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Priest Admits Sex with Teen in 70s

By Stuart Vincent
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Almost 20 years after a Kings Park woman confronted her parish pastor with charges he had sexually abused her teenage son, the former Long Island priest stood before his Michigan congregation and confessed to "the sexual encounter."

[Photo caption: The Rev. Thomas DeVita.]

The Rev. Thomas DeVita, 51, who in 1978 was assigned to St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church in Kings Park, on Aug. 16 responded to allegations of past sexual abuse by some parishioners at St. Mary of the Lake Parish in New Buffalo by admitting at three consecutive masses that he had had a sexual relationship with the 16-year-old. DeVita, still a priest of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, said he had not done so with anyone since then.

Members of the congregation responded with applause.

DeVita declined Friday to talk about the confession, referring questions to his Manhattan attorney, who was unavailable for comment. Bishop James Murray of the Kalamazoo, Mich., diocese, which includes New Buffalo, did not return calls. Murray was present at the three masses on Aug. 16.

The Kings Park woman said, "He's stating his version, which is considerably watered down" and said her son told her the abuse began before he was 16 years old.

DeVita's confession came just days after disgruntled parishioners circulated an information packet to other church members that included a letter to Murray asking him to investigate allegations of DeVita's "improper sexual relations with a young boy." They demanded that DeVita "fess up and tell the truth - publicly and openly."

According to an interview in The Herald-Palladium, a local newspaper, DeVita told parishioners, "Let me sincerely assure you that I am not a pedophile. I do not and have not molested children. I am not a child abuser nor have I ever been one."

DeVita said he "befriended" the teen, who worked as a parish summer camp counselor. "The friendship was good, wholesome, enjoyable and supportive, but at one point our emotions got the upper hand, and we crossed the line on a few occasions," he said in the interview. He admitted to "sexual misconduct" but said it was consensual.

The victim, now a 35-year-old man who has since moved from New York State, declined to be interviewed. But in a Newsday interview five years ago he said the abuse occurred while he worked at the church teen center.

"He [DeVita] was always after me to stay after when everyone else left so I could help clean up. It was kind of a once-a-week thing. I never reciprocated . . . but I didn't stop it either. It was kind of getting attention to some degree. That was how he worked me."

According to his mother, DeVita took her son, then 16, to Manhattan for a pre-Christmas weekend trip in December, 1978. When she noticed bruises on her son, she said, she took him to a pediatrician. The doctor took her aside and asked, "Could he have been sexually abused in the last few days?"

she said.

She confronted DeVita in his rectory, she said, and refused to leave until he promised her he would never again touch her son. It was only in 1984, following family therapy and at the urging of friends, that she spoke to former Long Island Auxiliary Bishop Gerald J. Ryan about the incident. Ryan, she said, assured her he and other bishops would confront DeVita. Ryan died in 1985.

She believed the matter had been taken care of until she picked up the March 31, 1993, Long Island Catholic, the diocesan newspaper, and saw a photograph of DeVita and an announcement that the priest, then at St. Aiden's in Williston Park, had been named pastor of St. Frances de Chantal in Wantagh. She again went to the diocese and this time spoke with former Auxiliary Bishop James J. Daly, who has since retired, she said. DeVita in 1993 underwent a psychiatric evaluation as required by the diocese's policy for personnel accused of sexual abuse.

Msgr. Alan Placa, a vice chancellor for the Rockville Centre Diocese, said that after six months of psychiatric treatment, DeVita was judged fit to return to his duties. "It was his decision to leave Long Island," Placa said. "We would have reassigned him here."

He said, "We have full confidence that he's a threat to no one at this point."

DeVita went to the Diocese of Venice, Fla., in 1994 and worked until 1995 at Epiphany Cathedral in Venice. After former Long Island Auxiliary Bishop Alfred J. Markiewicz became bishop of Kalamazoo, DeVita was assigned to St. Mary's in New Buffalo, a summer resort town on Lake Michigan. Markiewicz died in 1997 and was succeeded by Murray.

Placa said he had spoken with the woman and with her son and had offered the son counseling, which he declined. He said there was no financial settlement in the case.

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