capuchin authorities at the school. Either no action was taken or reporting students were punished or mysteriously expelled from school soon after their reports were made.

The recipient of many of these reports was Father Gale Leifeld, the school's chief administrator. Capuchin faculty members other than Father Leifeld were also receiving information about Father Buser sexually assaulting students.

Teaching students about ambition

In the Fall of 1971, one new freshman from the Milwaukee area was performing poorly in mathematics and ordered into tutoring with Father Buser.

According to the former student's deposition, Father Buser would explain certain math problems and administer a test at the end of the tutoring session. When the youngster didn't get all the answers correct, the priest would "start yelling at me, calling me 'stupid and lazy,' just berating me."

He then ordered the student, as punishment, to bend over the desk and drop his pants so he could be "taught some ambition" and began hitting the youngster's buttocks. According to the victim:

He had me pinned on the desk. I tried to get away from him and he was hitting me so hard that, you know that all I wanted to do was escape. I tried moving left and right, you know, trying to get away from him forcing me down on the desk and he grabbed my genitals, and squeezed to the point where I started collapsing on the floor.

The priest, looking down at the youngster on the floor, continued his discourse on ambition. “He said he wasn’t going to waste his time with me if I couldn’t be taught some ambition. He told me he was going to give me the drive I needed to be a good student...the discipline.”

Father Buser approached the youngster a few days later and arranged for another “tutoring” session.

The student was instructed in math problems and administered a test. After correcting the results, the priest berated the youth again: “He told me he was going to make it where I would want to learn.” Again the student was instructed to bend over the desk and drop his pants. The priest began hitting the student.

When the youngster tried to resist the priest, according to the victim, he

... grabbed me by the genitals and—and squeezed, and I believe I passed out from the pain, and the next thing I could remember was he had me pinned on—on the desk, and he was sodomizing me...I was—I tried to yell and scream. He took his hand over my mouth. I kept on turning my face and trying just to yell out for help, and he shoved his hand in my mouth, and—started gagging me, and I tried to bite him, the deeper he’d shove his hand down my throat. Basically, I think it got to a point where—where I just tried to stop resisting him...when it was all over I crawled underneath the desk and waited there for quite some time. I curled up underneath this desk and I really don’t know how—how much time passed. I remember he left the room.

The student was bleeding from the rectum after the assault.

Faculty report

The following weeks the victim tried to avoid the priest but would see him “all over campus,” officiating at the daily school mass and conducting his other duties as class supervisor and faculty member. On two occasions, Father Buser tried to grab the youngster. During the second incident, which occurred outside the cafeteria, the student tossed his books at the priest, ran off the campus and hid in the woods below the hill. When he returned hours later the books were on his dorm bed.

The victim began skipping classes, hiding out in dorm, and not attending mandatory prayers and other assignments.

The student’s class counselor, Father John Zickert, called the boy into his office and ordered the student to tell him what was happening. The student reported the sexual abuse “in so many words...I didn’t know the words, ‘sexual molestation’ or anything like that but he understood what I was saying.”

The priest, who appears to have been earlier approached by Father Buser about the youngster, told the student: “Get the hell out of my office.”

The harassment by Buser did end after that. Fr. Zickert, however, never spoke to the student again, would not acknowledge the youngster when passing in the hallways, and removed him from work assignments, some of which he needed in order to pay tuition. “It was like I became a complete outcast.”

The student’s parents were informed at the semester break that the family could no longer afford to have the boy attend the seminary.

More reports to the rector

According to the December 1992 Journal story, in the Fall of 1974, two students from Fond du Lac reported to Father Leifeld and another Capuchin administrator that Buser had exposed himself to them in his dormitory office. No action appears to have been taken.

One of the youngsters had been ordered by Father Buser to attend spiritual direction sessions in the priest’s dorm office. The office, which was located in a hallway between the two large dorms, contained a private bedroom. The Capuchin had replaced Father Zickert as the director of the freshman class and was responsible for dorm discipline. He slept overnight in the dorm’s office bedroom.

The student reported that Father Buser would begin his spiritual guidance sessions by asking how the youngster was “progressing” through puberty. He would then order the boy to pull down his pants so the priest could “examine” the boy’s genitals. “Then he began to rub my penis and masturbate me.”

A West Bend student recalls in court testimony how in the early Winter of 1976 Father Buser befriended him during a spiritual counseling session in the priest’s office.

After spending most of the first session discussing the Bible, the priesthood and the boy’s family, Father Buser concluded the session by asking how the youngster was dealing with puberty and said he needed to examine the boy’s penis to see if “everything was going along O.K.”

“He told me to remove my pants to see my privates and touched me, touched my penis, and basically handled it like a doctor, like I was going in for a physical.”

A few nights later, during the next session, Father Buser asked again to “check” on the youngster’s “progress.” “While continuing to talk of other things, he masturbated me, like nothing unusual was happening and I ejaculated.”

Suicide attempt

The youngster began avoiding the priest but Father Buser called the student to his office two weeks later. Again he instructed the student to remove his pants. This time the youngster froze and would not comply; the priest began pulling the pants down himself.

The student pushed the priest away and fled the dorm and made his way into the infirmary where he stole “some kind of pills” and attempted to kill himself. The Capuchin nurse found him and pumped his stomach.

Buser brought the boy back to the dorm and ordered him never to tell anyone about the sexual contact or there “would be trouble.”

It was the first of three such suicide attempts by the youngster over the next several years.

Attempts at suicide were not uncommon among students being abused by Capuchins. Success often came later in life. Another West Bend student abused at the seminary fatally shot himself on Christmas Eve, 2001.

Kneeling out

After the first suicide attempt, the West Bend freshman victim began having disciplinary problems in school.

According to court records, Father Buser routinely punished students with the common seminary disciplinary practice of “kneeling out” on the stone stairway behind the dorm prefect’s office. Sometimes the priest would increase the punishment by requiring the victim to hold an encyclopedia in each outstretched hand. The most punitive measure would be to place a broomstick under the knees of the youngster.

Once Father Buser discovered the West Bend victim and two other freshmen trying to plug the bathroom sinks in the dorm, hoping to cause an overflow. The priest ordered the victim to kneel out in his office and put broomsticks under his knees. The priest said that if he put his mouth on the priest’s penis he would not force him to kneel any longer; if he didn’t he would “kneel for a month.” The student would not. He kept kneeling.

The victim and “three or four other students” reported the sexual abuse to Father Liefeld, the rector. Father Liefeld told them he would “take care of it.”

Afterwards, the disciplinary measures by Buser increased. For the “whole second semester,” according to testimony, the victim could be found “kneeling out” and scrubbing floors. The priest would also confiscate the student’s personal items, such as snacks and deserts sent from home.

The student did not return to St. Lawrence for his sophomore year.

Not “seminary material”

A Chicago area student's sexual assaults by Father Buser began in the Fall of 1977. The last incident occurred at the end of his sophomore year in 1978. Like the previous victim, the abuse was reported to Father Leifeld.

Father Liefeld was appointed the youngster's spiritual director.

After the assault, where the youth was forced to perform oral sex on Father Buser, the victim reported the sexual abuse. Father Liefeld began massaging the boy, a gesture he described in court deposition as a "common means of comforting students seeking his guidance." The rector warned the student that if the sexual activity was discovered he could "find himself in trouble" and likely be told to "leave the seminary."

Father Buser continued to assault the youngster for the rest of his freshman year. Sometimes the victim would wake up in the middle of the night and find the priest "would be fondling me or putting his finger in my anus."

The student continued to report the abuse to Father Liefeld in spiritual direction. Father Leifeld's response was to massage and rub the student's back as he reached into his pants. The youngster resisted. The priest told the student that if it continued to resist, the Capuchins would take "action against you to kick you out and tell your family."

Eventually Father Leifeld told the student that he would not be asked to return to the school: "You're not seminary material, not serious enough to become a priest," he was told.

Yet another student who was being abused by Buser in 1978 reported the assaults to a faculty member, Brother Ben Johnson, in spiritual counseling. Johnson told the student he needed to talk to the Capuchin dean of discipline, Brother Dismas Seward.

Records show that Brother Seward had received reports of abuse for several years. Again, no action was taken against Father Buser.

Next of kin

Father Leifeld testified in deposition that he was "surprised" to hear about Father Buser's behavior. He denied any reports of sexual abuse coming to him as rector about any Capuchin.

"Buser," said Father Leifeld, "wasn't a pedophile."

"He's not that kind of man."

When asked by an alumnus in the Summer of 2003 if he was aware of the sexual abuse taking place at the seminary, Brother Seward, the dean of discipline, replied that he was.

"Why," asked the former student, "didn't you report it?"

"I did, to my superiors."

The former student, startled, persisted: “Why didn’t you report it to the authorities so it would stop?”

The Capuchin’s answer was laconic: “I had to go to the hospital a few months ago. Do you know what I have to write on the form for next of kin? The provincial.”

Capuchin investigation

With the mounting publicity in 1993, the Capuchins hired a Milwaukee law firm to conduct a confidential investigation concerning the stories which concluded in May 1993 that at least nine friars were involved in sexual acts of misconduct with students from 1968 to 1992. Although the Capuchins promised counseling costs for those who participated in the investigation, records show that Capuchin attorneys “reserved the right” to determine “cost and length of treatment.”

In the meantime, former students of the seminary would form their own self-help organization for victims and press for reform. The victim’s group turned over to the investigators the names of 20 friars who had committed acts of sexual abuse.

Many victims in contact with the group declined to participate in the investigation because they feared it was not independent.

The former students’ efforts didn’t sit well with one of the Capuchin’s attorneys, Gerald Boyle. At a press conference that May, Boyle threatened a defamation suit against the students and released a statement that they had better “zip it up.” No motions were ever filed.

The new Capuchin provincial, Anthony Scannell, however, appeared contrite. He revised the provincial sexual abuse policy, created a review panel to include lay people, and vowed to meet with the students.

The meeting never occurred.

Court records show that the review panel appears to have met once by 1995. The order’s legal team conducted the meeting. The one mental health expert on the panel resigned after the first meeting when the group was told by the lawyers that they would probably would meet “rarely, if ever, and only at the provincial’s request.”

Racketeering charges

A steady stream of public revelations of abuse and lawsuits by former students and others continued to shadow the Capuchins, even after their report was issued, the abuse policy revised, and the order had promised to meet with victims.

In March of 1994, a state racketeering suit was filed against the Capuchin Province and the leaders of the seminary for creating “a decades-long environment that encouraged the sexual abuse of children.”

The charges were filed as an amendment to the 1993 suit of a former seminary student from Brookfield who was assaulted by a friar at the school from September 1985 through June 1989.

Further cases were being prepared against Capuchins not named in any public accounts, according to provincial records.

According to court records, the basis of the 1993 suit was the abuse of the Brookfield student by the athletic director who “sexually abused, harassed and stalked” the student. A youngster had previously reported to Capuchin authorities that the same friar, Brother Thomas Gardipee, had sexually abused him over a three-year period, from 1980-1983, beginning in eighth grade.

The racketeering claim charged that Capuchin authorities tried to silence victims of sexual abuse and employees who knew of the abuse; moved friars from one assignment to another to keep their criminal activity unknown in order to “continue the stream of financial contributions from unwitting parishioners;” tolerated sexual activity by failing to report accusations of abuse to police or parents of victims; and destroying documents regarding sexual assaults and records of treatment facilities used by both victims and church employees.

All court action against the Capuchins ended after the 1995 *Pritzloff* decision. Provincial attorneys offered \$5,000.00 to each plaintiff in exchange for an agreement with a confidentiality clause that would release the order from any liability.

Someday “the cover of Time”

In the Fall of 1980, as Fathers Jude Hahn, Gale Leifeld, James Buser and others were assaulting students at St. Lawrence and children in Mt. Calvary, one recently graduated student confided to a senior Capuchin official, Brother John Holly, that he had been sexually abused at the seminary.

The Capuchin’s response: “One day St. Lawrence will be on the cover of Time Magazine.”

The Capuchin seminary did not make the cover, but in 1993 the sexual abuse occurring there did find its way into the magazine under the title, “The Sins of St. Lawrence.”

The Time story detailed the results of the Capuchin sponsored investigation, the struggle of victims for justice, and the decades of what one observer told the magazine was an open “hunting season” on students by Capuchin sex offenders at the school.

Lessons Learned

On November 1, 2002 with the sexual abuse troubles in the church again receiving national attention, Father Guy Guraith, a media consultant and former graduate of St. Lawrence, conducted a seminar on sexual abuse and the media for the seminary’s 250 boys. The first part of the program featured film clips from famous movies with priests as heroes and defenders of justice such as “Becket,” “On the Waterfront” and “Romero.”

The second part was a presentation led by Milwaukee attorney Boyle who represented the Capuchins in civil and criminal matters on several occasions.

No victims of Capuchin sex offenders were invited on the panel. Capuchin documents were not presented.

What had the Capuchins learned from the painful history of sexual abuse at the school?

Boyle told the students that the topic “isn’t worthy of being talked about.”

But he managed to address it that evening at length. Students should not be concerned about all of the attention given to the issue: “The media has exaggerated stories about the priests because it hates Catholicism and doesn’t understand us. So they make each story more gigantic than it should be.”

There are many more doctors and lawyers than priests in jail, the Capuchin attorney assured the students. The “tiny” number of priests have “a sickness and gave into their emotions.” “They said they were sorry and have gone on to live better lives.” While “most people have much to answer for when they face God in the afterlife,” he was “confident every priest would be asked very few questions.”

The seminary’s current rector, Father Dennis Druggen, praised the attorney’s remarks as “realistic.” “We address this in the classroom, but I think the kids are real tired of it,” he said. “It’s not their experience and they don’t want us bringing it up so much that it’s in their face,” according to the Capuchin leader.

Lapsus linguae and lapsus mentis

As for Milwaukee’s retiring archbishop, clergy sexual abuse, and not the new cathedral and other achievements, would dominate his last year in office and eventually come to define his final days.

In his last Herald of Hope columns, the archbishop occasionally referred to the subject of abusive clergy that was again engulfing the American church and the Milwaukee Archdiocese.

Yes, there had been some lapses of speech (“lapsus linguae”) the archbishop explained in one column. “Someone” had “dug up” some “infelicitous” remarks about victims of clergy abuse and now they are “coming to haunt me.” They do not reflect what he really meant (“lapsus mentis”). But it seems, the archbishop laments, each time he tries to explain himself he “just gets in deeper and deeper trouble.” The man who had articulated the complex mission of the church for the modern age in such matters as economics, ecumenism and the rights of woman, who had delved into the subtleties of ancient church music, could not make himself clear on the matter of child sexual abuse. Most of these comments, the archbishop pleaded, he “doesn’t even remember.”

Undaunted, the archbishop reviewed in another column his tenure as Milwaukee's leading Catholic. He returned to a familiar theme, his relationship to Vatican authority:

Members of the Roman Curia often referred to me as a "maverick." (The word comes from Samuel A. Maverick, 1803-1870, a Texas cattleman, who refused to brand calves like the others.) The best compliment I received, then, came from a religious superior in Rome who said: "Rome does not know what do with Weakland. He is a free man." I feel I have been able to maintain my own dignity and identity throughout it all.

As for his handling of clergy sex offenders, the archbishop had made a "mistake" with one priest, Father William Effinger. If he were an abbot he would have put the priest in a monastery. As a bishop, however, he didn't have that option, at least "back then." No bishop thought of laicizing these priests; Rome "probably" wouldn't have allowed it. Anyway, it is he, the archbishop, who would have to take the matter "to his grave."

Most significant, according to the archbishop, has been his concern for the poor, especially on a global level, which "remains a strong factor in my thinking." But there has been no "groundswell in that regard among our people."

Nevertheless, going it alone when need be and living with a few regrets are the price of being a "maverick."

If the above [achievements] are being a maverick, so be it. One could be called worse things.

Conclusion

In the Republic, Plato's famous dialogue on the nature of justice, Socrates is found discussing the myth of the Ring of Gyges. The ring, according to the myth, makes its wearer invisible. What, asks Socrates, would happen if one possessed such a ring?

One would become unjust.

To break the link between visibility and invisibility, between corporeality and its effect, between human presence and the limits imposed by the presence of others, would lead one inevitably and inexorably to become a tyrant, which for the ancient Greeks was the most reprehensible and dangerous of human beings.

What is the central quality of a tyrannical character? That one can no longer grasp or, even worse, want to grasp, the singular fact which, Socrates argues, is the essence of the Good, that it is infinitely better to be the victim of an injustice than to be the cause of one.

J.R.R. Tolkien, of course, derived the inspiration for his popular trilogy from Plato's account. Less well known is the work of Simone Weil, Plato's greatest modern spiritual heir. Writing in her journal on the eve of World War II, Weil concludes that the myth is about "setting things aside." When it is somebody else committing wrong we compare the good with the evil. When it is ourselves, we set evil aside.

We set things aside without knowing we are doing so; that is precisely where the danger lies. Or, which is still worse, we set them aside by an act of the will, but by an act of the will that is furtive in relation to ourselves. Afterwards we do not any longer know that we have set anything aside. We do not want to know it, and, by dint of now wanting to know it, we reach the point of not being able to know it.

“The faculty of setting things aside,” writes Weil, “opens the door to every sort of crime.”

It is particularly dangerous when the prestige and social imperative of a group or a profession endorse the action of setting things aside. Any group is likely to exempt its own member’s behavior from the imperative of good and evil. Once firmly placed within the profession or group, the evil one commits in accomplishing the group’s goals are set aside because the group’s goals are, naturally, vital and necessary: soldiers waging war, business executives waging business, religious leaders waging religion.

What for others might be crimes are for us mistakes, errors, lapses of judgment. The connection between human cause and effect, action and consequence becomes blurred and provisional; unchecked, the line between good and evil, and our moral connection to it, disappears altogether.

That is why, concludes Weil, “We hate the people who try to make us form the connections we do not want to make.”

There is always an incentive for most of us to side with the sexual predator and not the victim, as Anna Salter observes in her new book, *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders*. The potential disruption caused by discovering one’s priest, teacher, or husband is a child molester is much greater than disbelieving or dismissing the victim, who is almost always of less social and psychological value than the predator. The sex offender, after all, usually has all the “connections.” But victims, she reminds us (and we cannot be reminded too often) are not the cause but the consequence of these terrible crimes.

And while it may not have set out to silence and shame the victims of clergy sexual abuse by what amounted to the institutional interdiction of their memory and witness, that is exactly what the church, marshalling its vast and considerable resources, accomplished. Why? Because, unknown to the victim, their testimony—almost always, incidentally, confirmed and credible--formed a connection between sexual violence and church power, a connection that church authorities simply do not want to make. It rendered visible what clergy and what church leaders were wearing: the Ring of Gyges.

After all, invisibility, in every major religious tradition, is an attribute and prerogative of the divine.

* Throughout this text "clergy" refers to ordained diocesan and religious order priests, deacons, and vowed religious order nuns and brothers. Pending Wisconsin legislation defines "clergy" as members "of a religious order, and includes brothers, ministers, monks, nuns, priests, rabbis, and sisters."

