

Father John P. Schmeer

Father John P. Schmeer, ordained in 1964, was pastor at Saint Martin of Tours in New Hope when he was placed on leave on May 23, 2004. Before that he was a science teacher and guidance counselor in the Philadelphia Archdiocese's school system for 25 years. When young male students came to him for counseling, Fr. Schmeer questioned them about masturbation and then fondled their penises.

The priest took boys to houses in Gladwyne and at the New Jersey Shore. In the late 1960s, he provided one 14-year-old, "Kevin," with pornography, instructed the boy to masturbate, and watched as an older girl tried to seduce him. On another occasion, Fr. Schmeer stripped and fondled the boy and, anally penetrated him with his finger in the Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary swimming pool. The priest's friend and fellow teacher, Ernest Durante, sometimes watched as Fr. Schmeer abused the student.

Older students at Roman Catholic High School harassed and sexually abused Kevin because of his reputation as "Father Schmeer's boy." In March 2002, he told Archdiocese managers that he knew of 15 or 16 other boys whom Fr. Schmeer had abused.

In response, the Church officials conducted a thorough investigation — of the victim. The Archdiocese probed Kevin's background, including tax records and court proceedings from his two divorces. An investigator hired by the Archdiocese's law firm obtained the victim's bank records without permission or authorization.

In March 2004, additional victims came forward following the publication of news stories reporting that Kevin was suing the Archdiocese and had named Fr. Schmeer as his abuser. Archdiocese managers, knowing that these other allegations corroborated Kevin's complaint, remained silent while unaware parishioners loyally rallied around Fr. Schmeer and questioned Kevin's motives.

Father Schmeer abuses Kevin at Roman Catholic High School; when Kevin complains, the Archdiocese investigates the victim.

Kevin was a freshman at Roman Catholic High School when his science teacher, Fr. John Schmeer, singled him out – or so he thought – for frequent guidance counseling sessions. Kevin was a small boy, late to mature, with an uninvolved father. According to the handwritten notes of Msgr. Lynn, in an interview with Archdiocese managers on April 2, 2002, Kevin told them he was honored at first. He considered Fr. Schmeer his spiritual leader, mentor, and "man in [his] life." His mother approved.

Kevin also gave an account of his abuse to a detective from the District Attorney's office on June 18, 2002. He told her that in his first counseling session, Fr. Schmeer began to talk about masturbation and asked the boy whether he did it. Kevin described being embarrassed, but said that Fr. Schmeer did not touch him that day. During his second

session, the priest and teacher again talked about masturbation. This time, he pulled his chair close to the student so they were face-to-face with knees touching. The priest then reached over and grabbed Kevin's penis through his pants. Father Schmeer asked whether Kevin was "getting an erection" and proceeded to rub the boy's genitals for about twenty minutes.

Kevin said this pattern continued twice a week for months. Father Schmeer fondled the boy when they met, always talking about masturbation, "impure thoughts about girls," or "whatever perverted questions he could ask about sex."

The abuse soon moved beyond counseling sessions. One incident, at the Saint Charles Seminary pool, greatly upset Kevin. He described how Fr. Schmeer took him to the end of the pool and had the boy sit on his lap. Kevin went on:

In 2 seconds he had my bathing suit off and his hands on my ass. I thought he was gonna drown me. He grabbed my testicles and penis from behind, they were in his hand. I started crying. Then he put his finger up my ass. I couldn't stop crying, I was freaked.

Kevin said the priest had an erection and was rubbing up against the boy. Father Ernest Durante was in the pool, watching.

Kevin was bothered by his inability to break away from the priest. "I just beat myself up, that after this happened to me, I still returned to the guidance office," he said. "I don't know why I kept going back to the counseling sessions." Kevin described feeling "hooked or brainwashed." He explained, "I wanted to tell my mom, but felt I couldn't because I felt I let it go on too long."

Kevin said that after the pool incident, Fr. Schmeer no longer fondled the boy in the guidance sessions. He did, however, take the boy to houses he said he owned with Fr. Durante. In a "big expensive" home off the Gladwyne exit of the Schuylkill Expressway, Kevin said Fr. Schmeer took him to a room filled with "Playboy books." The priest told the teenager it was "OK to masturbate while looking at pictures of girls." Father Schmeer then instructed the boy to "go ahead," and left the room. Kevin said he did not stay in the room, but walked around the house. As he entered one room, he saw Fr. Schmeer and Fr. Durante sitting on a large leather couch, masturbating.

In the spring of his freshman year, Kevin and two other boys were taken by Fr. Schmeer and Fr. Durante to a house on the New Jersey Shore. This time, Fr. Schmeer left the 14-year-old in a room with a “17-year-old very nice looking girl.” Kevin described how the two teens were talking, and then, “all of a sudden this girl gets up and kisses me and rams her tongue down my throat.” He said he was shy and ran from the room. As he pushed the door open, he bumped into Fr. Schmeer, who had been watching the episode.

Kevin described as “horrific” what older students at Roman Catholic High School did to him because of his reputation as Fr. Schmeer’s boy. Kevin told the Archdiocese and the detective that he was assaulted four or five times by older students in the school basement. Groups of students would “beat me up and hold me and grind up against me until they ejaculated.”

Kevin said by the end of his freshman year he wanted to commit suicide. He said it was unbearable when he returned the next year, and he persuaded his mother to allow him to transfer to Roxborough High School. He said he was in therapy for the next 20 years. He was 33 years old before he could talk about what happened. He was 49 before he reported the abuse to the Archdiocese.

When questioned by Msgr. Lynn on April 2, 2002, Fr. Schmeer denied ever abusing Kevin and claimed not even to recall the name. He admitted, though, that his friend “Ernie” Durante was assigned to live in Gladwyne at the time. He said that he did take boys swimming and could have taken some to the shore.

Father Schmeer agreed to go for an evaluation at Saint John Vianney Hospital in Downingtown. There he again denied the allegations against him, but talked extensively about his relationship with Fr. Durante, which had ended abruptly when Fr. Durante left the priesthood in 1987 to get married. Father Schmeer told the therapists he was devastated because Fr. Durante, with whom he co-owned a house at the shore, had kept his affair with his future wife secret for five years.

Saint John Vianney’s therapists concluded that they could not substantiate the allegations against Fr. Schmeer, but they did so expressly “based upon all available data.” This data included Fr. Schmeer’s denials, Msgr. Lynn’s representation that there had “never been any other reports of Father Schmeer being involved with any adolescents or

for that matter with anyone else sexually,” and Msgr. Lynn’s assertion that “an ex-priest friend of Father Schmeer’s” reported that he had never seen the alleged behavior.

Monsignor Lynn apparently failed to inform the therapists that Kevin claimed to know 15 or 16 others who had been abused, that Fr. Schmeer *had* previously been accused of sexual misconduct – in 1976 with a parish cook – or that the “ex-priest friend” who vouched for Fr. Schmeer was, himself, implicated in the abuse of Kevin. Even so, the therapists suggested that the Archdiocese might want to investigate further. Cardinal Bevilacqua permitted Fr. Schmeer to continue on as pastor at Saint Martin of Tours in New Hope.

Handwritten notes from March 3, 2002 in the Secret Archives file recorded that Church officials’ investigation concentrated on questioning and re-questioning Kevin, with direction coming from the Archdiocese’s lawyer. Those notes of a consultation with counsel record instructions that Msgr. Lynn not tell Kevin that Fr. Schmeer had denied the allegation, but instead tell him that the investigation was continuing. Monsignor Lynn recorded numerous questions he was to ask Kevin, as well as counsel’s instructions to “get details – even unimportant.”

The Archdiocese file on Fr. Schmeer reflects an extensive probe of Kevin, with 18 pages of records investigating relatives, tax records, any criminal history (none was found), and his two divorces. It also contains Kevin’s confidential bank records, which were obtained without permission or authorization. The file includes high school records not only for Kevin, but also for three other boys with whom he attended Roman Catholic High School. No effort to interview these boys is recorded.

The Archdiocese finds the report of Father Schmeer’s abuse “not credible,” but media coverage leads to other victims coming forward.

On December 5, 2003, following an Archdiocesan Review Board investigation into Kevin’s and others’ accusations, the Archdiocese decreed that “the allegation lodged against Reverend John P. Schmeer is not credible.” This decision was based, in part, on Kevin’s reluctance to be interviewed yet again. All that had come of his previous repeated interviews with Archdiocese managers was an investigation of him.

Kevin, frustrated with the Archdiocese's response, filed a lawsuit on March 24, 2004, against the Archdiocese, naming Fr. Schmeer as his abuser. Following the appearance of stories in the media, Fr. Schmeer denied the allegations from the pulpit and went to several classes of the parish grade school to reassure the children of his innocence.

On March 29, 2004, two more victims of Fr. Schmeer came forward with reports much like Kevin's.

- **“Nathan”**

Nathan reported to the Archdiocese that in 1968 he had been falsely accused of skipping class at Roman Catholic High School and was summoned to Fr. Schmeer's office. Nathan mentioned that to get to Fr. Schmeer's office, he had to pass through Fr. Durante's office. The report written by Msgr. Lynn states:

Once in Schmeer's office [Nathan] said Schmeer talked about sexual relationships, erections, and masturbation, then reached over and grabbed [Nathan's] penis, over his clothes. [Nathan] said that he ran out the door and when he returned to class, he recalls other students asking if he saw 'Schmeer the Queer.'”

- **“Clarke”**

Clarke reported that he was molested by Fr. Schmeer in 1986, the summer between his graduation from Saint Titus grade school and his freshman year at Bishop Kendrick High School. He told the Archdiocese's victim assistance coordinator, Martin Frick, that Fr. Schmeer took him, his 10-year-old brother Marty, and another 10-year-old, “Gary,” to the priest's house on the New Jersey Shore. When the younger boys were not present, Fr. Schmeer questioned the 15-year-old Clarke about masturbation and wet dreams. Father Schmeer then had Clarke sleep in the same bedroom, which had twin beds, with the priest.

Clarke told Frick that he awoke during the night to find Fr. Schmeer at the side of his bed with the priest's hand in the boy's shorts. Clarke reported that Fr. Schmeer made him ejaculate – the first time the boy had ever done so.

Archdiocese managers remain silent while parishioners rally behind Father Schmeer.

Even with these new allegations, echoing those of Kevin, Fr. Schmeer remained pastor at Saint Martin of Tours for nearly two more months, until he was eventually placed on leave on May 23, 2004. His parishioners, apparently unaware of the other allegations, rallied around him and attacked Kevin's motives. Some parishioners raised funds in their priest's defense. Signs posted in the church's front windows read "God Bless a Great Pastor," "Pray for Father Schmeer and his False Accuser," and "It's all About Money - 30 Pieces of Silver." According to a news report, Fr. Schmeer "made a quiet exit" from Saint Martin after celebrating Mass on May 23, 2004. While loyal, uninformed parishioners rallied on behalf of Fr. Schmeer and attacked Kevin, the Archdiocese managers, who knew of the additional reports, said nothing.

On May 25, 2004, Msgr. Lynn met with Fr. Schmeer. The Secretary for Clergy's notes from that meeting allude to three people who provided information concerning the allegations of Clarke and Nathan to the Review Board's investigator. Monsignor Lynn carefully avoided writing down any incriminating information the witnesses might have provided, but did record Fr. Schmeer's defenses and explanations. He wrote, for example:

With regard to allegations of "Gary," Father Schmeer remarked that it would be unusual for a teacher to escort a student to his office. Normally, that happened only if the student were headed to the discipline office. Father Schmeer denied the use of the language alleged and stated that he was always careful and mindful that the Lord said not to give scandal to the children.

With regards to the situation [a male with the same last name as Clarke] described, Father Schmeer pointed out how it would have been almost impossible for such an exchange to take place in a corridor in a high school while class was going on. He found this to be incredulous.

The Secretary for Clergy recorded Fr. Schmeer's "hopes" that "more investigation would be done on [Nathan's and Clarke's] families." In accord with those hopes, Msgr. Lynn asked James Bock, the Associate to the Vicar for Administration to: "gain better information on [Clarke's] Family," to find out "the nature of [Clarke's] learning disability," and to question Nathan's wife about "mental problems" he might have. The

Grand Jury finds that, even in May 2004, Msgr. Lynn's "investigations" of abuse allegations were designed more to discredit the victims and conceal evidence of their abuse than to ascertain whether their alleged abuser was in fact a sexual abuser of children.

A second review finds allegations against Father Schmeer credible.

The Archdiocesan Review Board conducted a further investigation and review of Fr. Schmeer based on the additional allegations which were made following the publicity surrounding Kevin's civil lawsuit. On October 28, 2004, following the Review Board's new finding that the allegations made against Fr. Schmeer were, in fact, credible, the Archdiocese prohibited the priest from further public ministry.

On December 29, 2004, faced with the possibility of involuntary laicization, Fr. Schmeer agreed to live "a supervised life of prayer and penance" at Villa Saint Joseph, a retirement home for priests.

Father Schmeer appeared before the Grand Jury and was given an opportunity to answer questions concerning the allegations against him. He chose not to do so.