

Today, December 19th 2018, I've come to the unfortunate conclusion that the Diocese of Gaylord is not taking seriously a sexual misconduct allegation I brought confidentially to them against Fr. Dennis Stilwell, my former pastor at St. Francis Xavier in Petoskey, and current vicar general of the Diocese.

At the time in 2015 I confronted Fr. Stilwell man to man. After the news of the homosexual misconduct by ex- Cardinal Theodore McCarrick in June of this year, followed by the release of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report in August of 2018, I realized that what happened to me by Fr. Stilwell was no longer an isolated incident or outlier in the Catholic Church. I then decided at the end of August to file a sexual misconduct allegation with the Diocese, asking them simply to deem the following to be credible or not.

Four months later, their investigation is still "ongoing." The following are the notes I took during the time Fr. Stilwell sexually harassed me. These dates below are from 2015. According to a lawyer I consulted, the following is considered *workplace sexual harassment* under Michigan law.

July 19<sup>th</sup>, in car on the way to and back from dinner with parishioner, with [ ] in car, patted me on the thigh.

July 25<sup>th</sup>, after confessions in back of church, man hugged me and then patted my stomach.

July 31<sup>st</sup> came up behind me when speaking with [ ] in her office and patted/rubbed my stomach. 🍌

August 1<sup>st</sup> came to talk to me in the confessional after I finished confessions and then slapped me on the butt.

August 5<sup>th</sup> Confronted him in his office to explain that there will be problems if this happens again.

This next part is a scan of handwritten notes I sent to Rob Westerman, the lawyer for the Diocese of Gaylord in late August including an extra detail about Fr. Stilwell's cottage that I had not considered pertinent at the time of the above writing:

— Had me meet at his house when I got to the parish. In-  
sisted on giving me a tour. Showed me his bedroom w/ a replica  
of Michaelangelo's Adam above the bed.  
July 19<sup>th</sup>, in car on the way to and back from dinner with parishioner, with [redacted] car, patted  
me on the thigh. (on the way there and the way back).

July 25<sup>th</sup>, after confessions in back of church, man hugged me and then patted my stomach.

July 31<sup>st</sup> came up behind me when speaking with [redacted] in [redacted] office and patted/rubbed my stomach.

August 1<sup>st</sup> came to talk to me in the confessional after I finished confessions and then slapped me on  
the butt.

August 5<sup>th</sup> Confronted him in his office to explain that there will be problems if this happens again.

Various low back pats after this throughout  
the rest of the time there. I always kept my  
hands on my legs when driving in a car with  
him to avoid unwanted thigh pats. If ever  
in a car with him again I always will.

What started this again is reading Cardinal  
McCarrick's response to harassment allegations being  
"I Don't recall that." That's exactly what Denny  
told me when I confronted him. I then came  
across a priests detailing how Cardinal McCarrick  
would do things to him in cars. Again, the similarities  
to Denny's actions started to make me queasy thinking  
about it again. I didn't bring this forward in 2015  
because of shock that this was the reason Denny  
wanted me in Petoskey. Also shame for not being  
able to defend myself in the moment.

8/21/2018  
[redacted]

He was clever, doing the first 3 in front of people. I didn't tell him to stop because I didn't want to draw attention to it. I also didn't think I would be believed that the vicar general of the diocese would do that. I didn't want public embarrassment; that this had happened, and that I didn't defend myself in the moment and I didn't want to hurt the people of God by making them have to hear about this.

Now I want this taken care of in the right way. I want him to retire now and have it in writing from the Diocese that Denny will never serve or substitute in any parish again. If not, I'll pursue this with a lawyer publicly. Any naivety I had about the priesthood's status quickly left.

I found from the Cadillac lawyer that the statutes of limitations had expired 16 days before I filed the complaint with the Diocese. Either way, I wouldn't have pursued it in civil court. I just wanted (and still want) the Diocese to do the right thing. The following are the notes I've taken and email communications with Larry LaCross, the victim abuse coordinator for the Diocese of Gaylord:

On August 21, 2018 I spoke with Larry Lacross at 6:09pm for 45 minutes and 37 seconds regarding descriptions of sexual harassment in 2015 against me by Rev. Dennis Stillwell. Larry promised to inform the conduct board regarding his notes, Rob Westerman, Bishop Raica, and also to provide me with periodical updates.

August 23rd, 2018 I called Larry LaCross to modify a portion of statement regarding what I thought Fr. Denny ultimately wanted. (8:22Pm)

August 30th, 4:22 Pm

Larry Lacross called me to give me an update on the Diocesan action in the claim I filed. Bishop had been notified. The Emmet County prosecutor had been notified. Larry explained an outside investigator, not a part of the Diocese, would be calling me to do a statement.

September 12th, 3:45pm-5pm

I met with Jim Janisse, the man who works as investigator for the Diocese. We met at Big Boy in Kalkaska. Jim arrived 15 minutes late due to 131 construction. The meeting was supposed to take place at 3:30pm. Jim recorded the conversation and I did as well.

The conversation went as one would expect in the circumstances. I related to him the events as I recorded them and remembered them, and he asked questions. I gave him the 1st page of the scanned document titled Stillwell1Pdf.

Toward the beginning of the meeting Jim told me his opinion that it is okay for gay man to be a priest and that perhaps the Church should change its teaching about this. Jim said he decided to share this in order to know 'where he stood on this' I assume in order to establish rapport. Considering the circumstances of the report I was about to make of sexual harassment against me by a male priest who was my direct superior, I found this to be very out of place and wonder why the Diocese would utilize a person in this capacity who disagrees with the Church's teaching on this issue.

Likewise, at one point during the report (about ¾ of the way through) Jim asked me if I am homophobic. Jim asked me this after I mentioned another reason I felt very uncomfortable during my time at Saint Francis was because I had learned that Fr. Stillwell had allowed a priest (removed for sexual assault of a minor male) to serve as sacristan at Saint Francis for 1 ½ during my time there as well as Fr. Stillwell's bishop friend Robert Lynch who also has a public record available in internet archives of sexually inappropriate behavior towards adult former employees and seminarians during his time as rector of a seminary. Jim asked this question as though my bringing all of this to his attention was inappropriate and it felt to me as though I were the one being interrogated.

Once again, Jim's seeming attitude of finding the above information making it seem as though I needed to defend myself from the charge of being 'homophobic' was very out of place in a meeting with him in which I desired to make a report of sexual harassment by another male against myself.

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On November 16th I wrote an email to Larry Lacross expressing frustration with the proceedings. He wrote back on November 18th acknowledging this. They read as follows:

To: llacross@catholichumanservices.org ;

Larry,

I want to thank you for your kindness and diligence so far in the misconduct report I've raised about Fr. Stilwell.

Regarding the process with the Diocese, I must admit my growing frustration. Before I brought this sexual misconduct behavior to your attention, my impression in almost 5 years of ministry in the institutional diocese regarding clerical misconduct was:

- 1) The Diocese will do something only if it's forced to.
- 2) Homosexual misconduct by clergy is not tolerated only if it becomes public knowledge.

Specifically with my case, I predicted back in August that:

- 3) The Diocese will try and delay their investigation until Fr. Stilwell retires as scheduled in June of 2019, and then do something, if anything.

I had hoped I was just being cynical about the last point. Thus far, I haven't been proven wrong. I'm also forced to say the same for 1 and 2.

As I mentioned to you on the phone it's hard for me to see how the institutional Diocese (ie, the Bishop, Rob, the Chancellor), actually are taking this seriously when they send me to a detective who begins the interview by telling me he doesn't see anything wrong with homosexuality, when he's supposed to be investigating an allegation of male to male sexual harassment.

It's also difficult for me to imagine how long it can take so long to schedule a lay panel to see if they think i'm lying or not.

You and me normally communicate through phone but I emailed this time in order to have a physical documentation of our communication.

A parishioner mentioned to me the bishop gave an interview for 9 and 10 news tonight. I'm about to go watch it on their website and hope to be pleasantly surprised by what he has to say. Yet, as humans say, actions speak louder than words.

In Christ,

Fr. Matthew Cowan

St. Stephen, St. Theresa

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Larry replied:

Larry LaCross <LLaCross@ .org>

Sun 11/18/2018 8:47 PM  
Inbox

Hello Fr. Matthew,

Thank you for reaching out to me. I know this process has been frustrating for you and taken longer than expected. I really appreciate your patience so far!

I did have a chance to check in and get an update. I believe that the investigator wanted to do one more interview with someone and then will submit a final report to the review board.

One thing I can clarify; I believe the review board meets somewhat regularly and also is able to schedule meetings as needed when information or reports are available. I don't anticipate a long wait one the final investigation report is complete; however that is just my impression.

I am hopeful that this process is completed soon and will let you know when I hear more.

I also hope that you found the Bishop's interview helpful. I did not hear that one but read some of their coverage.

Please know that you continue to be in my prayers.

Larry

Larry LaCross, LMSW, CAADC, CCS

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Two weeks later I became curious about how the process was actually supposed to be conducted, according to the Diocese. The part in italics below was taken from <http://www.dioceseofgaylord.org/policies-246/> under Diocese of Gaylord Employee Manual. I emailed Larry the following:

Cowan, Rev. Matthew

Thu 11/29/2018 5:52 PM

Sent Items

To:

Larry LaCross <LLaCross@ s.org>;

Another question is I read the following on the Diocesan procedures:

*The Human Resources Department must be informed in writing if there is no resolution or if the sexual harassment continues after it is reported to the supervisor. All complaints will be handled in strict confidence, except for such disclosure as is necessary to investigate the complaint or as may be required to be disclosed through law. The Human Resources Department (Director or Staff) then will begin an investigation to determine the credibility and extent of the alleged sexual harassment. **During this time the alleged violator will be placed on leave until the investigation is completed.***

I wasn't even aware of this until I read it jut now but feel justified since the thigh pats and low back pats continued to the point that I didn't even doc them anymore. I put the last part in bold myself. Has Fr. Stillwell really been on leave while since August 21?

Thank you and God bless,

Fr. Matthew Cowan  
St. Stephen, St. Theresa

Fr. Matthew Cowan  
St. Stephen, St. Theresa

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LaCross <LLaCross@ .org>

Fri 11/30/2018 7:50 AM

Inbox

To:

Cowan, Rev. Matthew;

Good morning Father Matthew,

Thank you for passing that along. I am not aware of exactly how that policy would apply to your situation. I am not aware that Fr. Stillwells status has changed at all but I am typically not involved in those types of decisions.

I will be talking with Rob again soon and I will bring up this question.

I hope you are well and looking forward to a blessed Advent.

Larry

Larry LaCross, LMSW, CAADC, CCS

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In response to this email, Larry called me. The following are the notes of our conversation:

Larry LaCross called me on Monday, December 10th at 9:54am. We spoke for 13 minutes and 19 seconds. Larry informed me the Diocesan review board would be making a decision "soon". It was taking so long because Jim Janisse, (the detective), wanted to do *one more interview*. This is despite the fact Jim told me he would have all the interviews finished within two weeks of our meeting on September 12th . Larry said that Fr. Stilwell had not been suspended from ministry during this process because Rob Westerman explained to Larry that the Diocese was following the *Diocese of Gaylord Policy for the Protection of Children* procedure with the sexual harassment allegation I brought forth against Fr. Stilwell.

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So, on December 17th I decided to read what the Diocese of Gaylord Policy for the Protection of Children entails. Part of it proscribes that:

The investigator shall:

Determine if the matter has been reported to the civil authorities or agencies regarding the allegations;  
Collect whatever information is available from other authorities or agencies regarding the allegation;  
Conduct an investigation into the allegation by contacting the alleged victim, accused, and other persons with information or knowledge of the matter (provided said contact does not interfere with any ongoing criminal investigation) to determine the facts;

**Forward a status report to the Review Board within 14 days of receiving the allegation and within 30 days of receiving the allegation, the investigator shall provide a final report regarding the claim to the Review Board, with a recommendation of credible or not credible, unless good cause may be shown for extending the investigation.**

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The investigation was supposed to be finished by September 22nd, seeing as though Larry said he filed it on August 22nd. I have not been told or shown what the good cause is for extending the investigation by

three months is. The reporting procedures the Diocese purports to follow can be found at:  
<http://www.dioceseofgaylord.org/childprotection-22/>.

Please feel free to disseminate this as you see fit and help those who do not have access to internet to receive a copy of it. In light of Adam Chittle's letter to the Diocese regarding Bishop Lynch, I also feel emboldened, following the reasons Adam described, to bring the details of my own mistreatment forward by Fr. Stilwell.

In Christ,

Fr. Matthew Cowan

December 19, 2018