

8-21-08 -- Schwaegel: Priest's abuses well known to church leaders in 1982
BY GEORGE PAWLACZYK, Belleville News-Democrat (IL)

The Rev. Joseph Schwaegel testified today that when parents wrote him in 1982 that the Rev. Raymond Kownacki had sexually molested two boys, he did nothing other than tell the parents to forget the issue.

"By this time (1982) everyone in diocese command knew this guy was a child molester, isn't that right?" plaintiff's attorney Steve Wigginton asked Schwaegel.

Schwaegel's barely audible answer was "Yes."

The trial, that began Monday in St. Clair County Circuit Court, involves a lawsuit filed in 2002 by the former altar boy, James Wisniewski of Champaign, that accuses the Belleville Diocese of covering up widespread sexual child abuse by priests for decades and failing to investigate.

Schwaegel testified that a family from Salem wrote him about Kownacki molesting their son as well as Wisniewski. He testified he never interviewed the family, so he never met Wisniewski.

Wigginton then said, "Well, you can meet him now," and held up a poster-sized color photo of Wisniewski as a sixth grader, about the time he was allegedly molested. Schwaegel looked down and said nothing.

The trial involves a lawsuit brought in 2002 by Wisniewski and his Belleville attorneys, Wigginton and Mike Weilmuenster. They claim that Kownacki psychologically damaged their client by molesting him for five years beginning when he was about 13.

The sole defendant, the diocese, is represented by St. Louis attorney David Wells. The defense has so far told jurors that the diocese instituted a review board to investigate allegations of sex abuse of minors by priests. But the defense has not addressed testimony on Wednesday from former vicar general Monsignor James Margason that high-ranking church officials knew for years about allegations against Kownacki but failed to investigate.

Schwaegel, who was removed from active ministry in 1994 for a sex addiction not involving a minor, wore a charcoal sport coat and dark shirt but no priest collar, which is forbidden for priests removed from ministry.

He testified that despite taking an oath as a priest to specifically protect children, he never called police or walked three blocks from the chancery to the state's attorney's office to report allegations of criminal sexual abuse by Kownacki.

Schwaegel, who was the personal secretary to four bishops and, in 1982 when he got the letter from the Salem family, also served as vice chancellor, said he didn't think it was his job to report the abuse to civil authorities.

"Others were aware of the situation much more than I was," he said, referring to then Belleville Bishop John Wurm and then chancellor Monsignor Bernard Sullivan, both deceased.

Schwaegel testified that he was instructed by Wurm to write a letter to the family that complained about Kownacki. He said he never talked to the family, the victims or to Kownacki.

In the letter to the family at St. Theresa's Parish, Schwaegel wrote, "I am giving Father the benefit of the doubt," and asked the family to, "Let bygones be bygones."

The letter also stated, "I am sorry Father had to learn his lesson at the expense of causing grief to your and your family."

On the witness stand, Schwaegel said he lied in the letter about Kownacki learning his lesson because the priest had never been reprimanded or even questioned.