

SINS OF THE PAST

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PAWCATUCK - When parishioners of Sacred Heart Church in Norwich learned that their leader, Father Thomas McConaghy, was being accused of molesting a boy in the 1970s while serving at a military academy in Long Island, they were shocked.

For some former parishioners at St. Michael in Pawcatuck, the accusations have brought back painful memories of the past.

McConaghy, referred to by parishioners at St. Michael as "Father Tom," was pastor of the church from 1990 to 1998. During that time, a man named Michael Zaharie, a Pawcatuck resident, was volunteering his time at the school, taking students on trips and allegedly molesting them in private.

Kathy Shortridge, of Pawcatuck, who said her son was molested by Zaharie from the age of 7 to 15, says she believes Father Tom knew what was going on the entire time. Zaharie was ultimately convicted on two counts of second-degree sexual assault and two counts of first-degree assault. He served time in prison before his 2004 release.

Shortridge recalls how school and church officials appeared to address the alleged incidents.

"They had meetings about my son, without me being able to go," Shortridge says today.

Her son, along with others, would be told by Zaharie that they should confess to the priests at St. Michael, including Father Tom, and let them know they were being molested, she says. She says Zaharie told the boys that, if they confessed only to the priests, all would be forgiven; but if they told anyone else, they would go to hell. The priests apparently never told the authorities, Shortridge added.

"Father Tom knew," Shortridge said. "The priests listened to their sins, gave them penance, and told them to live with it."

Neither Connecticut law nor church and clergy regulations require religious figures to divulge information confessed in confidence to a priest.

"The priest penitence privilege exists and cannot be violated," said Attorney Michael Lynch, of Westerly. "The priest is not subject to civil sanctions."

Brandon Dowler, who attended the Catholic private school in the mid-1990s and is now 22 years old, said he will never forget hearing rumors about incidents that allegedly took place.

Dowler recalled that, when he was in seventh grade, a drawing was found by students and teachers that depicted a boy, bent over a desk with a priest sodomizing him, and a nun watching. Dowler said that the next day teachers wrote a statement on the board using some words that were written in the drawing. He said the teachers told the students they had to write a sentence using the words on the board and hand them into the teacher.

Dowler said the teachers were trying to find out who had drawn the picture based on their handwriting.

After Brandon's mother, Lyn Dowler, a social worker, found out about the incident, she says she quickly confronted Father Tom and Sister Guytina, who was principal at the school during the 90s, and worked with Father Tom while at the academy on Long Island.

As a social worker, Lyn says, "My training would tell me that (the drawing) was based on experience."

Lyn pressed Sister Guytina and Father Tom to investigate the situation and find out if the depiction had any truth to it. Lyn said she was talking on the phone to Sister Guytina and told her that she needed to give the depiction to the police. But Lyn was then told that the picture was destroyed.

"(Sister Guytina) said, 'I have nothing to say,' and hung up on me," Lyn says now.

In a letter received by The Sun from Shane Zaharie, Michael Zaharie's nephew, he recalls when he was a student at St. Michael in the 1990s, under the guidance of Father Tom and Sister Guytina, and was subjected to a random underwear check by the principal.

"The reason for doing this was that somebody wasn't wearing underwear, so (they had) to find out who it is. Why should it matter?" Shane states. Brandon said he had also been subjected to random walk-ins to the bathroom by Sister Guytina.

Sister Guytina is currently assigned to St. Luke's Church in Ellington, Conn. She did not return a number of calls from The Sun seeking comment.

Ultimately, when Shortridge's son told her what was happening to him, she contacted the Stonington Police, and, after an investigation, they arrested Michael Zaharie, Capt. Jerry Desmond of the Stonington Police Department confirmed.

Shortridge had considered suing the school, but at the time her lawyer said there were not enough people coming forward who said they were molested by the priests - or confirmation as to whether the priests at St. Michael knew what was going on.

Desmond said he could not comment on any investigation involving priests at the school and church. Michael Zaharie was convicted and sentenced in January 1998 to 15 years in prison, with seven to serve, the rest suspended, and with 10 years probation.

Michael Zaharie was released from prison on April 12, 2004. Although he is registered on Connecticut's sex offender Web site, he is currently listed as being in violation of compliance for failing to confirm his address, according to the state's registry Web site.

The Sun called Zaharie's parents, but they said they could not speak about the situation. Officials at St. Michael also did not return calls for comment.

Jacqueline Keller, Director of Communications for the Diocese of Norwich, released a statement that said the Stonington Police made a "thorough investigation" of reports into cases involving priests who formerly served at St. Michael.

"They found no substance to the complaint and Father McConaghy was returned to active ministry on Dec. 30, 1998, when he was assigned to Sacred Heart Parish in Norwichtown," Keller's letter states.

Keller added that she urges anyone who was "ever inappropriately treated to come forward."

Bishop Michael Cote of the Diocese of Norwich issued a statement indicating that "Father Tom" has been accused of molestation, but the only reason he was taken out of the role of pastor is because of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

"This resignation must not be construed as an admission of any of the allegations against him," Cote said. "Rather it should stand as an expression of his concern to the parish and the Diocese of Norwich."

Cote asks Catholics to pray for "Father Tom" and the victim that came forward in the Long Island case. He also urges anyone who felt they were inappropriately treated by Father Tom to contact the Diocese at the report and assistance line at 1-800-624-7407. The Connecticut sex abuse hotline number is 1-888-999-5545; the Rhode Island sex abuse hotline is 1-800-494-8100.

The Dowlers and Shortridge said the reason they are telling their story is in the hope that others who may have been molested by "Father Tom" or anyone else will come forward.

"There are a lot of other kids out there," Shortridge said. "I know there's a lot of other kids out here."