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Former local man finds healing in speaking out about priest

By Pat Bywater Feb 12, 2008



After two sexual encounters with his parish priest in Jamestown that Kevin McParland, then a 20-year-old college sophomore, said were unwanted, he saw his life unravel. He had become a sometimes homeless drug and alcohol abuser with no hope or direction.

McParland had attempted suicide twice and nearly killed himself with an accidental drug overdose after the death of his beloved father.

That it took getting that low to shake McParland out of his downward spiral is no surprise to David Clohessy, director of the Chicago-based Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests.

Crippling and potentially deadly drug abuse, self-doubt and self-destructive behavior are common among those who have been abused by priests, he said.

“A huge percentage of victims try to cope with the pain by self-medicating,” he said. “It usually takes victims years or decades to understand the hurt is severe and ongoing.”

Clohessy should know. He, too, claims to have been victimized by his family’s parish priest. Through SNAP, which was founded in 1988 by a female social worker who was victimized by a priest, Clohessy comes in daily contact with victims across the United States. He has been involved with the organization since 1990.

While every instance of sexual impropriety by a priest is a serious matter, Clohessy believes that such instances within the Catholic Church are even more disabling to victims due to the tenets of the faith.

“Catholic children are trained from birth to trust, respect and revere priests and also that they are God’s representative on Earth,” he said. “These are men who can take away our sins and get us into heaven. They are imbued with almost superhuman powers.”

This “power imbalance,” as Clohessy calls it, combined with Catholic priests’ vow of celibacy, often renders victims helpless when a sexual advance occurs, he said. In many cases, victims do little or nothing to resist, according to Clohessy, even in situations like McParland’s when they have more than one sexual encounter with the same priest.

In addition, Clohessy believes most abuser priests pick their victims carefully. “These men are unbelievably cunning, shrewd and manipulative,” he said. “They know how to pick people who have a hard time saying no and who won’t report it.”

Often, according to Clohessy, that means finding a victim who is vulnerable, as McParland was over his father’s failing health.

The fact that McParland went back to the man he felt was his abuser for answers is another strand Clohessy finds running through many cases of sexual abuse by a priest. He likens it to a battered spouse who goes back to her or his abuser again and again.

If the downward spiral victim’s experience does not lead to their death, the victim is likely to hit a pivotpoint in their life that causes them to seek help. For some, like McParland, it takes getting as low as you can — a near-death incident, for example. For others it can be a major change, like getting married or divorced or having a child.

Since the Catholic Church’s priest abuse scandal broke into national consciousness around 2000, it has become easier for victims to find help and know that they are not alone.

“Now, thankfully, many victims are now more skeptical of church hierarchy, more willing to find independent help,” Clohessy said. “It is better than it was pre-2000, but is still an issue.”

Even after counseling, many victims find that the impact of the abuse “is never erased and the harm is never undone,” said Clohessy. “The unacknowledged wound never heals.”

In addition, “almost every one says they want to make sure the priest is not doing it to anyone else.”

In both respects, McParland's case is representative of countless others.

Road to recovery

Thanks to therapy that McParland said led to diagnoses of post-traumatic stress syndrome and panic attacks, he was getting back on his feet by 1991. He was sober, had found new friends and a new job. He believed continuing therapy was the key to recovery, he was looking for some sense of justice, and he had an idea of where these issues would take him. First, however, he needed the backing of his family.

McParland was relieved with his family's supportive, sympathetic reaction when he finally revealed to them what had happened to him 11 years ago and how it had changed his life. For a long time they had a feeling that something was at issue with Father Stephen E. Jeselnick, who served their parish for only about a year. Jeselnick also served other parishes in the Erie Diocese, including some time in Meadville.

With his family behind him, McParland was determined to approach the Erie Diocese. He knew there would never be a criminal case against Jeselnick — he learned that the statute of limitations had expired, so it was too late to seek prosecution. However, he did hope that the diocese would assist him in his recovery and he did expect church officials would act to ensure others were not at risk of abuse.

During his 1991 meeting with Bishop Donald Trautman, McParland claims he was offered pastoral counseling, which meant he would be counseled by a priest. A letter provided by McParland, sent to him by e-mail from Trautman, refers to both psychological counseling and pastoral care. Although Trautman's letter indicates McParland received diocese-provided counseling from 1991 to 2007, McParland claims that is not the case.

McParland claims he declined the 1991 offer because he did not want counseling from a priest. He wanted the diocese to pay for counseling from an independent, secular source.

According to McParland, the Erie Diocese's stance changed in 1996 when he, in the wake of reports of abuser priests in the Los Angeles Diocese, contacted officials there who served as a

liaison with Erie.

They helped forge an agreement that led to the Erie Diocese paying for McParland's counseling, he said.

According to McParland, the diocese paid for his counseling from 1996 to 1999 and from 2002 to 2007. Throughout the process he had to wrangle with the diocese over how much treatment he should receive, he claims.

In 2002, McParland claims to have heard from Erie Diocese sources that Jeselnick was interested in forging a settlement in the case.

In 2005, that led to an agreement between McParland and Jeselnick. McParland received a payment of \$25,000. In exchange, McParland released Jeselnick and the Erie and Los Angeles dioceses from all claims, agreed to never contact Jeselnick, Trautman and a number of church officials and agreed to never discuss the incidents with Jeselnick with anyone except mental health and medical officials.

In a cover letter accompanying the agreement, Jeselnick's attorney, Brian Balenson, wrote: "Let me pass on some direct thoughts from my client. He truly believes his meetings with you were free will and he now recognizes that, although you were both young adults, you did not view the meetings the same way as he did. He sincerely regrets any misconceptions and for the consequences you may have suffered as a result."

In addition, in an interview for this story, Erie Diocese officials revealed that the diocese outlined and provided a program of pastoral assistance and counseling for Jeselnick.

It appears that Jeselnick has remained active in the ministry, currently in the Baltimore, Md., area. The Erie Diocese would not provide specific information about his assignment and the Baltimore Diocese did not have a record of his activities. Calls to phones and a message sent to an e-mail address listed in his name were not answered. A request for an interview made through his lawyer also did not get a response.

The Erie Diocese official who responded to a request for comment for this article, Monsignor Tom McSweeney, declined to discuss how much the diocese had spent on counseling for Jeselnick and McParland.

Going public

Although McParland did sign the settlement agreement with Jeselnick and it did provide funding for additional counseling, McParland was never particularly comfortable with the arrangement. A part of him did not feel right having agreed to be silent and he said that made him feel victimized again. He felt that his ability to help ensure others weren't victimized had been limited by the agreement. In addition, he was becoming increasingly frustrated with what he claims to be ongoing wrangling with the Erie Diocese about his treatment.

It was in this context that McParland heard from the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests that there was a reporter interested in doing a story on a person living in Los Angeles who had unwanted sexual encounters with a priest.

He was advised by SNAP officials that agreements like the one he signed with Jeselnick are not enforceable. He decided to talk to the reporter and a series of stories was published.

McParland found the experience therapeutic because it “lets the people know this happens — it happens more than you think” and will perhaps give other victims the strength and inspiration they need to seek help. In addition, he said the articles helped validate his experience. “I am not a freak,” he said. “I am getting my voice back. What happened was wrong, finally validated after 27 years.”

Since those articles appeared in early August 2007, McParland has appeared on a television talk show and made contact with The Meadville Tribune.

In fall 2007, McParland's agreement with the Erie Diocese to pay for his treatment unraveled when he made a request that the diocese pay for inpatient treatment.

In a letter McParland provided that was e-mailed to him from Trautman, the bishop cites the many years of assistance the diocese provided, dating back to the 1991 meeting when the bishop says the incident with Jeselnick came to his attention.

In the letter the bishop writes: “It is our opinion and the opinion of experts that the Diocese of Erie

has taken every reasonable and compassionate measure over the years to assist you regarding the very regrettable event of two adults some 27 years ago. In view of this it is not our intention to provide further assistance.”

McParland’s life is far more stable now, and he believes he is doing an important public service by speaking out and sharing the details of his case. However, he said he still does battle depression, struggles with spiritual issues and rues the loss of so many years to drug addiction and mental illness.

It is unlikely that he will ever feel whole. He said the only thing that would completely satisfy him is beyond anyone’s power — giving him his lost years back. Beyond that, he would at least like to see Jeselnick removed from the priesthood and have his mother paid back the \$100,000 McParland said she contributed to his therapy expenses. He has also joined lobbying efforts that would define priests similar to doctors and professional therapists in the eyes of the law. Such a change would open allow victims a longer period of time to seek prosecution and would expose priests to greater penalties.

While such legislation may some day come into being, the rest of the things McParland is looking for will probably never happen.

A statement provided by McSweeney in response to a call for comment on this story reiterated the stance laid out by Trautman in fall 2007 and provided some additional details. It reads, in part: “In responding to this case, Bishop Trautman sought and obtained the advice of members of the Diocesan Review Board. He also has been assisted by several mental health professionals in outlining and providing a program of pastoral assistance and counseling for both Jeselnick and McParland. The Diocese of Erie has provided extensive pastoral care and counseling for McParland for many years. The diocese believes every reasonable and compassionate measure has been applied in its response to the regrettable events of 26 years ago. At the same time the diocese is confident that the parties involved have attained meaningful progress in moving forward with their lives.”

McSweeney explained that the board reviews allegations of moral misconduct on the part of clergy. Its members advise the bishop. It includes trained professionals in the field of rendering pastoral counseling and legal advice and generally includes mix of secular and clergy members.

McSweeney also stressed that because McParland was an adult at the time of the incident with

Jeselnick, the case does not fall under the diocese's Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Adopted in 2003, it established specific guidelines for those who work with children and young adults, guidelines designed to prevent child abuse and requirements for reporting and handling alleged incidents.

PUBLISHED MONDAY

Kevin McParland experiences a life-altering event at the hands of his parish priest.

Learn more

You can learn more about the Roman Catholic Diocese of Erie at its Web site, www.eriercd.org. To learn more about the diocese's Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, type the title into the search engine on the diocese's homepage.

You can learn more about Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests at its Web site, www.snapnetwork.org.

Were you victimized by a priest?

Kevin McParland is interested in hearing from and help people who were sexually victimized by priests. You may contact him through Janet Patterson of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests at (620) 456-2330 or through SNAP Director David Clohessy at (314) 566-9790.

Full text of Diocese of Erie statement on the McParland case:

Any allegation of moral misconduct on the part of clergy is deeply disappointing and dealt with seriously and promptly by the diocese.

While it is the policy of the Diocese of Erie not to discuss personnel matters publicly, the allegation brought against Father Stephen Jeselnick by Kevin McParland received some public attention in the media and the diocese has always felt a clarification and statement is warranted.

The allegation brought against Father Jeselnick came to the attention of the diocese over 17 years ago. It concerns Kevin McParland, who at the time was an adult, and not a minor. Thus, this matter does not fall within the bishop's Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. In responding to this case, Bishop Trautman sought and obtained the advice of members of the Diocesan Review Board. He also has been assisted by several mental health professionals in outlining and providing a program of pastoral assistance and counseling for both Jeselnick and McParland. The Diocese of Erie has provided extensive pastoral care and counseling for McParland for many years. The diocese believes every reasonable and compassionate measure has been applied in its response to the regrettable events of 28 years ago. At the same time, the diocese is confident that the parties involved have attained meaningful progress in moving forward with their lives.

Full text of the letter from Erie Diocese Bishop Donald Trautman to Kevin McParland:

September 18, 2007

Mr. Kevin McParland

Dear Kevin:

I want to respond to your recent e-mails and to your present request for admission to the Renaissance Malibu program.

The matter between you and Father Jeselnick came to my attention sixteen (16) years ago. When I first learned of it, I responded immediately with the offer of psychological counseling and pastoral

care. That type of assistance continued from that time until the present. The pastoral and therapeutic care provided over the years was by competent professionals of your own choosing. In addition, at your request and with my concurrence you once attended a week-long Insight Super II Seminar. Several times when your counseling sessions were coming to an end, you requested extensions and I agreed. Again, the various counselors with whom you sought assistance were chosen by you for their degree of competence and your level of comfort. Added to this you had the availability and good counsel of our Victim Assistance Coordinator.

I briefly reviewed this history to point out that for sixteen (16) years the Diocese of Erie has approved your requests for counseling, approved the persons you chose and fully reimbursed them for their good service to you.

You refer in your e-mail to the financial settlement you entered with Father Jeselnick. That was a private matter between you and Father Jeselnick. The Diocese of Erie was in no way a part of the agreement. Both you and Father Jeselnick freely entered it with the assistance of your respective attorneys.

It is our opinion and the opinion of experts that the Diocese of Erie has taken every reasonable and compassionate measure over the years to assist you regarding the very regrettable event of two adults some 27 years ago. In view of this it is not our intention to provide further assistance.

Through e-mail and/or letter you have insisted that neither the Diocese nor our Victim Assistance Coordinator have any further direct contact with you. Our delay in responding in this instance was due largely to your request. We will honor it from this point on.

Sincerely,

Most Rev. Donald W. Trautman, STD, SSL Bishop of Erie

0 comments

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