

Forgiveness and renewal

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(Editor's note: Bishop Thomas Edward Abel requested that his article, appearing below, be published in The Catholic Messenger.)

Forgiveness and renewal, common themes of the Roman Catholic Church. Founded on Jesus Christ, the Church is forever in the process of its renewal; reaching out to the needs of God's people, by proclaiming the Good News. But, sometimes, as much as she tries, the Church, Universal, falls short of its mission.

Another man has come forward to detail years of sexual abuse at the hands of several priests of the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa. The Most Reverend Thomas Edward Abel, now sixty-six years old, a Bishop of the Catholic Church of America, a self-governing church based out of San Diego, California, has come forward to report to the Most Reverend Thomas Zinkula, Bishop of Davenport, that he was abused as a child of only twelve. The abuse began by the now deceased, defrocked priest, James M. Janssen. Janssen has been accused of sexual molestation of thirty-six other children, teenagers, and young adults, throughout his many years serving the Davenport Diocese.

Bishop Abel, originally from Fort Madison, Iowa, is a former member of Saint Mary of the Assumption parish who, as a child, attended Saint Joseph's Elementary parish school, also in Fort Madison. He informed Diocesan officials that Janssen also coordinated additional sexual abuse by fellow priests: Francis Bass, Anthony Geerts, and James W. Murphy, a priest in the Memphis Diocese (formally the Diocese of Nashville). Bishop Abel also named defrocked priest Gerald Stouvenel and the Most Reverend Lawrence D. Soens, who sexually abused him when he was a diocesan seminarian student at Saint Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa.

It was the revelation, in late November of 2017 of Janssen's death in 2015, Bishop Abel said, that caused an irrepressible sense of relief and forgiveness, leading him to renewal; opening up to others of the vast pain he has been enduring for years. It is only through forgiveness that renewal and healing begin, he said.

Bishop Abel has reached an agreement with the Davenport Diocese including the publication of this article in The Catholic Messenger.

Diocese believes it is important for survivors to share their stories in their words

Bishop Thomas Zinkula of the Diocese of Davenport has received a request from Bishop Thomas E. Abel, from the Catholic Church of America, to publish an article he wrote concerning the abuse he suffered as a 12-year-old. The Catholic Church of America in San Diego, Calif., was founded in 1999 as a self-governing Christian community that is separate from the Roman Catholic Church. It was not until he heard of James Janssen's death that he felt he could come forward.



In his article, Bishop Abel reports that he was abused by five priests: James Janssen, Francis Bass, Anthony Geerts and Gerald Stouvenel from the Diocese of Davenport, and James Murphy from the Diocese of Memphis. Bishop Lawrence Soens, retired bishop of Sioux City, was also named. Three of the priests were laicized (returned to the lay state): Janssen, Bass and Stouvenel. Four of the priests are deceased: Geerts (d. 2006), Bass (d. 2014), Janssen (d. 2015) and Murphy (d. 2016). All of these individuals are named in the List of Credible Allegations Against Priests except Fr. Murphy, who was not a priest from the Diocese of Davenport.

The “Non-Monetary Undertakings of the Debtor” (24.9) from the joint plan of reorganization calls for allowed tort claimants to publish the stories of their abuse for two years after the effective date of the bankruptcy, which expired in 2010. Bishop Zinkula has waived the date restriction in this case so that Bishop Abel can be heard. The diocese believes it is very important for survivors to be able to share their story in their own words.

Bishop Zinkula said: “We must continue to keep survivors of abuse in our prayers so that they may find healing and that we will never forget the harm that was done to them.”

To report child sexual abuse

Contact the Iowa Department of Human Services Child Abuse Hotline: 800-362-2178.

If the abuse involves clergy or church personnel, also notify Alicia Owens, Victim Assistance Coordinator: (563) 349-5002, PO Box 232 Bettendorf, IA52722-0004, vacdav@attglobal.net.

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