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## **Cries for Help Ignored**

Still-active priest abused them as boys, brothers say

By Steve Wick  
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Two former altar boys from Holbrook say a still-active Catholic priest sexually abused them over several years in the late 1970s when they were teenagers, usually in his rectory room in several parishes in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

One of the former altar boys, Mark Welzel, now 39, said the Rev. Eugene Vollmer, now an associate pastor at St. James Church, Seaford, sodomized him as many as 50 times, gave him marijuana to smoke, church wine to drink, and pornographic videos to watch. He broke away from Vollmer when he was 15, he said, and called the Diocese of Rockville Centre to report the abuse. The only response at that point, he said, was a lecture from an unidentified woman over the telephone who said he "shouldn't say this about others."

He said he also tried to report the abuse in 1991, this time giving Vollmer's name to a priest whose name he doesn't recall at diocese headquarters. He said he never heard back from him.

[Photo captions: The Rev. Eugene Vollmer, shown above in a 1978 photo, now is an associate pastor at St. James Church in Seaford, right. He was placed on indefinite leave last week.]

The second boy, Mark's brother Rainer, who is now 37, said he reported that he, too, had been abused by a diocesan priest, without naming Vollmer, in a request he made for a marriage annulment that was granted in 1994. No one ever followed up on that statement, he said, though he had "assumed the phone would ring off the hook."

In 1998, Rainer Welzel filed a complaint against Vollmer with the Nassau district attorney's office. Investigative sources last week acknowledged the complaint and said it wasn't pursued criminally because the state's statute of limitation had expired. The sources said it was forwarded to police and to the diocese.

In spite of the brothers' complaints, Vollmer continued to work as a parish priest until beginning an "indefinite" leave of absence Thursday, the day after Newsday first asked diocesan officials for comment about the Welzels' statements.

The Rev. Robert Hewes, the pastor at St. James, said yesterday that Vollmer slipped a note under his door Thursday night advising him he was leaving. Hewes said he then checked with diocesan officials, who told him Vollmer would be gone "for an extended period of time." Hewes said he does not know where Vollmer is now.

In a phone conversation Wednesday, Vollmer refused to comment on the Welzels' statements, saying only, "I think you should speak to the diocese."

For the past several weeks, Bishop William Murphy of the Diocese of Rockville Centre has said his review of diocese personnel records shows there are no "credible" complaints against priests now doing parish work, noting Sunday that the church had set "its house in order" on the issue of sexual abuse of children by priests.

Since Wednesday, the diocese has refused numerous requests for comment on whether the church

was aware of the complaints about Vollmer, whether anybody in the diocese had been in contact with law enforcement in 1998, as investigative sources have said, or why no one followed up on the information that Rainer Welzel said was in his annulment request.

Yesterday, spokeswoman Joanne Novarro said that the diocese would have no comment on individual cases and that annulment requests are private church documents and, thus, unavailable. She said she did not know whom law enforcement officials might have contacted within the diocese in 1998.

Novarro also confirmed that Vollmer is "no longer on assignment." She said Friday that Murphy "has said that no one is working in active ministries who has information in his file related to sex abuse."

Rainer Welzel, who lives in California and works in the software industry, said despite the many years that have passed since he was an altar boy on Long Island, it was "very hard to speak about" the past.

"I've been in therapy for years," he said. "I've been divorced twice and had a difficult time maintaining normal relationships. For years, I blamed myself. It was all somehow my fault. It's just recently that I've been able to try and shake it off and open up."

He said he decided to take his story public only after a friend sent him an e-mail telling him that Vollmer was still an active priest.

After years of therapy, Rainer Welzel recently began talking with his brother, who told him about his own history with Vollmer, a close family friend who often ate Sunday dinners at the Welzel home. Mark Welzel, who lives near Boston where he works in computer networking, said he, too, has spent years in therapy, overcoming a drug addiction he says began when Vollmer gave him marijuana.

"I think I did a better job of hiding the damage and getting on with my life" than Rainer did, Mark Welzel said. "Now, I want Rainer to find the same kind of peace."

In separate interviews, each brother told his story, beginning at the first sexual encounter with Vollmer. Once or twice, they said, they had sex with Vollmer with other boys present; at other times, they said, they were alone with him.

For Mark Welzel, the encounters took place in rectories in Ronkonkoma, Lindenhurst and Hempstead, and at Vollmer's parents' summer home in Southampton. For Rainer Welzel, it was these locations, as well as an afternoon in a motel on Route 112 in Brookhaven, that are still fresh in his mind.

"I sat in the car while he went in the office and rented the room," Rainer Welzel said. "Then he drove around to the room. I was 12 or 13. He put on a pornographic video and we masturbated. Then he drove me home."

Each said he has retained detailed memories.

For Rainer Welzel, it is a half-gallon container of buffalo milk that Vollmer had in his rectory bedroom that he brought back from a trip to Yellowstone National Park. "While he did what he did ... I would just focus ... on that buffalo milk," he said. "Laser-like. It is so clear in my mind."

For Mark Welzel, it is wrestling bouts with Vollmer, then in his late 20s. "After wrestling, he'd say, 'I won,' and ask for something in return," he said, adding that this "something" often turned out to be a sexual activity.

While each brother knew a little of the other's involvement with Vollmer, neither knew the full extent until they talked. Each said they saw other boys with Vollmer, as well, but never knew their names. "Many times when I got to the rectory, boys would be leaving his room," Mark Welzel said. "And many times when I left, other boys would be arriving."

The brothers also were not aware until recently what the other had done in terms of reporting the abuse. And while both brothers, emboldened by years of therapy, told their two sisters over the years,

neither could summon strength to tell their parents. They finally told them Wednesday night, Mark Welzel said.

"Our mother loves the church," he said. In the past, "I just could not hurt her with the truth. I worried it would just break her heart."

Their family story is in many ways that of a typical Long Island family with significant ties to the Catholic church. Their father's faith was strong, their mother's even stronger.

Both boys attended St. Joseph's, the Catholic elementary school in Ronkonkoma. Each vividly remembers his first Communion, and each still laughs about the personalities of different nuns in the school. "The pastor at St. Joseph's died when I was 13 or 14, and I was picked to serve at the funeral," Rainer Welzel recalls. "I was so thrilled by that."

Vollmer became a part of his life when he was 10 or 11, Rainer Welzel said and the sex came as a result of "a slow progression" that "started with trips to get pizza," then moved to sharing pornography magazines. Eventually, he said, it included masturbating each other and oral sex. "I felt absolute shame in doing it," Rainer Welzel noted, but he said Vollmer told him, "This is what guys do. It's a natural part of life. No big deal."

Mark Welzel recalls Vollmer, then fresh out of the seminary, coming to dinner. "He began coming to the house for dinner on Sundays and he got to know my mother and father," he said. "They loved him. He started off saying to our parents that he'd take me to the city to see plays.

"My parents thought he'd be a great influence ... Then he'd say, 'Since it'll be late, why not stay in the rectory with me.'" Then, when they were alone in his room, he said, "Vollmer gave me marijuana. I was 12. He would also try to get me to drink Amaretto, which was his favorite drink.

"I can still remember that taste - it was too sweet," he said. "So he'd give me the Communion wine instead."

On a number of occasions, other boys were in the rectory room, Mark Welzel said.

"I met probably a dozen or more boys who visited him," he said. "On more than one occasion, there was Vollmer, me and another boy. I'd stay over the night and I had meals in the morning with other priests. Or a housekeeper would make me a snack. There was never an effort to sneak me in or hide me once I was there. The other priests knew I was staying overnight. They saw me."

When Mark Welzel said he began to understand the extent of his brother's involvement with Vollmer, it broke his heart. "When I was 15, I think this was in Lindenhurst, I told Vollmer this has to stop. I said, 'If you bother my brother, I'll kill you.'

"He laughed and said no one would believe me because he's a priest and they would think I was gay. At the same time, he indicated he would leave my brother alone."

After enrolling in St. John the Baptist High School in West Islip, Mark Welzel said, he decided to call the diocese and report the abuse. "It was the spring of 1980," he said. "I feared for my brother. I called the diocese office in Rockville Centre. I got a woman; she put me through to another woman. I told her his name and what he had done to me. I told her I knew he had done it with others. Could I talk to someone to make sure he is stopped?"

"She told me I shouldn't say this about people. She basically hung up on me."

When Mark Welzel was 18, he joined the Army and was stationed in Germany, where he was beset with problems he now says he believes are directly attributable to the abuse. "I couldn't possibly have a normal sex life after all this," he said. "I became a heavy pot smoker. I was also shooting heroin and cocaine and anything I could get my hands on."

He made his second attempt to report Vollmer's activities to the diocese after meeting the woman he

would later marry. "It was 1991, or the spring of 1992," he said. "I had not talked to my future wife about it, but he [Vollmer] was on my mind. I wanted to get on with my life. I just was hoping I could say something to someone and stop him. I got past the receptionist. I got to a man this time. I understood he was a priest. He had a title in the diocese.

"I told him about Gene Vollmer, that it started at St. Joseph's. I told him there were other boys. I didn't mention my brother. He said, 'Thank you, we'll look into it and take care of it.' I gave him my phone number. I never heard from him or anyone else after that."

Now, he said, "I know I should have said something sooner. But I did call. Should I have tried harder? The church itself, the diocese, this is their responsibility. Their priests saw us staying overnight in Vollmer's room. All they said was, 'Hi.'"

Recently, he said, his therapist told him that, statistically, men who are abused turn into abusers themselves. It broke his heart, he said, because he has a 1-year-old daughter. "That brought it home for me," he said. "My God."

Rainer Welzel's journey to speaking publicly about the alleged abuse began by first acknowledging that it was not his fault. "I remember when I finally cut it off, I was 16 or 17," he said. "He called the house and asked to meet me to have a discussion. I agreed to meet him. We met at a Howard Johnson's off the LIE. I got in his car. He tried to kiss me and I told him goodbye."

There were still tough times ahead, including two marriages that ended in divorce and other relationships he said failed because of the years of abuse.

"When I was 21, I got married," Rainer Welzel said. It was October 1987, and Vollmer officiated at the wedding. "Why? I hated the fact that I asked him to marry me," he said, but Vollmer was the family's long-standing priest and his parents didn't know about the abuse. For that reason, he explained, "I felt I had to. He even came to my bachelor party."

Welzel said he married for a second time, and that relationship also ended in divorce. Unlike with his first wife, he told his second about the abuse. "I told her about what had happened to me," he said. "The abuse wrecked both my marriages. It has affected every relationship I have had."