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Priest calls for truth on abuse

Dennis Coday | Dec. 21, 2010

Fr. James Connell speaks during Mass at Holy Name Parish in Sheboygan, Wis., in this file photo. (The Sheboygan Press)

A senior Milwaukee archdiocesan priest, who earlier this year publicly criticized bishops in Wisconsin for not living up to the mandates of the child-protection charter the bishops passed during their 2002 meeting in Dallas, is calling on U.S. priests to stand ?publicly with those who seek the revelation of the complete truth regarding the priest sexual abuse scandal in the church.?

Fr. James Connell of Sheboygan, Wis., put those words to action Dec. 1 by appearing on the steps of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Milwaukee for a news conference called by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP.

?I am absolutely convinced that we need the truth,? Connell said from the cathedral steps. ?Justice requires that the truth be known.?

Five days later, Connell released his open letter, which has been widely distributed through e-mail and on Web sites, to U.S. priests.

?My brother priests, obviously the revelation of the truth is not forthcoming easily, but we can be the catalyst for change,? Connell writes in the letter. ?We have been sent into the Lord?s vineyard with a mission to provide voice and witness to all that Jesus Christ is about. I trust that you will do all that you can to help bring about a grace-filled resolution to this crisis and scandal. And, as I say, we need to do this in a vocal and public way.?

In the letter, Connell urges priests to ?raise our united voices in calling for the necessary sequence of truth, justice, healing, forgiveness and peace, regarding this most difficult challenge in the church. ... Let us always embrace the words of the Lord: Fear not; the truth will set you free.?

Connell is a pastor in Sheboygan and the vice chancellor of the archdiocese.

The text of Connell's letter can be found here: Open Letter to U.S. Priests [1].

Peter Isely, the Midwest director of SNAP, praised Connell. ?No senior member of the hierarchy of any diocese in the country has done this.?

In his letter, Connell writes:

?I see four positive results coming from the complete truth being available to all people.

?1. The truth would complete the puzzle so that the picture can be seen clearly, both validating the stories of the victim/survivors while also clearing the names of the innocent.

?2. The truth would help create accountability for what happened.

?3. The truth would empower the laity and the clergy alike to become the seedbed from which can come forth justice, healing, forgiveness and peace. This effort needs the people in the pews, but first they need to know the truth.

?4. The truth would provide the energy to generate necessary changes in the church.?

At the news conference Connell joined, SNAP was protesting a motion filed by the attorney for recently retired Auxiliary Bishop Richard Sklba asking a judge to seal a deposition that Sklba is scheduled to give next month in a case regarding priest sex abuse cases.

According to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Sklba?s attorney, Patrick W. Brennan, asked Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Thomas Cooper to either block Sklba?s deposition or strictly limit its scope and to bar the public release of the deposition.

?The motion is an apparent attempt to avoid a repeat of the fallout from the 2008 deposition of retired Archbishop Rembert Weakland, in which he called Sklba his ?go-to guy? for most things, including the handling of sex abuse allegations. That testimony was widely reported in news media ... and posted on YouTube and other Web sites,? the *Journal Sentinel* reported.

In his letter to priests, Connell describes a conversion process that he began in late 2009 when he and other Milwaukee archdiocesan priests reached out to survivors of sexual abuse by priests. This resulted in ?an ongoing series of simple candle vigil services for prayer and talking. The effort is making a difference,? Connell wrote.

?A question that is asked by some victim/survivors is where have all the good priests been?? Connell?s letter continues. ?No doubt our presence now is warmly appreciated, but this challenging question has caused me to reflect on my own accountability.?

Connell writes that he publically apologized to his Sheboygan parishioners during the week of Nov. 13-14.

?I explained that I had not been where I should I have been. I was not standing with people in pain who needed the public presence of a priest. I had been inattentive when I should have noticed. I apologized. Of course, I cannot reverse time, I told my parishioners, but I can be different going forward, especially by standing publicly with those who seek the revelation of the complete truth regarding the priest sexual abuse scandal in the church.

?The reaction of my parishioners has been powerfully supportive,? Connell wrote.

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Fr. James Connell was the subject of an *NCR* profile in July, by editor at large Tom Roberts:
Critical question leads priest to challenge lax abuse policies [2].

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[1] http://ncrnews.org/documents/connell_open_letter_to_priests.pdf
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