

Twelve suits filed against diocese

Accusations made against 4 previously unnamed priests

By Paula Reed Ward
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Twelve lawsuits filed Thursday in Allegheny County against the Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh include accusations of sexual abuse against four priests not previously named.

The four priests, who were not listed in the statewide investigating grand jury report released in August, are the **Revs.** Peter Pilariski, **John Unger**, George Leech and Joseph Feltz. They are not among those the diocese lists on its website as having been credibly accused of abuse.

The complaints, filed in Allegheny County Common Pleas Court, name as defendants Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik and Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, who was formerly bishop in Pittsburgh. They allege that the church and officials there knew about abusive priests, but did nothing to stop them.

The complaints filed Thursday, like others before them, include claims for fraud and conspiracy and were filed by attorney Alan Perer.

The **Rev.** Tom Kunz from the Pittsburgh Diocese said officials there have not yet been served with the lawsuits, and that he cannot comment on pending litigation.

Lawsuits filed against 4 priests who weren't named by grand jury

LAWSUITS, FROM A-1

Some of the more egregious claims, which date to 1960 and often included grooming behavior, include alleged victims being sodomized and whipped. In one instance, a victim was ordered to keep quiet because otherwise Jesus would harm his family.

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette typically does not identify alleged victims of sexual abuse, but in this case Mr. Perer said his clients gave permission to be identified.

The lawsuits tell of abuse that happened decades ago. Such suits are currently barred under the Pennsylvania statute of limitations, but the plaintiffs say that deadline should be tolled, or waived, due to alleged fraud and coverup by the diocese.

Included in Thursday's filings:

- Alan Corso, now 67, of Gibsonia, said in his complaint that he was 15 when he was abused in 1966 by Father Pilariski, who had been assigned to Resurrection church in West Mifflin.

Father Pilariski took the teen on overnight trips to a friend's cottage on a river, where the priest would insist on bathing Mr. Corso in the river while both were naked. There was also wrestling, touching and horseplay, the complaint said. During one encounter, Mr. Corso said he woke up from a deep sleep, "groggy, unsure of what happened and believed he had been 'drugged and abused' while unconscious.

Father Pilariski died in 2017.

- James E. Quigley, 70, of Aurora, Colo. claimed abuse when he was 12 to 14 years old by Father Leech, who died in 2006.

Father Leech was assigned to various parishes and schools within the Diocese of Pittsburgh, including St. Bartholomew School in Penn Hills, according to the lawsuit.

Mr. Quigley, who attended St. Bartholomew school and church, said the priest was a family friend who sexually abused him several times between 1960 and 1962, the suit said. When Mr. Quigley and others were being interviewed to be altar boys, the priest would make them strip to their underwear and examine them to "determine what size smock they would need," the suit said.

He said he reported the alleged abuse multiple times to the diocese in 2006; according to the suit, the diocese said it would "get back" to him but did not.

- Kirk Rice, now 59, of Har-mar, said he was abused by Father **Unger** starting in the fourth grade at Sacred Heart Elementary School between 1960 and 1971. According to the complaint, Father **Unger** called him out of class "under the guise of needing to clean the erasers."



Bishop David Zubik prays on Ember Days, a three-day period of prayer in the Catholic tradition, Sept. 18 at the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh's office chapel Downtown.

Father **Unger** led Mr. Rice through a tunnel that connected the school to the church basement and rectory, took him into the choir locker room and sodomized him, according to the complaint. He alleges that he was assaulted twice more in sixth grade, and that several other attempts were unsuccessful. The complaint said Father **Unger** threatened both Mr. Rice and his friends who were also victims.

Unger told plaintiff that Jesus would harm his family if he told anyone."

Father **Unger** died in 2004.

- Mark A. Pearce, 48, of Raleigh, N.C., said he was abused when he was a minor by the **Rev.** George Zirwas, one of what the grand jury report called a "ring of predatory priests" active in the 1970s and 1980s along with the **Revs.** Robert Wolk, Francis Pucci and Richard Zula. According to the court filing, Mr. Pearce was abused in the rectory by priests Zula, Pucci and Joseph Feltz. Father Feltz was not named in the grand jury report in which the ring of abusers was described.

The alleged abuse occurred when Father Zirwas served as a parochial vicar at St. Michael in Elizabeth Township.

Mr. Pearce, a former altar boy who said he lived two doors from the rectory, claimed Father Zirwas raped and otherwise sexually and physically abused him repeatedly between 1982 and 1987, beginning a couple of months after the priest arrived at the parish.

The priest bought Mr. Pearce a gold cross to wear as a secret signal to other pedophile priests that he was ripe for further victimization, the suit said.

Only the alleged abuse by Zula is detailed in the complaint, including allegations that Zula whipped Mr. Pearce and fondled him, the suit said.

Father Zirwas moved to

Cuba, where he was murdered in his apartment in 2001. After that, Mr. Pearce reported his allegations to the diocese. "The diocese indicated it was aware of Zirwas [sic] abuse, and offered to pay for plaintiff's medical treatment and other financial assistance.

Father Pucci is dead. Zula, who died in 2017, was convicted of child sexual abuse in 1988 and spent two years incarcerated.

Others named in Thursday's filings include priests named in the grand jury report. Some of them were prosecuted, some were removed from ministry, some have since died.

- Trent Brash, now 59, of Beaver, said in his complaint that he was abused by the **Rev.** John S. Hoehl. Mr. Hoehl was accused of sexually abusing numerous children of all ages. He was removed from ministry in 1988, and removed from the priesthood in 2004. He became a children's therapist in West Virginia and surrendered his license in March 2007. According to the grand jury report, Mr. Hoehl was reported to be living in Addison, Somerset County.

- **John** F. Chepponis, 49, of Butler alleged he was abused between the ages of 8 and 11 by the **Rev.** Francis Siler, who was filling in as a priest at St. Catherine in Hampton. Mr. Chepponis was an altar boy. A plaintiff identified as **John** Doe 2, 53, said he, too, was abused by Father Siler when he was 15 and 16 years old, living in Lawrence County and playing basketball for a church-affiliated team. Father Siler died in 2015.

- David A. Newman Jr., now 51, of Carrick said he was abused in 1975 and 1976 between the ages of 8 and 9, by the **Rev.** William P. O'Malley III who was assigned to St. Canice in Knoxville. Another man, identified as **John** Doe, said

he, too, was abused by Father O'Malley. That complaint said that Doe, now 49, was abused between the ages of 11 and 12 in 1980 and 1981 when Father O'Malley was at St. Francis de Sales in McKees Rocks. Father O'Malley died in 2008.

- Jerry Schwickrath, 69, of Kittanning, said he was between the ages of 16 and 17 when he was sexually assaulted by the **Rev.** Ernest Paone, who had been assigned to Madonna of Jerusalem in Sharpsburg. Father Paone retired from active ministry in 2001. He died in 2012.

- Marianne Bezjian, now 70, of Fort Lauderdale, said she was abused by the **Rev.** Lawrence O'Connell at St. Gabriel church and school in Whitehall between the ages of 11 and 17. Her sister, Kristine Marks, of Valencia, also said she was abused by Father O'Connell between the ages of 7 and 10 and 16 and 18. Father O'Connell died in 1996.

- Richard F. Welsh, now 48, of Bellevue, said he was abused from the ages of 8 through 11 by the **Rev.** Edward Huff, who was assigned as a priest at North American Martyrs in Monroeville. Huff was arrested in 1994 and charged with several crimes in Lawrence County for conduct that occurred when he was a priest at St. Anthony. On Aug. 21, 1996, Huff pleaded guilty and was sentenced to serve 18 months to five years in prison. He was paroled on Aug. 5, 1999.

- Michael B. Dojak, 49, of Castle Shannon, claimed he was sexually abused by the **Rev.** Raymond R. Rhoden when he was a teenager in Finkeville in 1964-65. Father Rhoden died in 2006.

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