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1993 Weakland deposition caused sex abuse survivors to unite

Marie Rohde | Jul. 2, 2013
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Publicity surrounding the 1993 release of an earlier deposition of then-Archbishop Rembert George Weakland served as the impetus for survivors of sex abuse to unite, a movement that has dogged the Milwaukee archdiocese for 20 years.

Milwaukee lawyer Robert Elliott questioned Weakland under oath as part of a lawsuit brought by victims of Fr. William J. Effinger [1], a priest with a history of abuse who was eventually convicted and sent to prison, where he died.

At the request of lawyers for the church, Weakland's sworn statement and others were sealed. Elliott released some of the information in a 1993 brief filed with the court. Using portions of Weakland's response to questions, Elliott said the archbishop and other church officials were aware of the problems.

After the story appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal*, Weakland sent letters to parish priests and other leaders in the archdiocese denying the report, which said the archdiocese did not have a policy that required allegations to be reported to civil authorities and that it had no program to educate school and parish personnel of allegations of misconduct. Many priests read his letter at weekend Masses.

The *Journal*'s editor, Sig Gissler, invited Weakland to respond to the story in his own words. The result was an 800-word essay that appeared at the top of the front page of a Sunday edition in late December 1993. Weakland devoted a single sentence of comfort to the victims then chastised the media for its "preoccupation" with the abuse allegations. "Priests need to be reassured by the entire Catholic community that they are loved and supported," he wrote.

The story caught the eye of Peter Isely, a Milwaukee psychotherapist who had been abused as a child at the St. Lawrence Seminary, a Capuchin high school north of Milwaukee. After contacting Gissler, Isely wrote a blistering response. Isely had not publicly discussed the abuse before writing his response to Weakland, but the response, he said, spurred him to become an activist.

In 2008, Weakland underwent a videotaped deposition [2] as the part of lawsuits brought by other victims of abuse was made public. He acknowledged that he transferred priests with histories of misconduct into parishes without alerting the community or the police. He said he held church trials for two abusive priests in the 1990s, something he said had not been done elsewhere. He said the trials resulted in a decision to remove the priests, but they appealed to the Vatican and remained in ministry.

It's unclear from that deposition whether Weakland made a plea directly to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, whose office handled sex abuse cases.

Weakland also accused the criminal justice system and others of failing to act when abuse allegations were made known.

Read Rohde's 2011 profile of Peter Isley [3] for Milwaukee Magazine.

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[Marie Rohde is a freelance writer based in Milwaukee.]

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/55261
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