

NEWS

Diocese: Springfield woman 'courageous' for telling her abuse story

Vicki Schmidt says the sex abuse perpetrated by the Rev. Peter Mascari lasted 14 years

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Thirty years after a Springfield woman ended what she called “a dysfunctional sexual relationship” with her parish priest and employer, she publicly named her abuser for the first time Tuesday at a news conference at Sacred Heart Convent.

Vicki Schmidt said the sexual abuse perpetrated by the Rev. Peter Mascari lasted 14 years. Mascari, who died in 2002, served for 36 years as pastor of St. John Vianney Church in Sherman and Holy Family Church in Athens.

“It’s an authenticity thing for me (in naming Mascari),” Schmidt said.

Andrew Hansen, a spokesman for the Springfield diocese, called Schmidt “courageous” for telling her story.

“The Catholic Church has come to recognize the importance of healing for those who suffer abuse,” Hansen said in a provided statement. “Vicki is also to be commended for writing books that will help people heal from abuse. While Father Mascari died in 2002, the hurt he brought to Vicki grieves us all.”

Hansen said Ali Smith, the diocese’s Victim’s Assistance Minister/Director of Safe Environment, attended Tuesday news conference and met with Schmidt.

Schmidt was also joined Tuesday by two St. Louis-based psychotherapists, Patrick Fleming and Sue Lauber-Fleming, with whom she has written three books, including the newly-published “Soul Light for the Dark Night,” which includes daily meditations of healing from trauma and abuse.

Schmidt, 64, first wrote about her relationship with Mascari anonymously in the 2007 book “Broken Trust.” Mascari organized numerous community and international outreach

programs, leading to his being named Copley First Citizen (now First Citizen) in 1979.

Schmidt, who is now the executive director for Theresians International out Springfield, worked for a not-for-profit company founded by Mascari from 1974 to 1990. Schmidt was also involved with a youth group called Helpers in Christ at the parish.

Schmidt said Mascari started “grooming” her after a car accident claimed her younger sister. Schmidt was 8 at the time. The sexual relations with Mascari began when she was 18, Schmidt said.

“My life and career were enmeshed in his,” Schmidt said. “Much like women who suffer domestic violence, I saw no way out of this. I couldn’t see the violence happening to me. I was full of shame and guilt.”

Schmidt has more recently identified herself as “a survivor of clerical abuse” without naming Mascari. She said her announcement didn’t “come from a place of vengeance, anger or a desire to attack the church.”

Schmidt said that “clericalism,” the assumption of moral superiority by priests, is “a core issue” in the sexual abuse scandal the Catholic Church is facing.

“The patriarchy in the church has promoted it,” Schmidt said.

Paul and Judy Kren, who were formerly parishioners with Schmidt in Sherman, were on hand Tuesday to support her.

“(This situation) should’ve been handled a long time ago (by the diocese),” Judy Kren said, “not with telling her she had to be silent.”

Schmidt said that she reached a financial settlement with the diocese in 1994 to cover therapy costs. The settlement included a “no-fault clause,” meaning the diocese wouldn’t accept any fault for what happened.

Hansen said Tuesday he couldn’t comment on any settlement, acknowledging only that the diocese and Schmidt “have previously been in contact.”

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