

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 28, 2011 at 8:48am

Clergy, survivors sign plea for Milwaukee sex abuse victims to come forward

by Tom Roberts



Fr. James Connell, left, speaks at a Dec. 27 news conference in Milwaukee. At right is Peter Isely, Midwest director of SNAP. (Tom Lynn/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

An alliance of priests, clergy sexual abuse survivors and advocates for abuse victims composed and signed a full-page ad that appeared Dec. 27 in *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* encouraging "victim/survivors" to come forward before Feb. 1, the deadline for filing abuse claims against the Milwaukee archdiocese through an impending bankruptcy proceeding.

The ad also calls upon other priests of the diocese to "join us and insist upon a full and public confession" by the archdiocese, including open publication of all abuse-related documents held by the archdiocese and the religious orders serving in the archdiocese. The signers also ask the archdiocese to provide "a full and explanatory list of all clerics and employees who have harmed children and minors."

Publication of the notice preceded a news conference scheduled for 1 p.m. Tuesday to address the issues. Peter Isely, Midwest director of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) issued a statement

Monday describing the effort as "the first time in the Catholic sexual abuse crisis [that] a group of priests and clergy sexual assault survivors" had jointly published a statement urging "public accountability and transparency from church officials."

See earlier *NCR* coverage of Connell and Isely here: [Critical question leads priest to challenge lax abuse policies](#)

The group was originally brought together by Isely and Fr. James Connell, vice chancellor of the archdiocese. During the past two years, the pair has worked on a number of initiatives to advocate for survivors of sex abuse and to call for increasing accountability on the part of church leadership. The first year, the two conducted a number of "candle vigil services" for victims of sex abuse and others who wanted to get together, especially in parishes where it was known priests had abused children.

In a phone interview Tuesday, Connell said he and Isely had been together for a demonstration on the steps of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist last year when Isely asked if he and other survivors could get together with interested priests for discussions.

Those discussions, Connell said, led to the ad. As part of the effort, the archdiocese has distributed signs displayed at all the parishes notifying victims of the Feb. 1 deadline date.

Julie Wolf, communications director for the archdiocese, said while the ad represents a more public stance than most priests have taken, "It is important to note that priests throughout the archdiocese of Milwaukee have reached out to victims of clergy sexual abuse through their own ways in their own ministries in their parishes. Priests in the archdiocese have been doing this for years."

She said Archbishop Jerome ListECKI continues to urge victims to come forward before the deadline, adding that the archdiocese is about to conduct a national ad campaign to advise victims who might be outside the archdiocese to come forward.

Regarding the listing of priests, she said the archdiocese has been doing that on its website since 2004 and continues to add information on those cases where there are "substantiated allegations" of sexual abuse.

In addition to Connell and Isely, the ad was signed by John Pilmaier, SNAP Wisconsin director, who is also a survivor; Mike Sneesby SNAP Milwaukee director and a survivor; Marilyn Pilmaier, John's mother; Vicky A. Schneider and Karen Konter, survivors; Fr. Richard Cerpich; Fr. Gregory Greiten; and Fr. Howard Haase.

The ad contains contact information for community resources for sex abuse victims as well as the number for the archdiocese.

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In the statement, the priests write: "We publicly declare our unqualified support to every victim/survivor. We hold ourselves and our institution fully accountable for any action or inaction that may have allowed these crimes to occur, the offender to go unpunished, and other children to be harmed. We are truly sorry that this happened to you."

Church and community healing, the priests continue, will require "a full institutional accounting of the crimes that have taken place in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Victim/survivors and their families have told us how important it is that they know the truth about what happened in their church. It is also

important for each one of us."

The priests acknowledge they are late to the cause, but "making this statement now is better than remaining silent."

Isely said the alliance between priests and survivors is an unusual one, "but it is a natural alliance." The two groups most affected by the scandal are survivors and priests, he said, and the priesthood has been deeply wounded.

"Priests' ability to preach the gospel has been severely compromised, not just by predator priests and the cover-up, but by the way the priesthood itself worldwide allows for clergy who have raped and assaulted children to remain clerics," he said.

Even in the United States, where a zero-tolerance policy is in place, Isely said a priest determined to have committed an act of sexual abuse "is removed from public ministry, but not from the priesthood."

In other words, said Isely, a licensed therapist, "You don't lose your license. It's the only occupation in civil society that's allowed to operate that way."

He said he hopes the alliance of priests and victims in Milwaukee continues to grow.

"This is the conversation that needs to occur," he said.

Some survivors, reluctant at first to be in the same room with priests, have come to realize that it is not all priests who are the problem, "but only certain priests."

In his case, Isely said, the conversation has been "healing and challenging. It is very easy [for survivors] to get stuck when you're trying to fight this battle, it is easy to stay in a position where you do not want to try again or reach out again" to individual priests.

"They're not the problem ultimately," he said.

For more coverage, go to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's website.

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