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Critical question leads priest to challenge lax abuse policies

by Tom Roberts



Fr. James Connell speaks during Mass at Holy Name Parish in Sheboygan, Wis., in this file photo. (The Sheboygan Press)

What Peter Isely remembers about driving to a coffee shop in the suburbs north of Milwaukee late last November to meet Fr. James Connell was that he really didn't want to go.

Isely, a victim of clergy abuse and a founding member of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, had been to so many meetings. "I was tired," he said in a recent phone interview. "I was tired of the whole thing. We had been through all of this with Dolan [Archbishop Timothy Dolan, then of Milwaukee and now of New York]."

"How can I put this?" he asked. "I usually get calls from priests, or priests come up to me in town, and they say, "Thanks, if it weren't for you guys nothing would change." But they would never do something publicly."

So he thought this would be another of those meetings where perhaps there would be a bit of understanding that wasn't there before, an experience of the other person as something more than a collar or, conversely, as something more than a protester.



This meeting, however, would end up being different from the rest. And it would be different, Isely says in retrospect, because Connell dared to ask a critical question of himself. It was a question that might, in the asking, sound remarkably obvious, especially for a minister of the Gospel. But it was so unusual that Isely said he's never heard of a Catholic cleric ask it of himself in the context of the sexual abuse crisis.

What makes the question all the more intriguing is that it occurred to Connell the same day he learned that Isely and other members of SNAP had called for his removal from the archdiocesan review board because, the group alleged, he had been part of a cover-up of a notorious case of sexual abuse during his time in the chancery office in the 1990s.

The concern that led to a meeting with Isely also led Connell eventually to issue a public letter raising serious questions about the conduct of diocesan review boards and his own bishop's role in overseeing one of those boards.

Conflicting emotions

Oct. 13, 2009, was an agonizing day for Connell. The accusation, which he denies, stung. The archdiocese contends that Connell, at the time he was vice chancellor, documented the offenses of the late Fr. Lawrence Murphy, who was believed to have molested as many as 200 boys at St. John's School for the Deaf between 1950 and 1974. According to the archdiocese, Connell's documentation was aimed at permanently removing Murphy from the priesthood.

The victims' group, however, charged that Connell failed to notify the deaf community of Murphy's history. Those conflicting claims, and whether it was Connell's responsibility to notify the deaf community, have yet to be resolved.

The morning that he heard about the charges, announced by Isely in a televised news conference on the steps of the cathedral in Milwaukee, Connell had to make a trip from Sheboygan, where he is pastor of two parishes, to Milwaukee to visit the sick child of parishioners. He said he was "torn apart by lots of emotions."

As he left the hospital to return to his car, the question that had been bubbling below the surface all morning burst through: "What if I had been a victim of sexual abuse by a priest?"

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On the drive back to Sheboygan he said he prayed the rosary and felt a calm come over him. The question has stayed with him, and since that day, he has come to consider "the minor bruising" he received as incidental compared with the suffering of those who have been abused.

In retrospect, said Connell in a recent phone interview, "something else was going on, another door was opening. That TV moment may have been a moment of God's grace, too."

"During the ensuing days," he wrote in his open letter, released June 17, "I found my empathy for [abuse victims] growing as I focused on their struggle for truth, justice, healing and peace. I also began to wonder how the lives of survivors would be different today if they had never been abused by a priest."

That moment led to a phone call to Isely and the meeting Nov. 30 with him and with John Pilmaier, also of SNAP.

Isely is a psychotherapist, a clinical social worker with a degree from Harvard Divinity School and a background in working with victims of clergy abuse from around the country. About eight years ago he gave up that dimension of his work when he decided to become a more committed advocate for victims while maintaining a small private practice. Isely was abused by a priest while a young student in a seminary school.

"Rape and assault is a violent parody of human love and human consent to love," said Isely in a phone interview. "However God made the universe, he made it in a way that would require our free consent to him and to consenting to his absence here, as we find in the book of Job and as we find on the cross, the horror of that absence."

"I've seen over almost 20 years as a victim and as survivors begin to speak, the remnant that comes forth to ask: Where can we place our witness to change the culture and stop the next assault?" said Isely.

"That is why," he said, "Fr. Connell is so important. Because what he is doing and what he is trying to do may stop the next assault of a child."

Unusual path to priesthood

Connell, 67, wouldn't speculate beyond a "maybe" whether his background prior to priesthood had anything to do with his response, but it is noteworthy that his path to priesthood evolved out of unusual circumstances. He had a master's degree in accounting (a certification he maintains today), a senior manager-level position at the huge accounting firm of Peat Marwick Mitchell & Co., and a failed marriage, which he described in the interview as "more my fault than hers."

Following his divorce in 1975, he said, he went through a five-year period of being angry at God and alienated from the church.

But things changed when the accounting firm transferred him from Chicago to Milwaukee, he said, and he began to re-engage with the church.

He entered the seminary in 1983 at the age of 40 and was ordained four years later. What followed was five years at the North American College in Rome while studying for a canon law degree at the Gregorian University. He followed that with a doctorate in canon law at St. Paul University in Ottawa.

Connell, then, knows something about accountability and church law, which he cites at length in his open letter. In preparation for a March 4 meeting of the Milwaukee Review Board with the newly appointed Archbishop Jerome ListECKI, Connell visited the Web site of the La Crosse, Wis., diocese, where ListECKI formerly served.

He was surprised to learn that the standard of proof used by the board "in assisting the bishop in his

assessment process is "moral certitude which excludes every prudent doubt or every doubt founded on positive reasons." The standard, put in place by then-Bishop Raymond Burke, is much higher than that outlined in the bishops' own norms, which were promulgated following their famous Dallas meeting in 2002. It is also higher than the civil law standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt." Burke, who went on to be archbishop of St. Louis, now heads the Vatican Supreme Court.

Connell said he feared that children would be at risk from priests accused of abuse who, in other dioceses, would have been referred for further investigation. In other words, in La Crosse, someone accusing a priest of sexual abuse would have to provide a greater degree of proof than the church's rules expect. "Some priests or deacons could still be in active ministry who would not be there if the correct standard of proof were used," said Connell.

Indeed, during the meeting with Listecki, Connell made reference to his concern about La Crosse. The bishop, according to O'Connell, noted that 60 percent of the cases in La Crosse had been unsubstantiated, a percentage well above the national average.

Later, said Connell, he noticed in the 2009 Annual Report published by the bishops' Office for Child and Youth Protection that "as a national average, approximately 10 percent of the allegations during this time period were ruled unsubstantiated, while approximately 90 percent were considered credible. Immediately I recalled the comments regarding 60 percent."

Even later, Connell sent out another release when he learned that the firm that audits compliance by dioceses is commissioned by the bishop to only audit those activities dealing with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, but is not authorized to audit compliance with the U.S. bishops' "Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons." The distinction certainly bypasses most people, but Connell said it is significant, since the charter is a statement of "mission, expectations, principles and tasks," whereas the norms "are particular law in the United States." In other words, the norms are the legally binding requirements under church law that diocese must follow.

Connell spent three months contacting church leaders and the Office for Child and Youth Protection and received very little response. Listecki, who was traveling a great deal in recent weeks, initially released a statement saying he "immediately responded" to Connell's concerns "to assure him that no child was at risk" in La Crosse. He said that he pledged that the review board in La Crosse as well as the new bishop there "would examine its policies to determine if changes were needed."

Connell went public on June 17.

"Why is it so difficult for the leaders of the Catholic church to do the right thing?" he asks in his letter. "If the Catholic church is serious about safeguarding children and young people, then the church leaders should prove me wrong or immediately begin corrective action."

When the priest left the coffee shop back in November, he said he felt challenged, as if the two SNAP members had said, "Ball's in your court, Connell, do what you can."

He began by going over the events of recent weeks and the conversation with some trusted friends, and that circle widened eventually to include some sex abuse victims and Amy Peterson, victim assistance coordinator for the archdiocese. The group has already had three of four planned meetings, attracting between 35 and 80 people. The final one is scheduled for late August in downtown Milwaukee.

He's not certain what will happen beyond that.

But his concerns about La Crosse and the auditing system remain, and he wonders how many other dioceses are using improper standards of proof or are playing loose with the rules because no one is holding them accountable.

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