

February 13, 2007 - **Documents Show Church Knew About Abuse**
MILWAUKEE, WI, Inside TMJ4, Charles Benson

MILWAUKEE - Stunning new details in secret court documents tell a chilling story of a local priest who was allowed to molest young boys again and again.

The documents suggest Catholic Church leaders in Milwaukee tried to cover up Father Siegfried Widera's shameful past. They detail an alleged pattern of sexual abuse and how the church failed to protect other children from Widera.

By all accounts, Fr. Siegfried Widera was a pedophile priest. But you will never hear church leaders use that term in court documents. A few years ago, Widera's alleged victims told us they still struggle with what happened and why.

"How can someone just slip through the system like that?" asked Eric Paino, an alleged victim.

"He's a coward and a criminal and someday he's going to be held accountable for it," said another alleged victim, Chris Huicochea.

The documents show the church first learned about Widera's sexual abuse in 1973 when Widera was convicted of molesting a young boy. He was working at Saint Mary's in Port Washington. He was put on probation, while the church paid for him to get counseling.

>From there, Widera was transferred to St. Andrew Parish in Delavan. Court records indicate no one was told of his past. In fact, church leaders received glowing letters from parishioners.

"He is wonderful with young children," wrote one mom.

"The children adore him," gushed another.

But those letters to church leaders, who knew of Widera's past, did not set off any alarm bells. However, they would come back to haunt parents years later when Widera was accused again of molesting boys in Delavan.

Confidential church records suggest they wanted to "try to keep a lid on the thing..." and encouraged a victim's mother "not to act with police."

Church leaders also knew of another incident where two women found Fr. Widera performing a sex act in the sacristy with two boys.

Widera then moved to Orange County, Calif., with the blessing of Milwaukee church leaders. In fact, Milwaukee Archbishop William Cousins sent a letter to the bishop in California praising Widera's work but only hinting at the priest's "moral problem having to do with a boy in a school."

The letter continues, there was "no great risk in allowing this man to return to pastoral work."

While in California, Widera would be transferred from church to church and be accused of molesting again and again.

"To find out this happened to so many other victims - I don't have words for it. It's painful," said Huicochea.

Widera killed himself in 2003.