

6-12-08 - Speak No Evil: Margate, FL priest misbehaved-secretary punished

By Thomas Francis, NEW TIMES, FL

Rev. Neil Doherty's secretary always suspected he had a dark side. She says she was punished for talking to police. Theresa Gerstner can recall how suspicion crept slowly into her mind. It was peculiar to see boys climbing into Rev. Neil Doherty's car for a trip to the movies. Then she learned the St. Vincent Catholic Church pastor took boys to his mother's house in West Palm Beach and even to his uncle's cabin in New Hampshire. It seemed downright wrong when Doherty mentioned having given a massage to a boy who he claimed was sore from playing baseball.

"I knew about the sexual misconduct for years," says Gerstner. "But I couldn't prove it. It was only my opinion, my observation."

Shortly after Gerstner's claims about Doherty were published in the Miami Herald, the archdiocese dismissed her. Her claims seem to show the Archdiocese of Miami singled out and punished an employee who dared to expose a priest's malfeasance. "You don't go against these people," says Gerstner. "They're like the Mafia."

Doherty's attorney, David Bogenschutz, did not return calls seeking comment about Gerstner's claims. A spokeswoman for the archdiocese declined to comment, citing legal concerns for pending criminal cases. Gerstner is likely to testify against Doherty in one of the most sordid Catholic sex abuse trials, which is expected to take place by year's end.

Gerstner, who is 61 and lives in Clearwater, moved from New Jersey to Margate in 1972 with her husband and two sons. That's when she joined St. Vincent Catholic Church on NW 18th Street. It was the closest parish to her family's home.

At mass, Gerstner gave readings from the liturgy and served as a Eucharistic minister. She volunteered to teach religion to high school students, chaperone their dances, be president of the church women's club, and even clean the place. At Easter and Christmas, Gerstner decorated the chapel.

She took a job as an assistant secretary in 1986, when the parish was led by Rev. William Gunther, and by 2000 was the office manager, a role that included hiring church staff and balancing accounts.

When Doherty arrived in 1991, he struck Gerstner as "arrogant," she says. He chased away longtime staffers and criticized those who stayed. "No matter what you did, it wasn't good enough for him," Gerstner states. Then one day, someone showed her a newspaper ad placed by the church at Doherty's behest seeking a clerical worker. She told Doherty she would fight to keep her job. That threat kept her employed, she believes.

Then there was the abuse. Gerstner says Doherty had the windows to his office covered by a film that made it impossible to see in from the outside. It was there he counseled adolescent boys who were having trouble at school or home.

Investigators would later learn of more than a dozen boys who had been raped or otherwise abused by the pastor. In nearly every victim's version, Doherty encouraged use of alcohol and drugs. Some boys reported waking to the sight of Doherty raping them. Others reported soreness or bleeding from their rectums.

Soon, Gerstner learned Doherty was misusing the church finances, partly to give cash to the boys he counseled and allegedly abused. Gerstner claims the priest snatched a \$12,000 check made out to the church, deposited it in a bank account for his private use, and spent the money on taxes for his uncle's cabin in New Hampshire.

She didn't take her concerns to the archdiocese because Doherty had well-placed friends, such as Chancellor Gerald LaCerra, whose job was to investigate claims of misconduct. (LaCerra died in 2000, before the matter

became public.) Besides, the parish men's club had complained to Archbishop Edward McCarthy and to his successor, John Favalora, about Doherty's financial improprieties, but nothing was done. So she said nothing and waited.

Gerstner would not know until later that Doherty had amassed about 30 years of abuse complaints. Some were filed with the archdiocese by alleged victims. Others were initiated by their parents. (These were detailed April 17 in New Times in "Lambs to Slaughter.")

Finally, in April 2002, as the child sex scandal rocked Boston's churches, the Archdiocese of Miami removed Doherty. Gerstner remembers the day attorney Patrick Fitzgerald and Monsignor Tomás Marín arrived at the office. Doherty left soon after on the pretext that he was attending the funeral of a priest in Maine.

In fact, Doherty had been placed on administrative leave. In the months that followed, he phoned the office, mostly to rage about Gerstner's refusal to place money in his Publix grocery account. It was a perk reserved for the church pastor, and as far as Gerstner was concerned, he was no longer functioning in that capacity. "He told me that he is still pastor of the church and as soon as he comes back, I will be fired," she says.

But the same year, lawsuits against the archdiocese by alleged victims of Doherty began to pile up. Doherty returned only to clean out his office.

As church attorneys began settling some of the cases in 2004, he retired on a pension that paid \$3,600 a month, says Gerstner, and his health benefits were paid in full for the rest of his life. It was an unusually soft landing.

A Broward Sheriff's detective named Eric Hendel arrived at the St. Vincent office in December 2005. He was investigating a victim who alleged Doherty had drugged and raped him at the priest's home when the boy was 8 years old. Hendel wanted to talk to Gerstner.

The next month, Gerstner gave a wide-ranging interview to Hendel. In July 2006, her statements were made public as part of Doherty's indictment for felony sexual battery against a child. On July 31, about a week after Gerstner's statements were quoted in South Florida newspapers, an archdiocese official arrived at the office. He ordered Gerstner to give him her keys and leave the premises immediately. She was being investigated for criminal mismanagement of church funds, he said.

Gerstner says it was retaliation: "To keep me silent, they fabricated this allegation of misappropriation of funds. It's not true."

A new round of articles appeared containing the archdiocese allegation that Gerstner was a thief. "Witness Under Investigation" was the headline in the Herald. "Church whistleblower put on leave," explained the Sun-Sentinel. The Margate Police Department investigated the archdiocese report and delivered its findings to the State Attorney's Office, which has not filed criminal charges. Records are sealed from public view because, police explain, there's an ongoing investigation.

In August 2007, Gerstner received a letter stating her employment with the archdiocese would end the last day of that month. It mentioned nothing about the allegation of misusing church funds.

She received no severance package and would face the coming months without health benefits — a dangerous proposition for a woman her age. What's more, her retirement plan lay in ruins.

"If I had stayed working there until I was 65, as I had planned, I would have gotten a pension check of about \$1,300 per month," Gerstner says. Instead, she gets nothing. This month, the archdiocese sent a letter denying her request for pension funds. She can't afford an attorney to challenge the archdiocese, and she can't afford to retire. In March, Gerstner moved to Clearwater, where her husband had found work. She puts in 12 hours a day at a doctor's office. "I will never be able to retire," she says.

After a year's hiatus, Gerstner has returned to the Catholic Church. She looks forward to testifying in Doherty's criminal trial. And she relishes the chance to expose the leaders of the Miami Archdiocese for the sake of the boys she believes Doherty abused. "I truly do not care what they have done to me — it's over; I have moved on," she says. "My main focus is to open the eyes of the people who truly do not know what has happened and what is still going on in the Archdiocese of Miami and to stop [church members] from giving money to support this immorality and corruption."

Doherty, meanwhile, is under house arrest as he awaits trial.