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Late Jesuit and ex-congressman Robert Drinan accused of attempted sex assault

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jun. 25, 2012

A popular online advice columnist has said that the late Fr. Robert Drinan, a famed Jesuit priest and onetime Democratic congressman from Massachusetts, tried to kiss and fondle her in the 1970s when she was 18 or 19 years old.

Emily Yoffe, who writes Slate's "Dear Prudence" column, said she was prompted to write her first-person account after reading coverage of the trial of Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State assistant football coach who is charged with raping and molesting 10 boys.

In the column, published Thursday, Yoffe said she was sexually assaulted three times before she turned 20.

She said the first episode took place was when she was 9 years old and a 15-year-old cousin tried to fondle her; the second was at age 15 when the father of a school friend drove her home and tried to kiss and grope her before she fled the car.

The third attack, she said, allegedly occurred when Drinan, who died in 2007, drove her home after a fundraiser for his re-election campaign. Drinan was first elected to Congress in 1970 on an anti-war platform and served five terms until then-Pope John Paul II said priests could not run for elected office.

Yoffe, whose family supported Drinan, wrote that as the priest was dropping her off in his car, he "began jabbering incoherently about men and women" and then tried to kiss her and ran his hands over her breasts. She said she shoved him away and scrambled out of the car, leaving a smear of pink lipstick on his clerical collar.

As with the other incidents, she said she was too embarrassed and fearful to tell anyone until now.

"What happened shook me up at the time, but my experiences weren't shattering. I didn't repress the memories -- I've just never given them much thought," Yoffe wrote. She said she wanted to encourage others to speak up, though Yoffe added that she is not sure she would counsel her own daughter to report Drinan if she were in the same circumstance.

"As we've seen too many times, coming forward in a case like that opens a woman up to character evisceration," Yoffe wrote. "Father Drinan died in 2007, and I'm aware that I'll be assailed for besmirching the memory of a distinguished man."

Long after his congressional service, Drinan remained an influential and controversial figure in the Catholic church, promoting many liberal social and doctrinal positions.

Drinan's niece, Ann Drinan, speaking on behalf of his family, told Slate: "We find it odd that anyone would come forward with this allegation decades later when our uncle is dead and in no position to defend himself."

Yoffe variously described her attacks as a sexual assault, abuse and "groping" and she said it wasn't clear whether any of the alleged perpetrators would have been charged or convicted of a crime.

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