

One priest's sex abuse case marked turning point for Milwaukee archdiocese

Brian Roewe | Jul. 2, 2013

Archbishop Rembert George Weakland of Milwaukee first heard of sexual abuse allegations related to Fr. William J. Effinger during the summer of 1979.

Fourteen years later, Effinger was charged with sexually assaulting a teenage boy in the late 1980s at his home in Sheboygan, Wis. He would eventually end up in prison while close to 10 others would allege the priest abused them as children during his 30-plus years in ministry.

Retrospectively, the Effinger case would become a turning point in the evolution of how Weakland, who served as Milwaukee archbishop from 1977 to 2002, viewed the sexual abuse of minors by clergy.

In [an October 2011 deposition](#) [1], released among the 6,000 pages of documents made public by the archdiocese Monday, Weakland told victims' attorney Jeff Anderson he immediately sent Effinger for "psychiatric or psychological treatment" upon learning of the accusations. That decision, Weakland said, followed the general practice in place when a case came to the archbishop's attention and spoke to the way he and others viewed sexual abuse at the time: that with treatment, a priest could be cured and returned to ministry.

"We were probably all of us naïve in thinking that it was a question of willpower and a question of self-discipline. Just as we were having some success with alcoholism, we could have the same success here [with sexual abuse of minors]," he said in 2011 talking about practices in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the deposition, Anderson sought clarification: "You learned after having formulated that thinking that it was kind of like alcoholism, that it could be stopped, that, in fact, when it came to sexual abuse of minors, many of these people could not control their sexual impulses, treated or not, correct?"

Weakland: "Yes, but that took awhile."

Anderson: "How long?"

Weakland: "10 years."

Weakland said his awareness of the magnitude of the sex abuse problem began to grow during the 1985 bishops' meeting held at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn. There, the bishops received training and a [92-page report on clergy sex abuse](#) [2].

Reflecting on that meeting in his book *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church*, the archbishop said, "I do not see how any Bishop after that meeting could have maintained that he was ignorant of the severity of the damage to the victims or that he did not know of the likely possibility of recidivism among the perpetrators."

He said he also came to realize that the choices he and other bishops made regarding a priest's transfer or

ministerial status became heightened in importance when it concerned the safety of children. The Effinger case further cemented that belief, Weakland said in the deposition.

In October 1992, Effinger was removed as pastor of Holy Name Parish in Sheboygan after telling a local television station he molested a boy 20 years ago in Kenosha. The priest would receive a 10-year maximum sentence for second-degree sexual assault, but other accusations would arise, some dating back as far as 1968. Effinger died in 1996 in prison.

Weakland, in his 2011 deposition, said during the time he had first learned of Effinger's abuse (in 1979), he would have thought that sexual abuse of minors "was controllable as a matter of my faith upbringing and also my formation.

"But as time went on, I thought it was still controllable, but rarely, and I began to see the enormous amount of help that was necessary for a priest to control something like this," Weakland said.

After Effinger's revelation to a Milwaukee TV station that he had abused and his ensuing removal from Holy Name Parish, Weakland met with more than 450 parishioners and informed them that "anyone in a situation like Father Bill will never be reassigned to any pastoral ministry," according to a [1992 Capital Times report](#) [3].

"It was from that kind of meeting," the archbishop said in his deposition, "... that I became aware of the way in which not just the individuals, but whole families could be hurt by the molestation and how difficult it was to come to any healing."

He said prior to the Effinger case, he had in fact allowed priests accused or admitted to sexually abusing children to remain in ministry.

"Up until the early '90s that's probably true, and then it became much more difficult in my own mind, because I began then to see that there was little success in helping," Weakland said.

More on the Milwaukee documents:

[Weakland: Milwaukee archbishops didn't disclose accused abusers](#) [4], by Kate Simmons

[One priest's sex abuse case marked turning point for Milwaukee archdiocese](#) [5], by Brian Roewe

[1993 Weakland deposition caused sex abuse survivors to unite](#) [6], by Marie Rohde

[Milwaukee documents show Dolan asked to transfer funds](#) [7], by Marie Rohde

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Links:

[1]

http://www.andersonadvocates.com/documents%5CKey_Milwaukee_Documents%5CFinal_Weakland_Deposition.pdf

[2] http://www.natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives/051702/051702a.htm

[3] http://www.bishop-accountability.org/news3/1992_11_03_CapitalTimes_DepartedPriest_William_Effinger_1.htm

[4] <http://ncronline.org/node/55271>

[5] <http://ncronline.org/node/55261>

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