

California Victims Settle with Milwaukee Archdiocese

Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests (SNAP) Milwaukee Chapter
SNAPnetwork.org

Milwaukee -- In a stunning display of legal inequity, California victims of childhood rape by Milwaukee priests, Fr. Franklyn Becker and Fr. Siegfried Widera, have agreed today to some of the largest single person settlements in the United States of at least nine victims for amounts believing to range from 1 to 3 millions dollars.

Wisconsin victims of the same two-pedophile priests, in the meantime, had their cases tossed in the Wisconsin state appellate court on Tuesday.

The court cited two controversial State Supreme Court decisions from the mid 1990's that grant full civil immunity to Wisconsin's bishops for hiring and transferring known and repeat sex offenders.

"Today is, hopefully, a turning point for victims of Fr. Widera and Fr. Becker in California," said Sharon Tarantino of Grafton, WI who was sexually molested as a child by Fr. Widera at St. Mary's Church in Port Washington, WI. "But it is a sad and difficult day for those whose lives were shattered by these very same priests here in their home state and home diocese. I am one of those victims. While I am pleased that victims of Fr. Widera in California are receiving some kind of justice, I can only plead with clergy abuse victims in Wisconsin not to despair because in Wisconsin we have yet to see even a hint of justice."

Wisconsin victims are looking to the state supreme court to overrule the previous court's decisions on clergy abuse law, which are unique in the nation.

"Only in Wisconsin," according to Mark Salmon of Wauwatosa, WI, who was sexually abused as a child by a Catholic seminarian and grade school teacher, "can sex predators and their bishops hide behind the law, which protects the wrong class of citizens, not children, but child molesters. The count is 49 states to 1 on the legal battlefield against clergy child rape. Wisconsin law is the shame of the nation on this issue and a judicial embarrassment. Because of this, Wisconsin is a haven for clergy sex offenders, the safest state in the country for priest pedophiles and for their bishops who drive the get away cars for these criminals."

Widera, who leapt to his death in 2003 while being pursued by federal authorities seeking to bring him back to Wisconsin to face dozens of counts of child rape, was convicted in the 1970's of child abuse in Ozaukee County. According to church records, the archdiocese, under the direction of Archbishop William Cousins and later Archbishop Rembert Weakland, secretly transferred the priest to Delevan, WI where he abused more children.

Widera admitted to church authorities at Delevan that he had once again assaulted children, even though he was still on probation for the Ozaukee county crime. Church leaders told Widera (see attached document) that they would "keep a lid on it so no police report would be made."

Documents also reveal that church leaders persuaded the mother of the Delevan victim who "fears reprisals from the church" to not go to authorities.

Widera was then permitted to transfer to California where he assaulted the victims in today's settlement agreement.

Archbishop Weakland, who it was revealed in 2002 paid a half a million dollars of church money to conceal his own sexual misconduct, finalized Widera's transfer to California.

In a California state appellate ruling, later upheld by the California Supreme Court, the court described the Milwaukee archdiocese as a pedophile "lend-lease" program and could be held liable for "dumping" a sex offender into their state.

Franklyn Becker, who lives in Mayville, WI, abused Nick Jordan, another plaintiff in today's settlements, at a parish in San Diego, CA. Milwaukee church records show that Becker had already been reported to the bishop for sexual abuse.

Becker was relieved of his assignment in CA, returned to WI and, under the supervision of Rembert Weakland, continued to abuse children, although reports of his criminal behavior repeatedly reached the archbishop.

Becker was secretly transferred to parishes and hospitals across the archdiocese for two decades, until he voluntarily left the priesthood last year after being given compensation to do so by the archdiocese.

Milwaukee's current archbishop, Timothy Dolan has not alerted the parishes or the community as to where Becker lives or his career sexual abuse history.

"Catholics of the Milwaukee Archdiocese are devastated that their church leaders orchestrated such a horrific cover-up of child rape and allowed these sex predators to assault scores of children when they could have stopped it," according to Peter Isely, the Midwest Director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

A religious order priest at a boarding school in Mt. Calvary, WI sexually assaulted Isely.

"Courts in Wisconsin are helping the bishops of Wisconsin to completely evade their liability and responsibility for the rape of children in our state. The magnitude of today's settlement is a ringing condemnation of the behavior of Milwaukee church leaders, especially Rembert Weakland, who surely would have had to expose even worse crimes if put under oath in a deposition or trial. That is why these settlements are so high, as they should be, for such atrocious corporate conduct."

Isely and other victims in Wisconsin are urging California's plaintiffs to join them in supporting legislation that, like California, would restore sex abuse victim's rights. Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle supports that bill.

Last week, Fr. David Bergner, the provincial of the Order of the Divine Savior, or Salvatorians, whose national headquarters is in Milwaukee, joined victims and the governor in supporting this legislation as well. Fr. Bergner is the highest-ranking church official in the United States to call for such a reform. He joins retired Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit in advocating for a "window" that would allow all victims of abuse to file civil cases in the United States.

SNAP is the nation's oldest and largest self-help organization for clergy sexual abuse survivors, founded in 1989 with over 7,000 members in 53 chapters.

