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## **Priest Plays down Abuse Crisis**

Prominent Friar's Counseling Criticized by NJ Diocese, Victims

By Brooks Egerton  
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In the world according to Father Benedict Groeschel, the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal is largely the stuff of fiction. Reporters "doing the work of Satan" are driven to lie, the New York priest says, because they hate the church's moral teachings.

These are not the opinions of a marginal figure. Indeed, Father Groeschel is one of the most prominent priests in America, reaching millions with his books, tapes, parish lectures and regular appearances on the Eternal Word Television Network.

His stature is high among many church leaders, too - he has heard the confessions of a cardinal, consulted with the Vatican on a case for sainthood, been a friend to Mother Teresa.

The preface to his media-blaming 2002 book *From Scandal to Hope* was written by Milwaukee Archbishop Timothy Dolan, who praised Father Groeschel for putting the abuse scandal in context.

For all his commentary on the crisis, Father Groeschel has revealed few details about his role as a player in it: He has been a key figure for 30 years in the loose-knit nationwide network of therapists who have helped troubled priests keep working.

The Franciscan friar's base is a mansion on Long Island Sound, where he runs the Archdiocese of New York's spiritual development office and Trinity Retreat Center for clergy. There, according to his own written account, he has counseled hundreds of his brethren and "happily, 85 priests have returned to the active ministry."

Father Groeschel, who declined interview requests, has not said publicly how many of his clients were accused of abuse. Archdiocesan spokesman Joseph Zwilling would not comment on Father Groeschel.

Dallas Bishop Charles Grahmann has allowed one of his priests, removed from parish work after the diocese concluded he had abused a girl, to help manage the retreat center in recent years. That priest, the Rev. Richard T. Brown, moved to a hermitage a few months ago and "is not contactable," said Father Groeschel's secretary, June Pulitano. Neither she nor Bishop Grahmann's spokesman, Bronson Havard, would identify the hermitage.

Mr. Zwilling said Father Brown "never did any pastoral work" in the archdiocese and did not have its permission to serve as a priest there.

Leaders of the neighboring Diocese of Paterson, N.J., one of several that sent business to Father Groeschel, blamed three "unfortunate" reassignments on his advice. Two of those priests were subsequently accused of misconduct in their new jobs.

"We relied on his recommendations," said Marianna Thompson, spokeswoman for Paterson Bishop Frank Rodimer. Father Groeschel used words such as "transformation," she said, and helped arrange transfers between dioceses.

Ms. Thompson said Father Groeschel had much to recommend him - he had taught pastoral psychology at Catholic institutions and had a doctorate in psychology from Columbia University's Teachers College. He had close ties to the late New York Cardinal John O'Connor, who endorsed the friar's secession from a Franciscan order in the 1980s and formation of a new group that has won renown for service to the poor. The cardinal earlier had Father Groeschel prepare the sainthood case for the previous leader of New York Catholics, Cardinal Terence Cooke, for whom the priest had served as confessor.

In *From Scandal to Hope*, completed shortly before the nation's bishops met in Dallas last summer, Father Groeschel acknowledged that some priests had abused boys. He described the problem as "active homosexuality with minors," stressing that most victims were teenagers and never mentioning girls.

"Many of the cases now in the papers are about clergy who, perhaps under the influence of alcohol two or three decades ago, engaged in improper actions, but not sexual acts," he wrote. "They went into treatment and have behaved well over the years."

Father Groeschel also said that church leaders sometimes had relied, to their detriment, on the advice of behavioral experts.

"I've been involved in psychology for four decades, and we in the profession were naïve enough to think that these offenders could almost always be cured," he wrote. Therapists "often were correct in their assessments," but "were sometimes tragically wrong about a particular case."

Father Groeschel said nothing in his book about his own success rate in treating priests.

He saved his harshest words for the news media's coverage of the abuse issue, which he called a "blitz of lies." Like Adolf Hitler, he wrote, news organizations are "spreading lies in order to destroy" the Catholic Church.

"When a scandal occurs," the priest wrote, "about two percent of what is said in the media is true." Last month, he made similar statements to a standing-room-only crowd at a suburban Boston church.

Such statements have infuriated victims. "It just burns me to no end," said Buddy Cotton, who has accused the Rev. James Hanley of abusing him in the Paterson Diocese and recently called Bishop Rodimer to complain about Father Groeschel.

The bishop, Mr. Cotton said, agreed that Father Groeschel "had failed a lot of victims."

Ms. Thompson, the bishop's spokeswoman, said Father Groeschel's critique of the media was misguided. "Bishop Rodimer has told the media, 'Thank you for opening the window on this,' " she said. "The media have been fair. We created this story, not the press."

### **The victims**

Father Groeschel has said he is sensitive to victims.

"As a psychologist for priests, I have occasionally spoken to the victims of priests and to their families," he wrote in *From Scandal to Hope*. "I can only say that I am deeply, deeply grieved. I often had to accept their anger, not directed personally at me, but at Church authorities. ...

"I am willing," he added, "to suffer with the victims."

Mark Serrano, who also has said that Father Hanley abused him as a boy, questioned Father Groeschel's sincerity. His skepticism, he said, is based on an experience he had after his family's complaints led Bishop Rodimer to suspend Father Hanley.

In 1986, the year after the abuse complaints, Mr. Serrano agreed to talk to Father Groeschel, who was counseling Father Hanley. Mr. Serrano, who was then a college student, said he thought the counselor "wanted more information" for therapeutic purposes. Instead, Mr. Serrano said, Father Groeschel lashed out at him.

"He said, 'Why don't you stop harassing this poor priest? He's a sick man. You are wrong for what you're doing to him.' "

Monsignor Kenneth Lasch, a Paterson diocesan priest, said he had urged Mr. Serrano to talk with Father Groeschel because the friar had expressed pastoral concern for Mr. Serrano - "something like, 'Mark seems to be a troubled person.' "

Hearing Mr. Serrano's account of what ensued "left me very, very uncomfortable," Monsignor Lasch said, "and made me wonder what was going on" at Father Groeschel's retreat center.

Father Groeschel's 2002 book warned that Catholics would still face a crisis after "the media monster ... slither[s] away to attack other victims." He prescribed a return to conservative moral teachings, saying that nothing would restore confidence in church leadership "better than a firm stance against pornography, extramarital sex, abortion, euthanasia and the general moral decline of the United States. ... Tough topics like contraception and autoeroticism need to be consistently and publicly addressed."

He said that the news media fail to mention that most priests aren't pedophiles, that cover-ups occur in other denominations, and that abusers "are among the most penitent people I've ever met in my whole life."

He cited the example of the late Atlanta Archbishop Eugene Marino, who resigned in 1990 after an affair with a young woman in lay ministry and went to Father Groeschel's retreat center, in the New York City suburb of Larchmont. He "lived a life of extreme humiliation, humility and penitence," Father Groeschel wrote.

In the mid-1990s, Archbishop Marino became spiritual director of the outpatient Clergy Consultation and Treatment Service at St. Vincent's Hospital, near Trinity Retreat. It was formed at the request of the late Cardinal O'Connor and works closely with the retreat center.

One priest who was counseled by Archbishop Marino and Father Groeschel was the Rev. Morgan Kuhl.

He was sent to them in 1999, after he solicited sex online from undercover officers posing as adolescent boys and was arrested. The subsequent FBI investigation showed that he had met teens this way and abused them.

### **Clergy treatment**

The prosecution of Father Kuhl, who has been removed from ministry, opened a rare window into the Catholic clergy treatment system.

A psychologist who evaluated Father Kuhl for federal prosecutors recommended that he "be enrolled in a program specific to sex offenders," not just in the general psychotherapy and spiritual counseling he was getting. Dr. Barry Katz wrote that the priest "expressed regret over the effects that his actions have had upon himself, but no remorse for the effect that his actions have had upon the minors with whom he was involved."

After pleading guilty, Father Kuhl apologized to a judge for "the hurt and the embarrassment that I have caused so many other people." He also said he had devoted his life to helping others, and had learned in church-sponsored therapy "that there was one person I never did seem to try to help, and that was myself."

U.S. District Judge Anne Thompson initially sentenced Father Kuhl to a short prison term followed by house arrest. But she later reduced the penalty, over the objections of prosecutor Donna Krappa, to five years of probation and ordered the priest to "adhere to the program requirements at Trinity Retreat."

In advocating probation, Father Groeschel represented himself to the court as a counseling psychologist, Ms. Krappa said in an interview. New York state officials said he has never had the license generally required for use of that title. Using the title without a license is a misdemeanor, state officials said.

"I think that the judge would have been interested in this fact," Ms. Krappa said, "when she considered the quality of treatment Father Kuhl was receiving through the archdiocese."

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### **Declared Fit for Duty**

Officials in the Diocese of Paterson, N.J., blame these three reassignments on Father Benedict Groeschel's advice.

The **Rev. John Picardi** transferred from Boston to the Paterson Diocese in the early 1990s after being accused of raping a man. Father Groeschel wrote Paterson Bishop Frank Rodimer a letter saying that "there was no indication of any involvement with a minor or a nonconsenting adult," although he apparently knew that the accuser felt violated. Another church document indicates that while supervising the priest's treatment, Father Groeschel had once called a Boston archdiocesan official to ask whether the accuser was "still angry" and "in a litigious stance."

Marianna Thompson, spokeswoman for Bishop Rodimer, said he learned of the rape allegation only after Father Picardi was accused in 1995 of touching a girl improperly in the Paterson Diocese.

Father Picardi has denied abusing anyone. Neither allegation resulted in criminal charges, although Ms. Thompson said that Bishop Rodimer and New Jersey child-welfare authorities concluded that the priest should not work in a parish.

Father Picardi later got a job in the Phoenix Diocese, which removed him last month after Boston attorney Roderick MacLeish Jr., who represents many of the victims in that archdiocese's sex abuse scandal, obtained and released his personnel file. Father Picardi could not be located for comment.

The **Rev. Patrick D. Browne** transferred from the Paterson Diocese to the New York Archdiocese in the mid-1990s because of affairs with two women, said Ms. Thompson. He allegedly repeated the misconduct with a woman who was seeing him for marriage counseling and was cited in a legal action brought in New York by her husband.

Father Browne was removed again and is not working as a priest currently, Ms. Thompson said. He did not return a message left for him with his diocesan superiors. The spokeswoman said Bishop Rodimer told the New York Archdiocese about Father Browne's past, and relied on Father Groeschel's feeling that his client could recommit himself to celibacy.

The **Rev. James Hanley** moved in the mid-1980s from the Paterson Diocese to the Diocese of Albany, N.Y., after admitting he had sexually abused boys. He then suffered a physical collapse while working as a hospital chaplain and was recalled to New Jersey.

Before the transfer to Albany, "Groeschel told us that the basis of [Father Hanley's] problem was alcoholism," Ms. Thompson said, "and that once he was treated he felt he would be fit for ministry." He has not been criminally charged. Father Hanley, who recently asked to be removed from the priesthood, could not be reached for comment.

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