

Setting the record straight in the case of abusive Milwaukee priest Father Lawrence Murphy

Then-presiding judge for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee gives first-person account of church trial

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For CatholicAnchor.org

To provide context to this article, I was the Judicial Vicar for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee from 1995-2003. During those years, I presided over four canonical criminal cases, one of which involved Father Lawrence Murphy. Two of the four men died during the process. God alone will judge these men.

To put some parameters on the following remarks, I am writing this article with the express knowledge and consent of Archbishop Roger Schwietz, OMI, the Archbishop of Anchorage, where I currently serve. Archbishop Schwietz is also the publisher of the Catholic Anchor newspaper.

I will limit my comments, because of judicial oaths I have taken as a canon lawyer and as an ecclesiastical judge. However, since my name and comments in the matter of the Father Murphy case have been liberally and often inaccurately quoted in the New York Times and in more than 100 other newspapers and on-line periodicals, I feel a freedom to tell part of the story of Father Murphy's trial from ground zero.

As I have found that the reporting on this issue has been inaccurate and poor in terms of the facts, I am also writing out of a sense of duty to the truth.

The fact that I presided over this trial and have never once been contacted by any news organization for comment speaks for itself.

My intent in the following paragraphs is to accomplish the following:

To tell the back-story of what actually happened in the Father Murphy case on the local level;

To outline the sloppy and inaccurate reporting on the Father Murphy case by the New York Times and other media outlets;

To assert that Pope Benedict XVI has done more than any other pope or bishop in history to rid the Catholic Church of the scourge of child sexual abuse and provide for those who have been injured;

To set the record straight with regards to the efforts made by the church to heal the wounds caused by clergy sexual misconduct. The Catholic Church is probably the safest place for children at this point in history.

Before proceeding, it is important to point out the scourge that child sexual abuse has been — not only for the church but for society as well. Few actions can distort a child's life more than sexual abuse. It is a form of emotional and spiritual homicide and it starts a trajectory toward a skewed sense of sexuality. When committed by a person in authority, it creates a distrust of almost anyone, anywhere.

As a volunteer prison chaplain in Alaska, I have found a corollary between those who have been incarcerated for child sexual abuse and the priests who have committed such grievous actions. They tend to be very smart and manipulative. They tend to be well liked and charming. They tend to have one aim in life — to satisfy their hunger. Most are highly narcissistic and do not see the harm that they have caused. They view the children they have abused not as people but as objects. They rarely show remorse and moreover, sometimes portray themselves as the victims. They are, in short, dangerous people and should never be trusted again. Most will recommit their crimes if given a chance.

As for the numerous reports about the case of Father Murphy, the back-story has not been reported as of yet.

In 1996, I was introduced to the story of Father Murphy, formerly the principal of St. John's School for the Deaf in Milwaukee. It had been common knowledge for decades that during Father Murphy's tenure at the school (1950-1974) there had been a scandal at St. John's involving him and some deaf children. The details, however, were sketchy at best.

Courageous advocacy on behalf of the victims (and often their wives), led the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to revisit the matter in 1996. In internal discussions of the curia for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, it became obvious that we needed to take strong and swift action with regard to the wrongs of several decades ago. With the consent of then-Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland, we began an investigation into the allegations of child sexual abuse as well as the violation of the crime of solicitation within the confessional by Father Murphy.

We proceeded to start a trial against Father Murphy. I was the presiding judge in this matter and informed Father Murphy that criminal charges were going to be levied against him with regard to child sexual abuse and solicitation in the confessional.

In my interactions with Father Murphy, I got the impression I was dealing with a man who simply did not get it. He was defensive and threatening.

Between 1996 and August, 1998, I interviewed, with the help of a qualified interpreter, about a dozen victims of Father Murphy. These were gut-wrenching interviews. In one instance the victim had become a perpetrator himself and had served time in prison for his crimes. I realized that this disease is virulent and was easily transmitted to others. I heard stories of distorted lives, sexualities diminished or expunged. These were the darkest days of my own priesthood, having been ordained less than 10 years at the time. Grace-filled spiritual direction has been a Godsend.

I also met with a community board of deaf Catholics. They insisted that Father Murphy should be removed from the priesthood and highly important to them was their request that he be buried not as a priest but as a layperson. I indicated that a judge, I could not guarantee the first request and could only make a recommendation to the latter request.

In the summer of 1998, I ordered Father Murphy to be present at a deposition at the chancery in Milwaukee. I received, soon after, a letter from his doctor that he was in frail health and could travel not more than 20 miles (Boulder Junction to Milwaukee would be about 276 miles). A week later, Father Murphy died of natural causes in a location about 100 miles from his home.

With regard to the inaccurate reporting on behalf of the New York Times, the Associated Press, and those that utilized these resources, first of all, I was never contacted by any of these news agencies but they felt free to quote me. Almost all of my quotes are from a document that can be found online with the correspondence between the Holy See and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. In an October 31, 1997 handwritten document, I am quoted as saying 'odds are that this situation may very well be the most horrendous, number wise, and especially because these are physically challenged, vulnerable people. " Also quoted is this: "Children were approached within the confessional where the question of circumcision began the solicitation."

The problem with these statements attributed to me is that they were handwritten. The documents were not written by me and do not resemble my handwriting. The syntax is similar to what I might have said but I have no idea who wrote these statements, yet I am credited as stating them. As a college freshman at the Marquette University School of Journalism, we were told to check, recheck, and triple check our quotes if necessary. I was never contacted by anyone on this document, written by an unknown source to me. Discerning truth takes time and it is apparent that the New York Times, the Associated Press and others did not take the time to get the facts correct.

Additionally, in the documentation in a letter from Archbishop Weakland to then-secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone on August 19, 1998, Archbishop Weakland stated that he had instructed me to abate the proceedings against Father Murphy. Father Murphy, however, died two days later and the fact is that on the day that Father Murphy died, he was still the defendant in a church criminal trial. No one seems to be aware of this. Had I been asked to abate this trial, I most certainly would have insisted that an appeal be made to the supreme court of the church, or Pope John Paul II if necessary. That process would have taken months if not longer.

Second, with regard to the role of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), in this matter, I have no reason to believe that he was involved at all. Placing this matter at his doorstep is a huge leap of logic and information.

Third, the competency to hear cases of sexual abuse of minors shifted from the Roman Rota to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith headed by Cardinal Ratzinger in 2001. Until that time, most appeal cases went to the Rota and it was our experience that cases could languish for years in this court. When the competency was changed to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in my observation as well as many

of my canonical colleagues, sexual abuse cases were handled expeditiously, fairly, and with due regard to the rights of all the parties involved. I have no doubt that this was the work of then Cardinal Ratzinger.

Fourth, Pope Benedict has repeatedly apologized for the shame of the sexual abuse of children in various venues and to a worldwide audience. This has never happened before. He has met with victims. He has reigned in entire conferences of bishops on this matter, the Catholic Bishops of Ireland being the most recent. He has been most reactive and proactive of any international church official in history with regard to the scourge of clergy sexual abuse of minors. Instead of blaming him for inaction on these matters, he has truly been a strong and effective leader on these issues.

Finally, over the last 25 years, vigorous action has taken place within the church to avoid harm to children. Potential seminarians receive extensive sexual-psychological evaluation prior to admission. Virtually all seminaries concentrate their efforts on the safe environment for children. There have been very few cases of recent sexual abuse of children by clergy during the last decade or more.

Catholic dioceses all across the country have taken extraordinary steps to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults. As one example, which is by no means unique, is in the Archdiocese of Anchorage, where I currently work. Here, virtually every public bathroom in parishes has a sign asking if a person has been abuse by anyone in the church. A phone number is given to report the abuse and almost all church workers in the archdiocese are required to take yearly formation sessions in safe environment classes. I am not sure what more the church can do.

To conclude, the events during the 1960's and 1970's of the sexual abuse of minors and solicitation in the confessional by Father Lawrence Murphy are unmitigated and gruesome crimes. On behalf of the church, I am deeply sorry and ashamed for the wrongs that have been done by my brother priests but realize my sorrow is probably of little importance 40 years after the fact. The only thing that we can do at this time is to learn the truth, beg for forgiveness, and do whatever is humanly possible to heal the wounds. The rest, I am grateful, is in God's hands.

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