

Illinois

METRO

Verdict Splits St. Odilo Parish

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The conviction Friday of a former Berwyn pastor on charges of sexual abuse has left St. Odilo Roman Catholic Church a House of God divided.

St. Odilo's was once a tightly knit congregation. But the indictment last year of the Rev. Robert E. Mayer, 53, for then-alleged sexual misconduct was a knife plunged right into the heart of the west suburban parish.

At the beginning of an Advent ceremony at the church Friday night, the Rev. Peter Cyscon, St. Odilo's pastor, asked 90 parishioners to pause for a moment of silent prayer.

"Pray for all the people who have

been hurt . . . the little girl and her family, Father Mayer and all the people in our parish who have been hurt by abuse," he said.

Some parishioners have declined comment, but others voiced anger, either at Mayer or over his ordeal.

Susan Stopko, the mother of a 15-year-old son at St. Odilo School, said earlier: "I send my children there to get help from them, not to be hurt."

She said such sexual abuse had "soured my faith in the church."

Linda Sitarz, 43, said, "I don't think he did it. It's too preposterous. . . . It is too ridiculous. The girl's whole story doesn't make sense."

Another woman from the parish, whom other church members identified as a friend of Mayer's, would say

only: "Our judicial system stinks."

Sister Margaret Campbell, a nun who identified herself as house representative at the St. Odilo convent, said she feels sad for what the controversy has done to the people of the parish and for all priests.

"It's happened; it's probably the fairest way of handling it," she said. "But I feel bad."

Another woman, who declined to identify herself, said: "I think he got what he deserved."

Others, looking weary and resigned, would say only: "It's over."

The church has been split, but Cyscon said he was confident that the parish would emerge from its ordeal a stronger, more united entity.

"We will heal," he said.

Mayer

Continued from Page 1

foundling a "terribly egregious act . . . done quickly and out of eyesight of everyone."

It proves, Durkin added, that priests "are no different than other men."

After hearing evidence that included testimony from the girl, Mayer and other witnesses, Durkin said, "Sadly, the state has proven him guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. I wish to God they had not."

Since Mayer's indictment, the Archdiocese has removed 22 parish priests accused of sexual misconduct—tearing deeply into the fabric of church life. The charges have ignited a storm of controversy among the archdiocese, clergy, parishioners and law enforcement officials.

Mayer's accuser—then an eighth-grader at St. Odilo School—was fondled in the church rectory in January, 1991. She told the court she went to the rectory to deliver a letter from her mother allowing her to convert to Catholicism.

After sitting next to her on a couch, she said, Mayer touched his thigh to hers but said nothing. When she moved away, he inched beside her, again saying nothing, the girl testified, her voice cracking and tears flowing.

When she reached the end of the couch, Mayer stuck his right hand down her blouse, touched her breast and then put his hand under her skirt.

Mayer denied touching the girl or ever being alone with her in the rectory.

During closing arguments Friday, prosecutors Mark Cavins and Roseanne Pulia said the girl's "testimony was unwavering. It was clear and convincing."

But defense attorney Patrick Tuite countered that "the fact she cried on the



SUN-TIMES Rich Hen

The Rev. Robert E. Mayer enters the court building, where he was convicted of four counts of sexual abuse.

witness stand does not prove anything." He and co-counsel Brent Stratton said that, although Mayer received the letter, it was not personally handed to him by the girl inside the rectory.

"It would have been contrary to regular practice" of having rectory staff members accept deliveries at the door for the priest, Tuite said.

Three rectory employees and one former worker testified that they had no recollection of the girl going there and asking to see Mayer.

Several of the girl's male classmates had testified that Mayer, who was assigned to St. Odilo in September, 1990, told them that he thought the girl was cute and that he wanted to have sex with her.

Some sexual misconduct allegations against Mayer date back to the early 1980s, when he was a priest at St. Edna Church in Arlington Heights. No criminal charges were filed at the time.

Contributing: Scott Fornek

Archdiocese Reaction to Conviction

The following statement came from the Archdiocese of Chicago Friday after Rev. Robert E. Mayer was found guilty of sexually abusing a minor:

We understand there are many and varied feelings today concerning the matter of Father Robert E. Mayer, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago who has been found guilty of the charge of sexual abuse of a minor.

This is a personal tragedy for this young girl, for her family, for her classmates and teachers, for the people of St. Odilo Parish, for Father Mayer himself and for the archdiocese. Our thoughts and prayers go out to all of those who have been hurt by these events.

Father Mayer resigned as pastor of St. Odilo parish on July 1, 1991, and shortly thereafter the archbishop decided that he would not give him a ministerial assignment in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Father Mayer remains in administrative leave, under continued archdiocesan supervision, pending the outcome of the court's disposition of this case.

How Sexual Abuse Allegations Are Handled

Q. How widespread is sexual abuse by priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago?

A. The extent of such misconduct was clouded for years by the reluctance of church officials to specifically address the issue. But the long-simmering scandal boiled over in public debate with the conviction Friday of the Rev. Robert E. Mayer on sexual abuse charges brought in July, 1991.

Q. What has happened since then?

A. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin appointed a commission on sexual abuse. Twenty-two priests have been removed from their parishes because of alleged sexual abuse.

Q. What did the commission do?

A. It called for a nine-member in-

dependent review board to consider charges of sexual abuse of children by priests. The board will consist of three priests and six lay people with no role in archdiocesan institutions, one of whom is either a victim or a member of a victim's family.

Q. What happens if the board decides a priest is guilty?

A. The priest will never again be assigned to parish work. And he will be eligible for any kind of reassignment only after six years of therapy and supervision.

Q. What other action might the church take?

A. The ultimate penalty for a Roman Catholic cleric convicted of a crime is dismissal from the priesthood.

Q. What if a priest admits guilt

and expresses penitence?

A. Bishop Adam J. Malda of Green Bay, Wis., wrote in the Catholic Lawyer that "when a priest expresses sorrow, it derails the process. If he seeks reconciliation, in canon law we may give him absolution and say, 'Sin no more.'"

Q. What about criminal charges?

A. Bernardin has pledged that the archdiocese will inform civil authorities of sexual abuse allegations before it starts its own investigations.

Q. What is the status of the 22 priests removed from their parishes?

A. They are being housed in Roman Catholic facilities in the archdiocese. Movements of some are said to be strictly monitored while others reportedly are free to roam.