

May 30, 2007 - Honoring Schmit hurtful to victims, justice process

The Toledo Blade, OH, by DAVID CLOHESSY

IT WOULD be easy to dismiss the controversy over a Toledo street honoring a dead Catholic priest.

Easy, but wrong.

This issue is no tempest in a teapot. Who a community chooses to honor matters. It especially matters when the honor is public and permanent, like the street named for Msgr. Jerome Schmit.

Let's start with a quick review of the facts. Back in 1980, police were investigating the brutal murder of Sister Margaret Ann Pahl. The prime suspect was a Catholic priest, the Rev. Gerald Robinson. Police officers were questioning him at the station. No one disputes any of this.

Fast forward 26 years. At Robinson's May, 2006 criminal trial, two retired Toledo police officers, with no apparent agenda, came out of retirement and offered clear and unchallenged testimony, under oath, about Robinson's interrogation. Both said that Msgr. Schmit suddenly showed up at the station, interrupted the session by walking in with a lawyer, and quickly walked out with Robinson. The prime suspect was never questioned again and the crime went unsolved for almost three decades. Ultimately, Robinson was convicted of killing the nun.

(None of this is our opinion. These facts were widely, even internationally reported by dozens of credible news outlets and can also be found in Blade religion writer David Yonke's excellent book on the trial, Sin, Shame and Secrets.)

Unless these two veteran law enforcement officials are concocting some conspiracy tale for some inexplicable reasons, there's virtually no doubt that Msgr. Schmit's inappropriate and unwarranted intervention enabled a dangerous murderer and accused child molester to walk free for decades. (Who knows who else he may have hurt during those years.)

Now that this tragic history is known, is it wise or appropriate to use taxpayers' funds to publicly honor Msgr. Schmit? Why recognize someone who (according to several credible sources, under oath, with no axe to grind) thwarted the murder investigation of a colleague?

Consider the harm of such an unusual move.

First, honoring the man sends a terribly discouraging message to crime victims in general and sex crime victims in particular.

Second, a public tribute rubs salt into the already deep and still fresh wounds of clergy sex-abuse victims who have seen influential church officials, time and time again, cover up crimes and escape accountability.

Finally, honoring Msgr. Schmit is hurtful to the grieving family of Sister Margaret. Imagine how her nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends feel knowing that he has a Toledo street named after him. Imagine how they feel walking by and seeing the sign.

On one hand, we beg witnesses and victims of terrible crimes to come forward, report those crimes, and cooperate with the often long and arduous criminal justice system. On the other hand, when that process reveals wrongdoing that makes us uncomfortable, we want to ignore that wrong-doing. We can't have it both ways.

The choice is simple: we either publicly praise someone who obstructed justice, or we don't.

This one's a no-brainer.

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