

# Gaylord Diocesan Watch

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## New witness verifies harassment claim of Gaylord whistleblower priest

CADILLAC, Mich. (Feb 12, 2019) – A new witness has come forward to [Gaylord Diocesan Watch](#) (GDW) to verify allegations of workplace sexual harassment against Fr. Dennis Stilwell, pastor of St. Francis Church in Petoskey and vicar general of the Diocese of Gaylord.

Allegations of unwanted physical contact by Fr. Stilwell were presented to diocesan officials last August by 33-year-old Fr. Matthew Cowan, associate pastor of St. Stephen Church in Lake City. He claimed Fr. Stilwell's offensive behavior began the first day he started on his new assignment as assistant pastor at St. Francis in 2015 and included hugs, patting and rubbing his stomach, slaps on his butt, and thigh-touching while in an automobile.

A description by Fr. Cowan of his complaint and his dealing with chancery officials regarding it is [here](#).

The diocesan Review Board, according to a [statement published Feb. 6](#), concluded that Cowan's allegation "did not reach the level of credible and substantiated sexual misconduct."

According to the statement, however, the diocese re-opened the investigation sometime in January based on new information from Fr. Cowan about Stilwell's behavior.

"We are publishing information about the new witness, who came forward after the investigation was re-opened, because Bishop Steven Raica has not answered any of our questions of our concerns about the Fr. Cowan situation since it became public in December. We are faithful Catholic laity who are entitled to know what is going on in our Church!" Dr. Richard Brenz, spokesman for GDW, stated today.

"We do not know who the members of the Review Board are and we have no details--none whatsoever--about how the investigation was handled regarding the serious charges by a priest we have come to know and respect in the Petoskey and Cadillac areas since he was ordained nearly five years ago. A basic sense of justice requires that Bishop Raica reveal what is going on."

Brenz added that the Archdiocese of Detroit publishes the names and credentials of its Review Board members. "When bishops talk about transparency, they should practice what they preach."

Even though diocesan protocol mandates that priests under investigation for sexual misconduct are supposed to be immediately placed on leave when accused, Fr. Stilwell has not been restricted in his ministry since Cowan made his initial complaint.

However, Fr. Cowan has been brutally punished by Bishop Raica for being a whistleblower, and in the bishop's words, "going against the unity of the presbyterate of the diocese." Fr. Cowan was stripped of his position and is officially on indefinite "administrative leave," forbidden to officiate in the diocese as a priest at any Mass or any other sacramental occasions, such as baptisms, marriages or funerals. Additionally, Fr. Cowan is not making any public commentary about the situation at this time.

Meanwhile, Fr. Stilwell has issued [a video on Facebook](#) which incorrectly states the Review Board found him innocent of the charges. The Review Board neither concluded Fr. Cowan's allegations are false, nor that Fr. Stilwell was innocent of persistent unwanted touching that went on for more than a year: The Feb. 6 statement on the diocesan web site states: "The Diocesan Review Board ... concluded that the allegation did not reach the level of credible and substantiated sexual misconduct."

Fr. Cowan said in his Dec. 19 email the only reason he made his complaint this year about events of three years ago is he saw the stunning similarity of Fr. Stilwell's behavior and that of the disgraced Cardinal McCarrick, whose patterns of denying allegations of sexual abuse of adult seminarians was exactly the same: "I don't recall that."

The new witness is a member of St. Francis Church and has issued a brief statement to GDW. This individual has asked that his/her identity not be revealed at this time out of fear of retaliation, but the witness wants the public to know that Fr. Cowan's description of events is truthful. Below is the full text of the witness's note GDW:

In response to the sexual harassment charges against Fr. Dennis Stilwell, I am coming forward to speak God's truth. I am a witness that saw some of the sexual harassment behaviors that Fr. Matthew Cowan experienced at the hands of Fr. Dennis Stilwell.

Approximately 7 to 10 days ago (on February 1, 2019), I mailed a written legal declaration describing what I saw to an investigator for the Gaylord Diocese, who in turn has forwarded it to the attorney who is handling this case for the Diocese of Gaylord. Hopefully, my eyewitness declaration will find its way to the Diocesan Review Board for their serious consideration.

--Sincerely submitted Feb. 11, 2019

“We respectfully reject Bishop Raica’s stance that his punishment of Fr. Cowan is ‘a private and confidential issue between a bishop and one of his priests.’ ” Dr. Brenz said. “These kinds of situations, ie, well-meaning people complaining of inappropriate sexual conduct by priests and the refusal of bishops to intervene, are tearing the Catholic Church apart.”

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