

8-5-08 - Priest gets 10 years for abusing 3 minors: Gary Edward Underwood, 53 pleaded guilty to 6 counts of sexual abuse of a minor involving 3 victims

A.J. FLICK, The Tucson Citizen

Twenty years ago, Gary Edward Underwood made a good impression on parents and teens, many of whom took an immediate liking to the young, handsome, sports car-driving, beer-swiggling, hot tub-loving Catholic priest.

That image is in stark contrast to Underwood today, a remorseful 53-year-old who listened as three men testified about the priest's darker side, how he manipulated them, got them drunk, showed them pornography and molested them.

Pima County Superior Court Judge Richard Nichols sentenced Underwood on Monday to 10 years in prison and lifetime probation as a registered sex offender.

Underwood, who has been suspended from the priesthood and is free on bail, pleaded guilty in May to six counts of sexual abuse of a minor involving three victims.

"I wish my victims would know how truly sorry I am and how none of what happened was their fault," Underwood is quoted in a presentence report.

In court before sentencing, 15 supporters voiced doubts about his guilt, but Underwood apologized to his victims and asked for their forgiveness.

"It's been a long, emotional ride for us," one of the victims said after sentencing.

None of the four men who testified Monday, three of whom are named in the indictment, are being identified by the Tucson Citizen because they are considered victims.

"I'm hoping we can get this behind us," another victim said.

All four were teens or younger when they met Underwood, then youth pastor at St. Odilia Catholic Church. "It was a process, it seems, a well-thought-out process that starts as friendship," said one of his victims, now a 39-year-old dentist. "Then it progresses."

The first witness said the behavior that he remembered was some fondling, though he testified Underwood got him drunk so many times he didn't know if it had gone beyond that.

The second witness said Underwood performed oral sex on him twice.

The third man, who is serving a 17-year drug-dealing sentence with the Arizona Department of Corrections, testified that Underwood had sex multiple times with him.

"I'm bitter, man, and you can't make eye contact with anyone, man," he said, looking at Underwood, who stared down at the defense table. "You destroyed my life."

Throughout the testimony before a full courtroom, Underwood sat immobile at the defense table. Once, when a witness was describing how Underwood justified gay sex because Jesus' disciples supposedly had sex with each other, he glanced at his defense attorney, Dan Cooper, with his eyebrows raised, his hand covering his mouth.

The first witness, 41, who is now a married physician with four children, became Underwood's ward when his parents moved to Texas after his junior year in high school. It wasn't until he moved into the rectory that

he heard the running joke - that Underwood had a "friend of the month club," meaning plenty of young boys to pal around with.

When as a teen he dated girls or talked about sex, the doctor said, Underwood became jealous.

"I got a letter from Gary Underwood that stated graphically how 'I'm attracted to you. I'm not afraid to have a quote/unquote erection around you. I need you. I want you,' " the doctor said.

The doctor said he tried to suppress his memories of the year he spent with Underwood.

"You channel yourself to safer places," he said. "It's like a prisoner-of-war type thing. You put it in a place and you hope that door never opens."

Two witnesses said their experiences with Underwood led to addictions.

"The counselors told me without a doubt this is a result of what was happening to me and what Gary Underwood did to me," said the second witness, a 37-year-old painter. "I do the best that I can, but, at the same time, there's always something in the back of my head. I always have to be numbed somehow so I can forget. And if I don't, I'm even worse."

Underwood, who was ordained in 1980, served at St. Odilia Catholic Church, 7570 N. Paseo del Norte, from 1983 through 1986, Tucson diocese spokesman Fred Allison said.

After serving for several months in 1987 in Casa Grande, Underwood volunteered for the Archdiocese of the Military at the end of 1987, Allison said.

The diocese filed for bankruptcy in 2004 after lawsuits were filed over the sexual misconduct allegations.

In 2005, the diocese agreed to pay \$22.3 million to more than 50 sexual abuse victims of priests. Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of the Diocese of Tucson will review Underwood's status as a priest with the Vatican, Allison said.