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Circuit Judge William B. Spellbring

Priest sentenced to 16 years

By **TIMOTHY W. MAIER**

Journal staff writer

A county judge sentenced a 69-year-old Roman Catholic priest yesterday to 16 years in prison after blasting him for doing an "evil thing" with at least five boys in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Rev. Thomas Schaefer, who served at both St. Matthias Church in Lanham and St. John's Church in Clinton, was facing a maximum of 70

years in prison following his convictions of child sex abuse and sodomy charges. In August he pleaded guilty to four counts of child abuse and last Friday pleaded guilty to sodomy in a St. Mary's County case.

Circuit Judge William B. Spellbring said there were no winners in the courtroom and lamented that the priest should be enjoying the fruits of retirement instead of standing in court as a convicted child molestor

seeking probation.

"You have abused the position of trust as a Roman Catholic priest," Spellbring said. ". . . You have caused harm to the respect of you and your position. Your counsel says you are not an evil person. I accept that. But you have done an evil thing."

Spellbring then imposed the 16-year sentence, which exceeded the guidelines that judges often rely on

to hand down consistent sentences. In this case, the sentencing guidelines fell between probation and 12 years. Schaefer must serve at least four years in prison before being eligible for parole.

Bert Nelson, one of the victims, who asked his name be published, broke into applause while listening to Spellbring hand down the 16-year

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sentence and watch the priest hauled away in handcuffs. Tears welled up in Nelson's eyes as he embraced a lay church leader.

At the sentencing hearing, Nelson said the abuse drove him into depression that led him into a heroin addiction. He characterized Schaefer as a manipulator who destroyed innocent children.

"Schaefer had a master plan and I was outwitted," Nelson said while Schaefer stared downward. "He had power over me."

Another victim said he fought off bouts of depression and suicide for 30 years because Schaefer sexually assaulted him at least 200 times. Another victim said simply: "I had my dignity taken from me at the hands

of a man who was masquerading as a servant of God."

Prosecutors said Schaefer engaged in sex acts with a 12-year-old altar boy at St. John's Evangelist Church in Clinton beginning in 1978 and lasting to 1981. Schaefer admitted committing similar sex acts with an 11-year-old boy from 1972 to 1975 at St. Matthias in Lanham and with the same boy at St. John's between 1975 and 1978.

The third victim was a 13-year-old boy who worked for St. John's and the fourth victim was sexually assaulted between 1979 and 1981 at St. John's. The fifth incident happened in St. Mary's at Holy Angels Church in the early 1970s.

His attorney Martin Hertz said a doctor claimed the priest was suffering from a personality disorder and

not pedophilia. He said the disorder was traced to the priest's troubled childhood.

One of Schaefer's brothers died of polio at an early age, another was killed in a murder involving homosexuals, and another was kicked out of the military for having sexual problems similar to Schaefer's, Hertz said.

Schaefer's parents were unable to give him much love and attention and he turned to another brother for support during his childhood, Hertz claimed. When that brother died, the lack of love in his life turned to rage and he began abusing children, Hertz said.

Hertz said Schaefer was trying to tell the boys, "I will give you the love I think you need and the love I missed."

Schaefer, a priest for more than 40 years, repeatedly apologized to the victims and said he has not touched a child since 1982 after being properly diagnosed and undergoing therapy.

"I would like to state my deepest regret and sorrow for all that I have done to them . . . I generally like each one of them and try to help them in many ways. I did not realize my conduct would hurt them. I always wanted the best for them."

Schaefer was one of four priests indicted eight months ago in connection with sexually abusing five boys. The Rev. Alphonsus Smith, 70, pleaded guilty on similar charges in August and is scheduled to be sentenced Dec. 19. The Revs. Edward Pritchard, 50, and Edward Hartel, 58, are awaiting trial.

Allegations of sex abuse against

the four priests initially surfaced April when the Archdiocese of Washington confirmed that the men had admitted to molesting the same altar boy, now a 34-year-old Baltimore resident. The priests were removed from their parishes upon learning of the abuse.

Earlier this year when it became public that Schaefer and Prichard had undergone treatment for pedophilia, but were never denied pastorships, additional victims came forward with allegations of molestation that forced police to investigate. Schaefer received treatment in 1967, 1975 and in 1983, but each time returned quietly to his parish.

A 28-year-old victim, who did not testify at the sentencing, said outside the courtroom that he was disturbed about the actions of the archdiocese that enabled Schaefer to continue

abusing children.

"I grew up so religious," he said. "I have no faith in God now. I blame it all on him."

Prosecutor Beverly Woodard sought a 20-year sentence, characterizing Schaefer as a predator of young boys. "Religion comes from the heart," Woodard said. "What he did was break the heart of five young men."

A Catholic priest is like a representative of God in which he's a supreme being that can do nothing wrong," Woodard added. "These young men had that belief."

Woodard also noted that Schaefer admits he does not remember committing sex acts with two of the victims but does remember other victims that did not come forward.