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A Visit, Forgiveness from Ex-Altar Boy

By Sean Kirst
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Ernest "Skip" Keller prepared himself to be denied.

He was finally going to stand face to face with the Rev. Albert Proud. Keller had publicly accused Proud of being a child abuser. Keller, 43, maintained that Proud gave him beer and then sexually molested him in a secluded trailer at Selkirk Beach in 1973, when Keller was a 14-year-old altar boy in Liverpool.

Last month, the Syracuse Diocese granted Keller's wish for a meeting with Proud, 64, at St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Md., a private Catholic psychiatric hospital that specializes in treating priests and others involved in church ministry.

Keller expected that Proud would deny any knowledge.

Instead, Proud took full responsibility, Keller said.

"I couldn't really remember his face, and then it flooded back as the face of the man who molested me," said Keller, whose wife, Chieko, also attended the meeting. "He admitted to what he did. He said I did nothing wrong to set it up. He assured me he was sorry."

The Rev. Michael Minehan, chancellor of the diocese, helped arrange the meeting and sat in on it. Minehan declined to comment on what he heard.

"The content of the conversation was between those two," Minehan said.

A message left for Proud at St. Luke, where the staff won't confirm or deny who is in treatment, was not returned.

But Minehan said, "We consider (Keller's allegation) a credible complaint."

In many ways, Keller said, that affirmation is what he really wanted. He grew up in Liverpool. He ran into years of trouble, starting as a teenager. He eventually changed his ways, he said, by "walking with the Lord."

"I can't blame (Proud) for everything that happened in my life, but this vindicated me in some ways," Keller said. "This is part of the reason I went downhill, into drugs and crime and alcohol. I didn't wish to cause pain or guilt in his life, but I thought I had the right to tell him what happened to me, even how I stabbed someone in a bar fight."

"I told him he wasn't completely at fault. I always knew the difference between right or wrong. I always had a conscience, and I still made wrong choices. I told him I had forgiven him in my heart, but I wanted to forgive him to his face."

"Then I asked if he would forgive me."

Keller said the request startled Proud, who insisted Keller didn't need any forgiving.

"I told him how I used to fantasize about killing him," Keller said. "I think it jolted him. He started crying, and I think it was sincere. I asked if I could give him a hug, asked if I could pray with him, asked if I could have a picture of us to put in my Bible. I hugged him, and I hugged him again when we left the room, and I encouraged him to never molest anyone again."

And it was over.

"It's almost like it was a dream," said Keller, who now lives in Jacksonville, Fla.

Keller is a born-again Christian who performs prison ministry. He said he has no plans to sue. Instead, he is hoping the Syracuse Diocese will pay for his tuition when he attends a four-year Bible institute.

"To me, it makes sense," Keller said. "They've said they want to invest in the future of those molested by priests."

Minehan said it's too early to speculate on whether the diocese would pay those bills.

"He told us he'd make a presentation," said Minehan, who also said this wasn't the first time the diocese has set up a meeting between an alleged victim and a priest accused of abuse.

It only happens, Minehan said, "if both parties are open to it. We were hoping to bring some resolution and closure."

The Rev. Stephen Rossetti, president of St. Luke, declined to make any comment on reports of the meeting. Speaking in general, he said, the success or failure of any meeting of that kind is best gauged by the reaction of the victim. The danger, Rossetti said, is that a victim seeking confirmation or apology might instead be met by rejection or denial.

In this case, Keller said, that didn't happen. He knows that other victims, who read or hear about his session with Proud, may try to schedule similar face-to-face encounters with their abusers. Keller said he is reluctant to encourage or discourage them.

"I can't answer for everyone," he said. "It was the most difficult thing I've ever done in my life."

He offered thanks to the diocese for "working with me and honoring me." He said Minehan assured him that Proud - on sabbatical from serving as pastor of Annunciation Church near Clinton, in Oneida County - will no longer serve as a priest.

Tuesday, Minehan said that decision has yet to be made. He said it will be decided in keeping with the church guidelines, based on the final evaluation at St. Luke.

Still, Keller said, that frees him to move on with his life, as a husband and a Christian.

"I went in, and gave the whole thing to God, and did the best I could," Keller said. "I needed it for me, and I hope for the best for him."