News



by James Dearie

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In a press conference Feb. 27, a Buffalo man alleged abuse decades ago by a Buffalo Diocese priest, who then admitted to years of abusing teenage boys.

"It ruined my life," Michael F. Whalen, 52, said at the press conference, in footage and audio broadcast by local television station WIVB, "ruined my first marriage. ... I don't have a relationship with my daughter from my first marriage; the drugs, the alcohol just consumed me."

Whalen claims that the single incident of abuse occurred on a ski trip with Fr. Norbert Orsolits, then a priest at St. John Vianney Roman Catholic Church in the Orchard Park neighborhood of Buffalo, and two other boys when he was about 14. "He served us alcohol and he smoked marijuana with us in the cabin," Whalen said. "He tried to be 'that cool priest.' "

The New York statute of limitations on child sexual abuse apparently prevents any legal action in the nearly 40-year-old case.

When confronted by The Buffalo News about the incident, Orsolits, 78, said he could not remember Whalen specifically, but he did not deny the allegation, saying that he had abused "probably dozens" of boys during his ecclesial career.

Orsolits told the newspaper that he had been sent to the Southdown Institution for treatment and had not abused anyone since. He also said that his 2003 "retirement" was forced on him by the Buffalo Diocese, as part of an effort to comply with a new "zero tolerance" policy on abusers in the priesthood. He is no longer permitted to publicly function as a priest.

According to a Feb. 28 article in The Buffalo News, Orsolits served in nearly a dozen parishes between his 1965 ordination and moving to work at the diocese's headquarters in 1989, never remaining at one parish for more than a few years. He became a chaplain at Buffalo General Hospital in 1990, where he worked until his removal in 2003.

Two days after Whalen's press conference, the Buffalo Diocese announced a new Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program for those abused by priests.

"Individuals who have made claims previous to March 1, 2018, can participate in this voluntary program which offers an opportunity for healing, justice and monetary settlements to individuals who have previously submitted complaints to the Diocese that they were sexually abused as a minor by clergy of the Diocese," the diocese's website says. Those who have not yet submitted a complaint are encouraged to call the diocese to discuss next steps.

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While the diocese did not go into more detail on allegations against Orsolits, Terrence M. Connors, an attorney for the diocese, did say at a press conference announcing the new program that the diocese had been made aware of abuse claims against the priest, who "was sent away and went to a facility for counseling and some form of rehabilitation to find out whether or not he was suitable for ministry. When he came back with a clean bill of health, advised that he was able to come back and serve, he did serve," according to The Buffalo News.

It is unknown when Orsolits attended treatment.

The Buffalo News also found that in the mid-1980s Orsolits served as pastor at Sacred Heart Church in Portville, New York, for five years. There he led a youth group at as well as ski trips to Vermont with dozens of children as the only adult. While no allegations of abuse have emerged from his days at Sacred Heart, those

who knew him say he still tried to be a "cool priest," introduced children to alcohol, "roughhoused" with some of the children, and clearly suffered from alcoholism.

His career as a parish priest ended in 1989 with a drunken driving charge.

After revealing the abuse at the press conference, Whalen advocated for the Child Victims Act, which is set for a vote the New York state legislature this spring. The act would extend the statute of limitations on child abuse in both civil and criminal cases and create a one-year window in which abuse victims could bring their cases if the statute of limitations has already expired.

Whalen also encouraged other survivors of abuse to come forward. "This is something that's been hidden, I guess," he said, "and it needs to be confronted."

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