

Gaylord Diocesan Watch

For immediate release: Feb. 9, 2019

CONTACT: Dr. Richard Brenz, MD, group spokesman: (248) 561-7272
Bill DeLyon (231) 348-2700
Martin Dubravec (231) 920-9738
Chris Maciborski (231) 920-9870

Gaylord Diocese should present the whole truth about Fr. Stilwell, Here is our response to the diocesan half-truths published Thursday.

CADILLAC, Mich. (Feb 8, 2019) – Thanks only to reporting in the media in response to [Gaylord Diocese Watch](#)'s press conference on Wednesday, the diocese has finally published information about the unjust suspension of Fr. Matthew Cowan on the diocesan web site. Fr. Cowan was suspended on Jan 7, for [sending out an email on Dec. 19, 2018](#) about his complaint of sexual harassment by his former boss, Vicar General of the diocese and pastor of St. Francis Church, Fr. Dennis Stilwell. Fr. Stilwell is the second-most-powerful priest in the diocese, behind the bishop.

Local reporters attended our press conference and other national media reported on the scandal after receiving our press release. You can read some of those reports [here](#), and [here](#), and [here](#).

The diocesan response is posted here: [Statement regarding Fr. Matthew Cowan](#).

Additionally, [Fr. Stilwell posted a 44-second video](#) on his Facebook page in which he says that both the civil and Church authorities conducted investigations in the allegations and the diocesan Review Board "made a verdict I am innocent of these charges."

Both the diocesan statement and Fr. Stilwell's video contain multiple half-truths and distortions of reality; and we present the main ones here:

First, we could not disagree more with the diocesan stance that this controversy is a private matter: "The bishop's administrative decision involves what should be a private and confidential issue between a bishop and one of his priests."

We believe the handling of Fr. Cowan is absolutely *not* a "private matter between a bishop and one of his priests," especially given the universal acknowledgment today by the pope, virtually all bishops and priests that "secrecy" and a "lack of transparency" are the habits that have destroyed the credibility of the Church in recent decades over behavior.

Secondly, the wording of the diocesan statement does not support the Fr. Stilwell's claim that the Review Board "made a verdict" that he is innocent. The diocesan statement states:

*Following the independent investigation, the Diocesan Review Board (which is also an independent body composed primarily of laity from throughout the diocese) met and concluded that the **allegation did not reach the level of credible and substantiated sexual misconduct.** (Emphasis added).*

But the diocese also indicates in its statement that “The investigation was reopened and that investigation is ongoing” due to additional revelations by Fr. Cowan.

Our reading of the diocesan statement is that the Review Board decided the behavior Fr. Cowan cited as harassment (butt-slapping, the unwanted hugs and stomach rubs and thigh-touching) is **not bad enough** to be called “credible and substantial misconduct.” That’s not the same as “innocent.”

Is the diocese claiming that the butt-slapping, the unwanted hugs and stomach rubs, and the thigh-touching *never occurred*? Fr. Stilwell’s response when confronted by Fr. Cowan was that he “did not recall.”

Fr. Cowan claims there are witnesses. The laity deserved to know, what the multiple witnesses told the investigators about those incidents. Obviously, if the civil and Church investigations were “thorough” as claimed, the witnesses were interrogated.

Thus, Fr. Stilwell is out of line out of line saying there he is innocent, especially if there is on ongoing investigation. How could this be possible? Fr. Stilwell is a canon lawyer and certainly knows better.

Finally, why has Fr. Stilwell not been “placed on leave” as diocesan policy dictates?

In the interest of the transparency so often spoken of in the Church these days, we renew our request to see the formal documentation that Review Board’s decided.

--- End ---