

BishopAccountability.org

" I Wasn't a Moral Monster,' Says Former Priest, Child Sex Abuser

By Mike McAndrew
Post-Standard (Syracuse, NY)
April 11, 2002

A Catholic priest who sexually abused children in the Syracuse diocese said the emotional isolation he experienced as a young priest led to his crime.

John Lugowski, a former Franciscan priest, served at St. Joseph Church in Endicott, near Binghamton, from 1981 to 1984. He left the priesthood in 1989 after serving eight months in jail for sodomizing a 10-year-old boy.

Diocesan officials cannot recall any other priest being convicted of child sex abuse in the seven-county diocese in the past 20 years, said Danielle Cummings, communications director for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse.

"I wasn't a moral monster. I didn't decide to be a priest to get at kids," Lugowski, 54, said recently in his first public interview about his case.

He said he was much younger than the priests he knew in Endicott, and he had little social contact with them. As a priest, he worried about showing affection for women in his parish. The only people he felt it was safe to show affection toward were children.

"The isolation brought me toward trouble," Lugowski said.

He said he had sexual contact with five boys in the Binghamton area between 1981 and 1987.

Lugowski said he is amazed by recent news accounts of Catholic bishops in America being accused of transferring priests accused of sexual abuse with minors from parish to parish and allowing them to elude prosecution.

That didn't happen to him.

"The Syracuse diocese, the Franciscans ... no one attempted to protect me at all. There was no attempt to cover it up," Lugowski said.

In 1984, three years before his arrest, the Franciscan order transferred Lugowski from the Endicott parish to a New Jersey parish. The transfer was routine and not prompted by any allegations, Lugowski said. He said he occasionally returned to Binghamton to have sex with youths.

None of his sex partners were members of his parish or children he met through his ministry, he said.

Lugowski pleaded guilty in 1987 in Broome County Court to felony counts of sexual abuse and sodomy.

A judge sentenced Lugowski to one year in the county jail, said Kevin Dooley, the former senior assistant district attorney who handled the case.

"It was horrendous conduct," Dooley said.

Friend recruited boy

The case garnered little attention, as it happened years before the clergy sexual abuse scandal erupted this year in the Boston diocese.

"My case had nothing to do with me being a priest. I knew them (the victims) through the YMCA," Lugowski said.

He said he once mentioned to an acquaintance who worked at the Binghamton YMCA that he had fantasized about having sex with a teen-age boy.

A few months later, the friend, Michael Gregg, introduced the priest to a boy who was willing to trade sex for money, Lugowski said. That boy introduced him to another child willing to exchange sex for cash.

"It spiraled from there," he said.

In 1987, Binghamton police arrested Gregg and Lugowski on sodomy and sexual abuse charges.

Gregg was sentenced to 5 to 15 years in prison for sodomy. He was paroled in 1998.

Professional help

The Franciscan order sent Lugowski to The Southdown Institute, a psychiatric counseling center for clergy near Toronto, for 11 months before he was sentenced.

"(The sex abuse) was just a manifestation of a bigger problem. I was basically depressed," he said.

No victims filed lawsuits against the Franciscans or the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse as a result of Lugowski's conduct.

Lugowski worked in the Syracuse diocese, but did not report to the local bishop. He was supervised by the Conventual Franciscan Order in Rensselaer. Franciscan priests staff two churches in the Syracuse diocese: St. Joseph's in Endicott and Assumption Church on North Salina Street, Syracuse.

"We had received letters of compliment. He was considered a very energetic priest with a lot of new ideas," said the Rev. Canice Connors, minister provincial of the Conventual Franciscan Order. "We had received no other allegations against him before or after his arrest.

"He wasn't a serial abuser. My analysis was it was just a case of stupidity. I think the explanation was immaturity. Some felt he was emotionally immature," said Connors, a former director of The Southdown Institute and of St. Luke's Institute in Silver Spring, Md., a facility that treats priests accused of sex abuse.

The first corrections officer Lugowski encountered in jail was a former parishioner from the Endicott church. The guard told Lugowski he thought he looked familiar, but couldn't place him, Lugowski recalled. The next day, the guard sheepishly told Lugowski he figured out how he knew him.

"That was the most embarrassing thing of all," Lugowski said.

One day, one of the youths Lugowski had molested was arrested on a robbery charge and tossed into Lugowski's cell, Lugowski said.

"We talked. He wasn't mad at me," Lugowski said.

After jail

In 1989, on the day he was released from prison, Lugowski said, about a dozen former Endicott parishioners threw him a party at a private residence.

"I was really touched. It was almost unbelievable," he said.

But his life was not easy. He was penniless and homeless. He had a master's degree in theology, but he couldn't get a job that paid more than minimum wage.

Lugowski spent several months living at a Franciscan order residence on Staten Island, hoping to be assigned to do ministerial work. He said he figured he wouldn't be put back into a parish. He hoped he would be allowed to be a prison chaplain.

But his Franciscan supervisors and the Catholic bishops he contacted did not want him mixing with the public.

"I didn't see any future," he said.

So Lugowski left the Franciscan community in 1989.

"His alternative was he had to live in a completely sequestered residence, in a supervised institution," Connors said.

A new life

The Franciscan community gave Lugowski a used car, supplied his health insurance and paid for his return to college so he could train for another career.

"I've worked hard to put together a new life," Lugowski said.

These days, Lugowski lives in New Jersey with his dog and works as a computer programmer. He asked that his town not be identified.

He said he hasn't had sexual contact with children since his arrest. He said he has no sexual desire for children.

Lugowski, who underwent years of therapy after his arrest, considers himself rehabilitated.

"I have adult relationships. Friends. All the stuff I didn't have before," he said.

"Not all child abusers are pathological," he said. "Obviously, if you're pathological, you can't be rehabilitated."

Lugowski remains a practicing Catholic. He said he thinks the Catholic Church could lessen the frequency of clergy sexual abuse if it allowed its priests to marry.

"Celibacy is part of the problem," he said.

But he said it would also help if priests were kinder to each other.

"If they were more caring and there was more emotional support, it would help," Lugowski said.

John Lugowski

Age: 54:

Home: New Jersey

Occupation: Computer programmer

Religious service: A Roman Catholic priest from 1976 to 1989. Served at St. Joseph's Church in Endicott (Broome County) from 1981 to 1984.

Criminal record: Pleaded guilty in 1987 to felony counts of sexual abuse and sodomy. Served eight months in Broome County jail for sodomizing a 10-year-old boy.

Any original material on these pages is copyright © BishopAccountability.org 2004. Reproduce freely with attribution.