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## NEWS

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# Romano: Impending freedom for priest in abuse scandal stuns victims



Robert Schaeufele, on the witness stand in 2003, agreed to a plea arrangement on multiple counts of attempted capital sexual battery but will have only served about 12 years of the concurrent 30-year sentences he received in Pinellas and Pasco counties.

By **John Romano**

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## Tampa Bay Times

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longer touch him.

This, of course, was never quite true. And all it took was a single phone call to plunge him back into a world of doubt, fear, shame and anger.

The former Catholic priest who McCafferty said sexually abused him as a child in Pinellas Park is scheduled to be released from prison in nine days.

McCafferty was stunned to discover Robert Schaeufele will have only served about 12 years of the concurrent 30-year sentences he received in Pinellas and Pasco counties.

In a conversation Tuesday evening, McCafferty sounded frustrated and perplexed. Hours later, he called back with a sharper perspective.

"Do you want to know the real answer? Do you want to know the truth?" he asked. "It feels like he just (assaulted) me again."

Once upon a time, the end to this story seemed preordained. When he agreed to a plea arrangement on multiple counts of attempted capital sexual battery in 2003, Schaeufele (pronounced SHOY-flea) was 55. Facing 30 years, it was assumed he would be in his 80s before ever stepping outside of a prison's walls.

Except his sentence, like his work at numerous Tampa Bay area churches in a 27-year career, was never quite what it appeared to be.

"The justice system let us all down," McCafferty said. "It's almost like he got away with it. He's the one laughing now."

The unraveling of Schaeufele's secret life was both swift and thorough, yet also maddening to many of his victims.

In 2002, within days of being accused of inappropriate contact with a young boy in the 1970s, Schaeufele agreed to resign as pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Church in Pasco. When news of his resignation spread, more men came forward

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Yet while many of the nearly two dozen allegations were deemed credible, prosecutors were hampered by the statute of limitations. The only cases eligible for prosecution had to involve children who were 12 or younger at the time of the abuse.

His first trial ended with a not guilty verdict, even though jurors later said they believed the accuser but the case lacked substantiating evidence.

Prosecutors soon filed charges for two more cases in Pinellas and another in Pasco. Facing a potential life sentence, Schaeufele agreed to the plea arrangement of attempted sexual battery while also acknowledging abuses had taken place.

"I can't help but think of all the boys who were traumatized and damaged," said lawyer Joe Saunders, who has represented 16 of Schaeufele's accusers in civil cases. "Most victims of sexual abuse never come forward, so who knows how many other lives he ruined?"

McCafferty, 42, wanted Schaeufele to spend the rest of his life in prison, but said he understood the risks of going to trial on a 20-year-old case.

So he agreed with the plea arrangement, with the assumption Schaeufele would have to serve at least 85 percent of his sentence, per a Florida law that took effect in 1998.

But there was a hitch. Schaeufele admitted to crimes that took place from 1983 to 1985, before the 85 percent law was passed. Thus, he could accrue gain time for prison jobs and good behavior and could be eligible for release after serving barely 40 percent of his sentence.

Frank Murphy, a spokesman for the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg, says the church is aware of Schaeufele's impending release and will make its victims-assistance team available for anyone seeking counseling.

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"He is no longer associated with the church," Murphy said.

McCafferty, meanwhile, continues to attend Mass regularly.

"My faith is my faith, and one bad man is not going to change that," McCafferty said. "I think the bishop (Robert Lynch) has worked diligently to get victims help. He's gone above and beyond, and I'm pleased with the programs they've put in place.

"I thought this was all behind me, but I guess it never was. I feel like somebody just dropped a bomb at my feet."

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