

Parchment priest: 'I feel violated by this accusation'

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It was Easter Sunday, and the Rev. Carl Peltz had reason to feel good. He was celebrating his 51st birthday the next day, and he was going on vacation. But as he left church, the priest was met by an ABC television news crew asking about allegations that Peltz had raped a 12-year-old boy in 1985.

A week later, Peltz stood before his congregation and declared his innocence. "Somewhere outside these walls, a man in his 20s for some reason believes I am the cause of his troubles," Peltz told the people of St. Ambrose Catholic Church in Parchment. "I'm angry. I'm hurt. I feel violated by this accusation." Across the country, sexual-abuse allegations against Catholic clergy that are years and even decades old are being exposed, putting the American Catholic Church under scrutiny.

For Peltz, it's a 1991 lawsuit filed against him and his diocese, alleging he raped 12-year-old Chris Toher in 1985 when Peltz was chaplain on a U.S. Navy base in Iceland. Without addressing Peltz's innocence or guilt, the suit was settled for \$25,000 in 1993 by the Diocese of Steubenville, Ohio, then Peltz's employer of record. Peltz and local church officials said he's been unfairly singled out and wrongly accused. While they acknowledge Peltz had a longtime drinking problem, they said he's been sober for the past 13 years and that there's no evidence of sexual misconduct. Peltz and local church officials note that no criminal charges were ever brought and the civil case was dismissed. They point out that the lawsuit said the alleged attack occurred in the fall of 1985, when Navy records show that Peltz was no longer in Iceland. "The incident in question took place at a time when I was nowhere near this boy," Peltz told his congregation.

Joe Toher, father of Chris Toher, said he's been frustrated in trying to find justice for his son. He said a mistake was made on the date in the suit and that the attack occurred in the spring of 1985 before Peltz left Iceland. "I was naive to think that a Catholic priest wasn't capable of something like that," Joe Toher said. "The damage that sexual abuse causes to a family is unbelievable."

Peltz's situation reflects the tensions and issues involved in the unfolding church scandal. Some believe it reflects an ecclesiastical process that has sought to hide rather than address accusations against clergy. Dozens of interviews and a Kalamazoo Gazette review of police, fire, military and other documents portray Peltz as a respected but emotionally troubled priest in the late 1970s and 1980s. In addition to Chris Toher, another man who knew Peltz as a teen-ager said the priest made an "inappropriate sexual advance" that ended their friendship in the early 1980s. John Pachuta, now a school teacher near Seattle, knew Peltz when he was a high school and college student in southeastern Ohio. "Father Peltz had a lot of personal issues," said Pachuta, who did not provide specifics on the sexual advance. "But he was caught in a (Catholic church) system that couldn't give him the support that he needed."

David Butler of Parchment, Peltz's attorney, said accusations by Toher and Pachuta are

"bunk." Just last week, the priest undertook a lie detector test that Butler said shows Peltz "has never made any sexual advance against a minor." Butler said that Peltz was willing to undergo another polygraph test if his accusers would do so here by the same polygraph operator. "This (the accusations) is character assassination," said Butler, who adds Peltz was not party to the 1993 court settlement. "Father Peltz has never been given his day in court. This whole thing is terribly unfair and besmirching his reputation."

Peltz declined to comment for this story; the Kalamazoo diocese agreed to provide written answers to questions submitted in writing. The Steubenville diocese would not provide details of Peltz's career and told its priests not to speak to reporters about Peltz.

First signs of trouble

Peltz grew up near Steubenville, a blue-collar, solidly Catholic community about 35 miles west of Pittsburgh. There, in the Appalachian foothills, he attended Catholic schools as a child and into college and seminary. After his ordination in 1977, he was assigned to teach religion and English at Guernsey Catholic High School in Cambridge, Ohio, in addition to a job as an associate pastor. Former Guernsey staff and students say they regarded him as an idealistic clergyman particularly adept at working with youths -- an impeccably dressed priest who was strict but fair. He often treated Guernsey boys to dinner and let them drive his Chrysler Cordoba, former students said. Mark Aleshire of Zanesville, Ohio, a former Guernsey student who occasionally went out to dinner with Peltz, recalls Peltz as "an excellent religion teacher who taught me a good bit. He was a very good and responsible priest. He was never out of line." "He was really popular," said Steve Crum, a former Guernsey student who now lives in Baltimore. "Me and my friends all liked him."

But Peltz had difficulties at Guernsey, according to documents released by the Steubenville diocese for the Toher lawsuit. Peltz left the teaching job after a semester, citing health concerns and the need for a retreat. He went to a church in Steubenville and then one in Cambridge, and returned to Guernsey a year and a half later, in September 1979, as dean of discipline and vice principal. It was a difficult time at Guernsey, former staff members say. The diocese was debating whether to close the school. The students were particularly rambunctious. Peltz found himself at odds with staff, especially the nuns, according to letters he wrote at the time. He asked to be transferred. "I am too physically exhausted and too emotionally drained to adequately perform the tasks that should be mine as spiritual director," Peltz wrote to the Steubenville bishop in November 1979. "I have been informed that a local pastor has counseled students of his parish not to come to me for direction because I would be a detriment to their growth and development." He was seeing a psychiatrist, Peltz wrote, and "my own physical, mental and spiritual health play a large part in my decision. ... I should be removed from the educational system ... removed from the cynicism of my fellow priests."

Peltz finished out the school year, then became pastor of a church in Harrietsville, Ohio, in September 1980. Within months he was seeking a new job. He met with the rector at St. Joseph Preparatory Seminary in Vienna, W.Va., to talk about a position there. "I fully recognize Carl's strengths," the Rev. Robert Arkle, the rector, wrote in a March 1981 letter copied to the Steubenville bishop. But "I must voice my conviction, however, that high school seminary work is not the form of apostolate for which Carl would be well-suited. ... "My judgment is based on my knowledge of him and my knowledge as well of the kind of priestly 'give and take,'

the close living, the in-built pressures of this kind of life, and consequent necessity of a unique brand of camaraderie shared by all the priests who live and work here. The plain fact is, Carl could have a terrible experience in this kind of situation, and if so, there would be spill-over effects on other clergy and students."

Instead, Peltz moved that spring to St. Mary's Church in Marietta, his fifth church in four years. Although he was almost an hour's drive from Cambridge, he continued to stay in touch with Guernsey students, and some visited him at the St. Mary Church rectory. But other students, he said, wished him dead. And he blamed students for a shooting in the rectory and accused them of threatening his life. It was May 26, 1982, and the head pastor at St. Mary was away. Peltz was asleep when he said he heard voices in the rectory hall about 1:40 a.m. Peltz later told police he heard laughter and someone say, "We're finally going to get him. He's going to die tonight." A 9 mm bullet came whizzing through Peltz's closed bedroom door. Peltz told police he fired back with a tear gas gun he had gotten from his father. According to the police report, police found vulgarities spray-painted all over the priest's office, on his vestments and on photographs of Peltz in the room.

In incidents that police linked to the rectory shooting, a Marietta investigator found his family car burned four days later and received a threatening letter signed by "The Children of the Night." "We know of your desires for the young ones," the note read in part. "... You try to hide your sordid lusts. But we hear your whimpers." Peltz told investigators he had been "run out" of Guernsey County and that in the two years after that he had received threatening mail, had his car tires shot out and had been robbed at gunpoint. He suggested the "Children of the Night" letter was written by a Guernsey graduate, saying it resembled a Nathaniel Hawthorne story Peltz had taught in 1977.

Peltz "had a way of doing things that the students disliked," the Rev. John Price, former Guernsey principal, told investigators. The police report makes no mention of interviewing Guernsey students. Investigators instead began to turn their attention toward Peltz. "Look in on Father Peltz's background," said a page of the report dated June 4, 1982. That month, Peltz checked himself into a psychiatric facility for eight days. He told police that he had gone to the hospital after receiving a 3 a.m. phone call from a man who said: "The Prince of Darkness will consume the white satin in a fiery flame." The same page of that June 23 report noted: "This officer has yet to confront Father Peltz with the ladies clothing he has been purchasing. This officer would like to check into this aspect before confronting Father Peltz." The final page of the police report was filed July 9, 1982. It said a Guernsey County investigator had spoken to a number of "reliable citizens" who were Catholic and "did not wish to become involved in this investigation. They advised that Father Peltz has very strong homosexual tendencies."

Marietta investigators who worked on the case, including Roger Phillis, a Marietta police captain in 1982, told the Gazette that part of the report appears to be missing, including the final summary of the case. Neither the car arson nor the rectory shooting ever led to an arrest. Phillis said the Marietta police chief in 1982, a staunch Catholic who is now deceased, stepped in and took over the investigation. B.L. McKittrick, Marietta's current police chief, said it's his understanding the Steubenville diocese was "uncooperative" in the investigation. "It just died at the request of the bishop," said McKittrick. "That's almost scary, isn't it?" Phillis said he "had a

feeling that something was wrong with this case, but I've never been sure what it is. ... My sense is that things weren't exactly as presented."

Mike McCauley, one of the investigators in the case, agreed. "It seems to me that this whole situation raises a lot of questions of what he (Peltz) was into at that time," said McCauley, now a psychology teacher at Marietta High School. Butler, Peltz's attorney, said Peltz was a victim in the Marietta case and that it's unfair to cast aspersions against the priest. "I suspect that Father likes women, but he has taken a vow of chastity," said the attorney. As for the women's clothes, Peltz was not a "cross dresser," Butler said. "I suspect he probably was buying gifts.

" 'Personal problems' "I know he was experiencing personal problems at this time," said John Pachuta, who met Peltz when he was a student at Guernsey Catholic. They continued their friendship after Pachuta enrolled at Marietta College. "I attended his church and we got to be friends and he started to reach out to me." It was during this period the priest made a sexual advance that he rebuffed, said Pachuta, who said he didn't tell either church or police officials. Pachuta only spoke about the alleged sexual advance recently when contacted by a reporter who asked about his relationship with the priest. Pachuta declined to discuss the specifics of the sexual overtures. "I'm in a tough spot. He was a friend and good to me," Pachuta said. "On the other hand, he was having personal problems."

In Marietta, as in Peltz's other ministries, there were people who praised his abilities. In 1983, he was honored by the Knights of Columbus as State Chaplain of the Year. "He was a very, very dear friend to all of us," said Janet Stump, who attended Mass in St. Mary's Church in Marietta and at other churches where Peltz served. "He was a very caring and giving person."

In late 1983, Peltz applied to become a military chaplain, and the diocese provided a letter of recommendation saying Peltz was "spiritually, morally, intellectually, and emotionally" qualified. Peltz entered the Navy in the fall of 1984 and in January 1985 was sent to the U.S. Naval Air Station in Keflavik, Iceland. There, Peltz became friends with Joe Toher, his wife and three children, say Toher and Peltz's attorney. Toher, an executive officer on the base, played guitar during Mass. Chris, 12, the older son, was an altar boy. Peltz frequently came over for dinner. Toher and Peltz would often drink together and visit. One night while they were drinking, Toher said in an affidavit submitted for the 1991 court case, "Father Carl Peltz told me that he had previously been accused of sodomizing a boy in Ohio." Toher didn't question the comment at the time, he told the Gazette, because Peltz had presented it as an absurd accusation.

There is no truth to this statement nor any record of such an accusation being made against Peltz, say Kalamazoo church officials. Other times, Joe Toher said, the priest talked about the nuns in Ohio hating him and once began yelling obscenities in front of Toher about the Carmelite nuns who lived near the Navy base. "These things sounded bizarre, but I didn't pay much attention to them at the time," said Toher, now a defense contractor who lives near Dallas. One afternoon, Chris Toher said, he was visiting Peltz at his office to interview him for a school project when the priest gave him two glasses of Scotch whiskey, raped him and threatened to kill him if the 12-year-old told anybody. Chris Toher, now a 29-year-old who lives near Grand Haven, didn't tell anyone of the alleged attack for years. Others said Peltz grew increasingly troubled as the months wore on in Iceland.

"Gradually but markedly, (Peltz's) attitude changed. We couldn't figure out why his personality

was switching," said Joe Lapiana, a shop engineer on the base and friend of the Tohers who recalled the priest's outburst about the nuns. Lapiana, who now lives on Martha's Vineyard, Mass., and Joe Toher say they were both at Mass on a Sunday in May 1985 when the priest began to say things that didn't make sense and collapsed on the altar. The next day, the base captain called Lapiana and Joe Toher into his office. The captain, who is now deceased, wanted Peltz "off the island," said Lapiana, and Peltz was sent back to the United States.

Joe Toher escorted Peltz back to Norfolk, Va. Toher remembers the first words the priest spoke to him aboard the chartered plane: "I really (expletive) up, didn't I, Joe?" 'Committed and involved' While Joe Toher and Lapiana paint one picture, Navy records reflect another. Peter Mast, commanding officer of the Navy's Security Group Activity, based in New York City, wrote a letter in April 1985 complimenting Peltz for his hard work in Iceland. "In many cases, I have sent my sailors to Father Peltz with critical personal problems," Mast wrote. "In each case, he has returned happier, more productive sailors."

Kalamazoo church officials said Peltz left Iceland largely because he disliked the geographic isolation and that any erratic behavior stemmed from that stress. "He wanted to move on to a more fruitful ministry," said Edward Carey, chancellor of the Kalamazoo diocese. "My understanding is he hit the ground running when he returned from Iceland." Capt. J.F. McCarton, commanding officer of a ship on which Peltz served, wrote in a May 1986 letter that Peltz "has proven himself a committed and involved Navy chaplain."

Lawsuit filed

In 1987, Peltz was granted early release from active duty in the Navy. From there, he went to a church in Montana. "He didn't seem to be a good fit," said the Rev. J.H. Peterson, vicar general of the Diocese of Great Falls, Mont. Around 1989, Peltz finally conquered a longtime drinking problem, the priest's attorney said. In summer 1990, Chris Toher told his therapist and his parents that he had been raped by Peltz years earlier. Peltz's attorney said it's his understanding that Chris Toher's recollection came as a "result of the repressed-memory phenomenon," and that there is no physical or medical evidence to prove the memory true. But Chris Toher said he had been dealing with the memory all along and decided to speak about the rape when he heard other teens talk about similar events. Joe Toher believes his son. But, he said, he was frustrated in filing criminal charges -- Iceland authorities referred him to the Navy, and naval officials said there was nothing they could do because Peltz was no longer in the military.

Officials in the Diocese of Steubenville, still listed as Peltz's official employer, were more sympathetic, at least initially, according to Joe Toher's notes from 1990, which he provided to the Gazette. Monsignor Roger Foys, then chancellor of the Steubenville diocese, "told me that Father Peltz had been a problem since his ordination, that Father Peltz had had alcohol problems for some time" and suggested the 1982 shooting in Marietta was "self-inflicted," Toher said in an affidavit for the lawsuit. Foys could not be reached for comment.

After the Tohers sued Peltz and the diocese in 1991, the diocese argued it shouldn't be held liable for Peltz's actions on a naval base. A federal judge agreed, and dismissed the lawsuit. The Tohers appealed, and the diocese settled for \$25,000 in 1993.

Peltz, who was put on leave as soon as the Tohers made their accusations, was not given a new

assignment after the lawsuit was settled, officials at the Steubenville diocese said. He moved to St. Louis, where he helped out at different churches and wrote books on meditation and prayer. In 1998, the Diocese of Kalamazoo offered him a job at St. Joseph's Catholic Church near Benton Harbor, and he was named pastor of St. Ambrose in 1999. "Our diocese made full disclosure to the Diocese of Kalamazoo, and I emphasize full disclosure," said Monsignor Gerald E. Calovini, director of communications for the Steubenville diocese.

Kalamazoo church officials said they went through Peltz's personnel file and psychiatric evaluations and were convinced any problems he had were behind him. "In the quest to discover the truth, I've been sent to a number of institutions," Peltz told his congregation last month. "All concluded that I never had the proclivity toward violence nor an attraction to children that would let me act out in such a brutal way to a child." Carey, chancellor of the local diocese, said the diocese "has taken a lot of time" in its own investigation of Peltz's background. "I think we've got it right," he said. "I'm not sure we'll get any more by keeping this alive. Any more information on this doesn't do anything but harm Father."

'Brutally honest'

Peltz celebrated the 25th anniversary of his ordination this month. "He has done a tremendous amount of good through his liturgies and outreach efforts," Carey said. Butler, the priest's attorney, said the publicity surrounding this case, especially in light of sexual-abuse allegations flooding the church at large, has been "terribly hard" on Peltz. "He has a parish to care for, and his duties have been undermined by the inquiry into something that has never been substantiated," Butler said. The priest's parishioners describe him as an "insightful" and "very intelligent" priest who is "brutally honest" about his own failings, and one who works exceptionally well with youths. "Father Peltz is one of the more outspoken priests, one of the best we have ever had in the Diocese of Kalamazoo, and many of us feel that way," said Bob Stoops, who has worked closely with Peltz, including on the St. Ambrose parish council. St. Ambrose parishioner Linda Buck said she supports Peltz "more than 100 percent." "He's always been a very honest, very open individual ... in acknowledging he is an ordinary person," Buck said. "He is a person who struggles with his Christianity and beliefs in God like all of us do. I really hope and pray the congregation will keep that attitude."