Opinion
Guest Voices



Creighton Preparatory School in Omaha, Nebraska, is pictured in this 2013 photo. Jesuit Fr. Daniel Kenney, who was later removed from ministry in 2003 and laicized in 2020, worked there from 1965-1989. He was dismissed from the school in 1989. (Wikimedia Commons/Ammodramus, CC0 1.0)

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In Ryan's freshman year at Creighton Preparatory School, an all-boys Jesuit high school in Omaha, Nebraska, he was called into private confession with Fr. Daniel Kenney, beloved throughout Omaha as "the Monkey Priest." Kenney told him to lock the door and show him his penis, just so he could tell Ryan whether he was developing "adequately."

That is as much of the story as Ryan ever told his friends, but there was more. Kenney moved from grooming behaviors to stalking. Misusing his access to Ryan's class schedule, Kenney would lurk in classrooms, club meetings and student social spaces, Ryan said. Although Ryan felt it was bizarre and inappropriate, it never occurred to him to classify this as abuse.

On the last day of school, when Ryan refused to be harangued into confession again, Kenney snapped. He attempted to forcibly impose absolution on Ryan as he stood in the hallway for his classmates and other teachers to witness. Ryan was uncomfortable, but told himself that it was just a "close call," since Kenney never touched him. Decades later, Ryan is ready for his story to be shared, but asked that his last name not be used in order to protect the privacy of his family.

Two years ago our research team of one theologian, one criminologist and one historian set out to assess the impact of just one credibly accused Jesuit on the social fabric of a Catholic city like Omaha. We focused our study on Kenney, who earned the moniker "the Monkey Priest" by carrying around a monkey hand puppet he called Buford. But in focusing on just one Jesuit in one place, we learned that clergy sexual abuse is never about just one person, place or phenomenon. And the harms take many forms, with some taking years — or, as in Ryan's experience, even decades — to surface.

Knowing there were no criminal cases and no litigation, we did not approach our research with a narrow vision of "abuse" and "victimization," but sought a more comprehensive articulation of the harm that took place. To assess harm, we conducted an in-depth review of public records and archival material, and were able to interview a total of 19 people, including survivors, Creighton Prep alumni, former administrators, and Omaha community members. This methodology revealed layers upon layers of the sexual abuse crisis that have yet to be accounted for, despite the efforts made by the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, or the Dallas Charter.

Reports and response

Our research revealed that Kenney was not an isolated actor who exploited minors in distant hideaways or hidden corners of the campus. His alleged abusive actions were knowable, and known, and went unaddressed by administrators. He operated in a culture of masculinity that made boys on the margins of the affluent, athletic prep-school brotherhood deeply vulnerable to grooming and manipulation. Both Kenney and Creighton Prep allegedly operated in a culture of ecclesial defensiveness that received inquiries about historical harms as threats to be neutralized. This mantle of silence has covered the wounds that Kenney inflicted upon the students he allegedly abused.

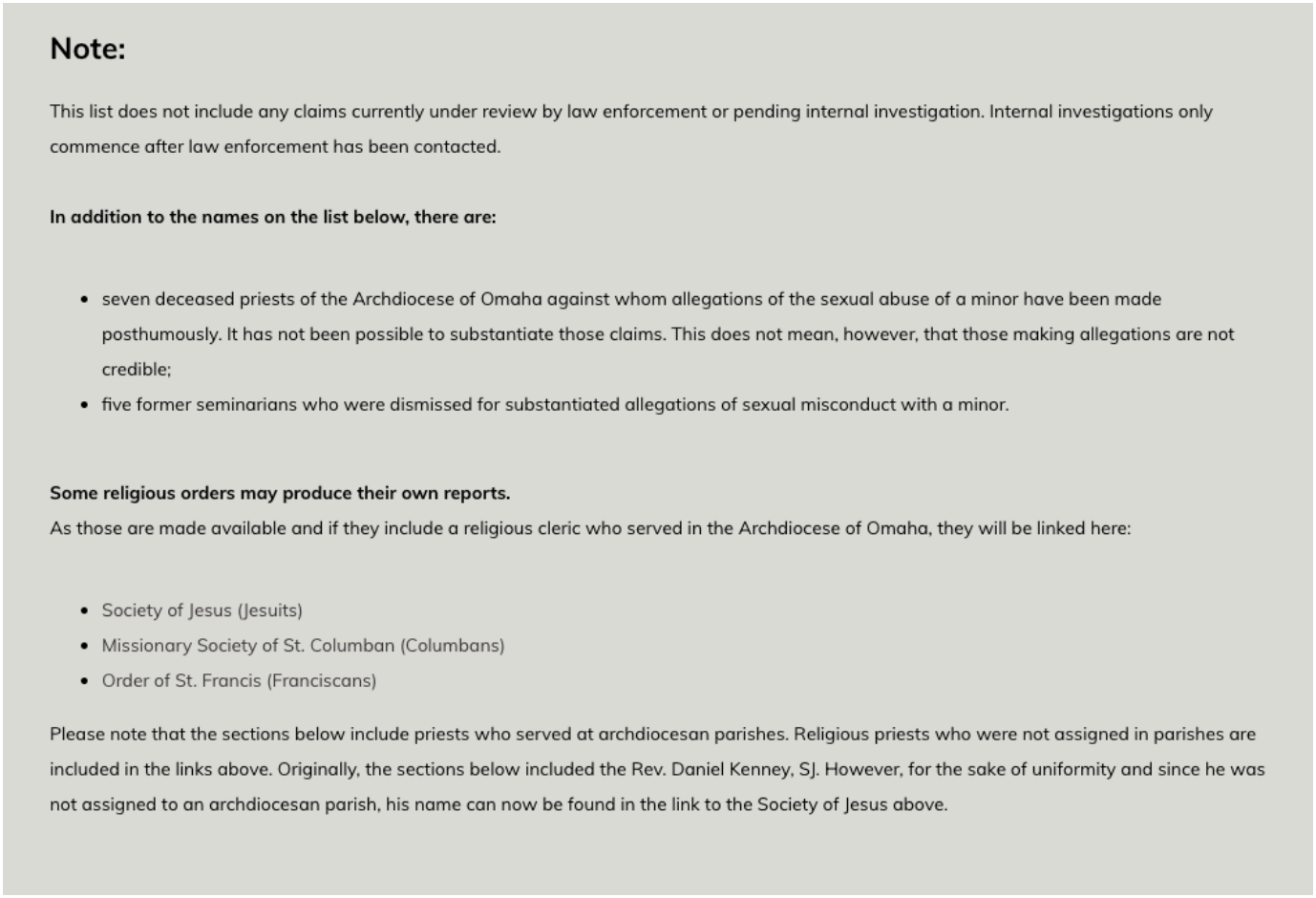
His eventual removal from ministry in 2003, which also took place under this mantle, did not bring healing. Pain still radiates throughout Omaha (and beyond), but within the frameworks of understanding available to survivors like Ryan, their pain was of no account because the damage was not clearly litigable. Many have been told, or have learned to tell themselves, that "it could have been worse" — as though there is an acceptable degree of psychological, emotional, parasexual and spiritual abuse in the world of Jesuit education.

Our goal is to acknowledge the number and type of the wounds still untended in Omaha, by elevating the stories of survivors and highlighting patterns of psychological and spiritual (though perhaps not always litigable) abuse. Litigable or not, the future of student safety depends on bringing the extent of the damage to life and the potential for healing depends on acknowledging their pain with rigorous, compassionate listening.

We hope, in turn, to equip survivors like Ryan, who have questions about how to make sense of their own "uncomfortable" experiences, with as much information as possible about the experiences of other survivors. They deserve to know that their abuse was part of a longer pattern, and they deserve to know how the Midwest Jesuits and the Archdiocese of Omaha made decisions about how to respond to allegations of abuse.

It turns out that it takes a team of experts to piece even the most basic facts together. When Kenney's name was published in 2018 on the lists of credibly accused priests for both the Archdiocese of Omaha and the Midwest Jesuits, it included eight reports of his alleged abuse of minors.

The archdiocese has since removed Daniel Kenney from the list, with the following note: "Originally, the sections below included the Rev. Daniel Kenney, SJ. However, for the sake of uniformity and since he was not assigned to an archdiocesan parish, his name can now be found in the link to the Society of Jesus above."



Note:

This list does not include any claims currently under review by law enforcement or pending internal investigation. Internal investigations only commence after law enforcement has been contacted.

In addition to the names on the list below, there are:

- seven deceased priests of the Archdiocese of Omaha against whom allegations of the sexual abuse of a minor have been made posthumously. It has not been possible to substantiate those claims. This does not mean, however, that those making allegations are not credible;
- five former seminarians who were dismissed for substantiated allegations of sexual misconduct with a minor.

Some religious orders may produce their own reports.
As those are made available and if they include a religious cleric who served in the Archdiocese of Omaha, they will be linked here:

- Society of Jesus (Jesuits)
- Missionary Society of St. Columban (Columbans)
- Order of St. Francis (Franciscans)

Please note that the sections below include priests who served at archdiocesan parishes. Religious priests who were not assigned in parishes are included in the links above. Originally, the sections below included the Rev. Daniel Kenney, SJ. However, for the sake of uniformity and since he was not assigned to an archdiocesan parish, his name can now be found in the link to the Society of Jesus above.

The "List of Substantiated Claims of Clergy Sexual Abuse of or Sexual Misconduct with a Minor" on the website of the Archdiocese of Omaha includes a note about

Daniel Kenney. (NCR screenshot/Report.archomaha.org)

Kenney was removed from his Omaha high school teaching position in 1989 (and reassigned after a stint in Milwaukee and Massachusetts to ministry at Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and, later, to Nairobi, Kenya), when a Prep parent filed a report with Nebraska's child welfare investigation department, Child Protective Services, which subsequently went missing.

Twelve more men brought allegations to Omaha World-Herald reporter Erin Grace in 2019, describing encounters similar to Ryan's, particularly the misuse of the sacrament of confession to manipulate students into exposing themselves and burdening them with the belief that they were somehow responsible. In the absence of criminal charges or civil lawsuits, Kenney was able to maintain to the newspaper that he did nothing wrong.

Officials at Creighton Prep disengaged from the matter after publishing Kenney's name, indicating to us in an email that they issued one external statement in 2018 that was sent to "families, alumni and other constituents for which they had an email address." That statement apologized and directed survivors to report incidents of abuse to the president of the high school, law enforcement and the Midwest Jesuits' victim assistance coordinator. We do not believe that this statement is publicly available. To date, the most recent public statements from the school about this alleged perpetrator (and others) simply referred individuals to the Midwest province.

This response, while in keeping with organizational due diligence, requires potential victims to be comfortable talking to someone who represents the church, or those who feel certain that they have a clear-cut legal case. This response left Ryan unable to name his abuse as abuse decades after leaving Creighton Prep.

Former Creighton Prep students who might have some questions about whether their previous experiences with Kenney were just "uncomfortable" or genuinely "abusive" will not find clarity in statements from the Midwest Jesuits or Creighton Prep administrators: No specific behavior is described or condemned.

Additionally, the number of identified victims is variable across official sources — the Nebraska attorney general's report only identifies one victim, while the Midwest Jesuits identify eight reports. This can be disorienting to survivors who are trying to discern whether they misinterpreted Kenney's behavior and/or did something wrong

to "deserve it," or whether Kenney is a serial predator who had a well-rehearsed pattern of exploiting and isolating minors in his care. In short, communication is crafted with the best interests of the organization in mind, with secondary concern for who may have been harmed by it in a variety of ways.

Related: Fordham report faults Jesuits for stressing discretion in handling abusive priests

'One of the good guys'

Our interviews with alumni revealed that Kenney is still remembered in Omaha as a highly charismatic theology teacher and compassionate, if clumsy, freshman football coach. He talked about God in approachable ways and gave special counsel to boys who didn't fit the mold of an athletic, affluent, masculine Creighton Prep student. He smoked cigarettes and translated the sacraments in ways kids could understand.

The fun-loving teacher, advocate for racial desegregation and charismatic founder of the still-operating holiday food drive did not fit the stereotype of a "dirty old priest." As another Prep alum put it, he believed that Kenney "was one of the good guys."

Sorting out the "good guys" from the "bad guys" is difficult, because Kenney did not allegedly act alone. Ryan said that when Kenney came to his study hall to take him to confession, the study hall proctor, Fr. Michael Cannon, told Ryan to leave class and go. A quick review of the list of credibly accused Jesuits raises a disturbing possibility: Cannon and Kenney were two of *seven* credibly accused Jesuits assigned to Creighton Prep at some point during Kenney's tenure (1965-1989).

It is hard to know what the adults around Kenney knew about his conduct, but there was a dangerous tolerance for abusive behavior. A Prep alum told Grace, the World-Herald reporter, that the dean of discipline at Creighton Prep chastised him for skipping study hall for confession with Kenney by asking, "Don't you know better than to hang out with a guy like that?"

One must ask whether collective inaction allowed the cultivation of a network of abusers within the school, within a culture of unchecked abuse. Whether the inaction was due to Kenney's relative standing as a "good guy, on balance" or because administrators did not think his behavior rose to legally actionable, is hard to say.

To date, there remains resistance to examining this past, even though resistance to uncovering the whole truth comes at the expense of survivors' healing and of real clarity about what the prevention of abuse requires. When our team received this grant from Fordham University — a Jesuit institution — to support research on how Jesuit institutions, writ large, have historically handled clergy sexual abuse, and how they might do better in the future, we were optimistic that we might be able to help our local Jesuit institutions to think more carefully about how to protect minors.

In order to put our expertise to good use, we needed information. Yet, despite the general support we received for our project when it was funded, when we placed routine research requests for access to school newspapers, yearbooks and non-personnel files, we were denied by the Creighton Prep administration, and it was made clear to our team that our requests for information, and any help finding alumni who may have been harmed by Kenney, would never be honored.

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Not 'in the past'

Ryan indicated that he reached out to us because we "were doing actual research" that he believed he might fit into, without a desire to determine his "credibility" or file a criminal charge. This underscores the reality that survivors want a broader picture of what happened, and why research such as this may help move beyond individual reports made to law enforcement, school administrators or victim assistance coordinators representing a diocese or a religious order.

Ryan, now a father, told us his story in 2022, when he was faced with a question of his own: where to send his daughter to junior high school. He was struck by how young a teenager is — and how young he was when he was made to lock the door of the confessional. Though raised Catholic, Ryan is relieved that his children won't go to confession, since they haven't received any sacraments beyond baptism.

This has not diminished the hypervigilance that pervades his parenting. He warns his children that some people will try to get them alone to exploit them. He knows this might be overwhelming for kids their age, but Ryan is terrified that his children will encounter their own Fr. Kenney. That would not be a "close call" to Ryan, but a direct violation.

As we talked with those who knew Kenney, we heard scathing criticism in one breath, followed by a catalog of his good works or tempering statements about his recovery from alcoholism in the next. To the students he did not allegedly abuse, Kenney was a life-changing mentor. As noted above, many met this complexity with the conclusion that Kenney was "a good priest, on balance."

The impacts of clergy sexual abuse cannot be corralled behind institutionally constructed markers of "the past," such as "Ryan's adolescence" or "the decade preceding the Dallas Charter." The Dallas Charter did the important work of exposing the pervasiveness of clergy sexual abuse and making the protection of children a priority. However, it confines responsibility for abuse to priests and others who are "credibly accused" of a narrow act of interpersonal violence between one perpetrator and one victim, and does not give space to important voices like Ryan's.

The subject of Kenney's dismissal from Creighton Prep in 1989 is a silent live wire that runs across Omaha because the stakes in telling it are still very high for a great many people. Few Jesuits agreed to talk about it at all, filing Daniel Kenney under "yesterday's news" — 34 years since a report went to CPS, 20 years since the Dallas Charter and more than two years since Kenney was laicized.

Yet Kenney is not "in the past" for Ryan, nor many of the dozen-plus alumni we spoke with who wondered why they never they never received the letter that Creighton Prep sent out in 2018 following the release of credibly accused priests' names. Most alumni we interviewed heard about Kenney's alleged abuse through the newspapers or through a friend, not from the school — and no one we interviewed had heard about consequences for Kenney. Often it was only through contact with our research team or survivor organizations that we partnered with that anyone knew Kenney had been removed from ministry in 2003 or laicized in 2020.

As another alum told us, "To regain trust, I need a reconciliation process." Reconciliation must begin with clear questions that have yet to be answered: What happened, who knew what, and what were the consequences for those who failed to protect minors?

We contend that these questions cannot be left to attorneys general offices or courts to pursue alone — it must also be answered by the organizations in which the abuse took place, and it must include all who have suffered.

Only then can we begin a new conversation — not about credibility or liability, but about who has been harmed, and how that harm can be addressed. We want an opportunity for all of these questions to get answered, and wait in hopeful anticipation that this might still happen in Omaha.