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Norwich man accuses nun of raping him in first grade



BUY PHOTO

Bob Kowal of Norwich alleges that he was sexually assaulted by Sister Seraphia at St. Joseph School in Norwich in 1963. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

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One day in 1963, when he was a first-grader at St. Joseph School in Norwich, Bob Kowal said his teacher, Sister Seraphia, suggested he not go outside for recess but stay inside her classroom for some extra help.

As he started to walk away, Kowal said the nun grabbed one of his hips with her left hand while using her right hand to grab his crotch. She then ripped open his pants. As she sat in a chair, he said, she forced him into sexual intercourse.

Afterwards, Kowal said the nun slapped and threatened him.

“I can hurt you worse than this. I can take you away from your parents,” she allegedly told the 6-year-old Kowal.

Now 61, the Norwich man is speaking publicly about the incident for the first time. He said the nun would go on to sexually assault him at least five more times, which resulted in three hospital stays for treatment of severe bladder infections, along with genital and hip bruising.

At one point, he said, the nun told him the rapes were helping prepare him to be a priest and if he told anyone, she would blame his parents.

“What I’m doing to you is not wrong. I’m married to God. Look at me you (expletive) owl,” he said the nun told him, a reference to his round glasses. “I’m grooming you to be a priest.”

Seraphia’s name not on list

In February, the Diocese of Norwich **released a list** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20190210/norwich-diocese-posts-list-of-priests-accused-of-sexually-assaulting-children>) of 43 priests “substantively accused” of sexually assaulting minors.

Since Seraphia was a nun — belonging to the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth — and not a priest, deacon or bishop, and did not meet other standards set by the diocese, she is not on the list.

Kowal said that in a 2004 meeting, Bishop Michael Cote told him that the “diocese wanted to settle so we all can heal.” Kowal said he asked for \$10,000 to be paid to his parents, in part to reimburse them for the tuition at the school, and \$1 million for himself.

He said he never received any payments.

In November 2006, Cote wrote to Kowal telling him that the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth was responsible for assigning and supervising Seraphia and that he should contact the order for information about her and in regards to any possible settlement.

St. Joseph’s School, which closed in 2010 due to financial problems, was operated by the diocese.

“Please be assured that you remain in my prayers. It is my sincere hope that you find comfort, healing and resolution to your experiences,” Cote wrote to Kowal.

In 2006, after Kowal again contacted the diocese about the alleged assault, Monsignor Richard LaRocque wrote to Kowal saying Deacon Al Fecteau, a retired Norwich police officer who acted as the diocesan investigator, would investigate Kowal’s information and provide the results to the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. He also said Kowal would be informed of the results of the investigation.

LaRocque also told Kowal the diocese had brought his complaint to the attention of both the New London State’s Attorney’s Office and the state Department of Children and Families in 2004.

But New London State’s Attorney Michael Regan, who worked in the office in 2004, told The Day that his office could not locate any correspondence from the diocese reporting Kowal’s allegations and that he and other staff did not recall such a report. But Regan added that due to the fact that the complaint was 15 years old, that doesn’t mean the office did not receive it.

DCF spokesman Gary Kleeblatt declined to say whether the diocese reported the assault in 2004, saying state law prohibits the release of child protection records.

Kowal, though, said he was never interviewed by investigators from DCF, the state’s attorney’s office or local police after making the allegation in 2004. He said his only contact with DCF and police is when he called those agencies himself.

Diocese won’t discuss allegations

Bishop Cote refused a request to be interviewed for this story, and the diocese would not provide any information about Seraphia.

In a written statement last month, diocesan spokesman Wayne Gignac said, “The diocese has no new information regarding Sr. Saraphia. The religious community that Sr. Saraphia belonged to at the time, would be the best source for new information.”

In 2006, Cote wrote to Kowal saying the allegations had been brought before the diocesan review board and members were “informed of the facts,” including information from Kowal that Seraphia had “touched him inappropriately.”

In his letter, Cote did not discuss the results of the investigation by Fecteau or the findings of the diocesan board.

Cote wrote that the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth were informed of the allegations and the diocesan review board was told by the order that Seraphia was no longer a religious sister and her whereabouts were unknown.

“It is even possible that she may no longer be living,” Cote wrote.

Sisters respond to questions

The Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth told The Day that Seraphia left the order in 1989 and died at age 71 on March 25, 2012, six years after Cote’s letter. The order said it had been informed of the allegations by the diocese in approximately 2006, two years after Kowal told the diocese what allegedly happened to him.

Sister Kathleen Maciej, the provincial superior of the order, which is headquartered in Des Plaines, Ill., and has a convent in Monroe, declined to release Sister Seraphia’s legal name “out of respect for her family whom we are unaware of contact information for or if any are still living.” Maciej said by email that throughout Seraphia’s religious life and during her assignment at St. Joseph’s School from approximately 1959 to 1966, she was known as Sister Seraphia. Nuns take on a new name upon joining an order.

Maciej declined to say why Seraphia left the order in 1989 and said she did not know where Seraphia had died. She said the order received no other complaints that Seraphia sexually assaulted minors.

Maciej said the order conducted an investigation of the complaint with outside counsel. She declined to say if the investigator interviewed Kowal. She also declined to provide The Day with a copy of the investigation.

She said the diocese, Connecticut law enforcement and the state Department of Social Services conducted investigations.

“Each of these separate comprehensive investigations all led to the same conclusion: there was no credible evidence in support of Mr. Kowal’s allegations,” she wrote in an email.

Kowal today

Today, Kowal says he has been diagnosed with PTSD, depression and anger issues. He has been on disability for decades and is scared to go out in public.

“I don’t have interest in anything anymore. I stay away from people because I’m ashamed. I feel I’m dirty. I could take a hot bath and wash and wash until my skin bleeds and I’d still be dirty,” he said during a recent interview.

He also claims he was confronted by Seraphia at a church carnival in 1974 and that she came to his house on a half-dozen occasions from 2006 to 2017 but he did not let her inside or call police. Some of those encounters allegedly occurred after The Sisters of the Holy Family say Seraphia had died.

He is particularly upset because he said Seraphia assaulted at least two other students he knows of, including a girl he said he was very fond of at the time. He said that when his parents first took him to the Naval Submarine Base Hospital and then The William W. Backus Hospital in 1963, they told doctors, nurses and a police officer that he had been sexually assaulted by a nun at the school. He provided The Day with hospital bills detailing treatment of his injuries.

Current law prevents Kowal from suing the diocese and the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. That would change if the General Assembly approves a bill pending in the current session that would abolish the statute of limitations, which currently gives victims only until the age of 48 to file a lawsuit. A public hearing before the Judiciary Committee is scheduled for Monday at 10 a.m. in Room 2C of the Legislative Office Building.

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