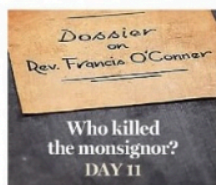


Priest suspected in murder accused of molesting boys



Eleventh in an 18-part serial on the unsolved 1966 murder of Buffalo Diocese Monsignor Francis J. O'Connor

BY DAN HERBECK
AND LOU MICHEL
NEWS STAFF REPORTERS

Rev. John D. Lewandowski was a tall, broad-shouldered Buffalo priest who liked to boast to youngsters about his days as a professional wrestler.

Buffalo Police Department files show that Lewandowski was questioned as a suspect in the March 1966 murder of Monsignor Francis J. O'Connor.

State court files show that he is also accused of molesting seven children while he was a priest.

Decked out in a skin-tight wrestler's uniform and high-top boots, Lewandowski in the 1960s would sometimes hold weekend training sessions where he would teach wrestling moves to adolescent and teenage boys.

But according to some of

the seven men who decades later filed Child Victims Act lawsuits accusing Lewandowski of sexual abuse, the priest used the wrestling sessions to connect with victims he molested.

"I was 14, I didn't know the first thing about sex until I met him," recalled one of the accusers, now 74, in an interview with The Buffalo News.

This man and two others who filed lawsuits said Lewandowski told them he had wrestled professionally. All three said the priest pulled their pants down and molested them while they wrestled.

They also recalled that Lewandowski told them he knew how to use wrestling moves to kill someone.

"He was wrestling me on the beach one day. He told me, 'I could snap your neck and kill you in an instant.' I took that as a direct threat that he could kill me if I ever told anyone about the things he had been doing to me," the accuser told The News.

"The guy was 20 times stronger than I was," recalled a second man who also filed a lawsuit accusing Lewandowski of sexual abuse. "He made it very clear, he told me he could kill me easily if he ever wanted to."

In March 1966,

See **Monsignor** on Page A4

'This man was a predator, no doubt,' ex-altar boy says

MONSIGNOR • from A1

Lewandowski emerged as one of the Buffalo Police Department's suspects in the murder of O'Connor. Police records show detectives began questioning people about Lewandowski, his involvement with teenage boys and his ties to O'Connor 10 days after the monsignor was killed on March 13, 1966.

O'Connor's body was found in Scajaquada Creek about 200 yards from Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, where Lewandowski had served until six months before.

Reports filed by homicide detectives back then portray Lewandowski as a hard-drinking man who used profane sexual language around youngsters.

Lewandowski loved bowling and was well-known at several city bowling establishments he frequented, often accompanied by teenage boys, the reports indicate. He also boasted to several boys that he held a black belt in judo.

While investigating the murder, detectives interviewed about a dozen boys who knew Lewandowski, in addition to workers at bowling alleys where the priest hung out.

Several boys from the Black Rock neighborhood told police in 1966 that Lewandowski asked them in graphic detail if they ever had sex, and some boys described disturbing incidents that occurred months earlier when Lewandowski took them on a camping trip to a cabin in Canada.

"He tried to force himself on me in a bedroom at the cabin. He tried to touch my private parts, but I wouldn't let him. I curled up in a fetal position. The other boys heard me scream, 'Get away from me!' I was 13," a former altar boy who was mentioned in a police report recently told The News.

"When we drove back to Buffalo, as soon as we crossed the Peace Bridge, I jumped out of his car and ran all the way home ... I avoided him after that."

This man, who did not file a lawsuit, said he met Lewandowski through bowling.

"He was the coach of our CYO bowling team at Assumption," he said. "This man was a predator, no doubt."

Records from the Buffalo Diocese say Lewandowski served as a priest from 1960

Coming Thursday

Police investigating murder question and fingerprint priest.

About the series

Buffalo police homicide files in the unsolved 1966 murder of one of Buffalo's most respected Catholic priests were never intended to see the light of day.

But on Feb. 2, 2022, the veil of secrecy was pulled back. Two Buffalo News reporters and their editor were granted access to the files in response to a Freedom of Information request.

Revealed in the nearly 57-year-old reports on the murder of Monsignor Francis J. O'Connor were shocking secrets

— a priest and a diocese journalist had been suspects — and a cache of other never-before released details.

The reports show the investigation suddenly ended, without any explanation, shortly after a priest was questioned and fingerprinted.

Most of the people who knew O'Connor are now dead, along with the detectives and prosecutors who investigated the crime.

But some people still want to know who murdered the monsignor.

— Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck

How we reported this series

Watchdog reporter Lou Michel filed a Freedom of Information Law request in January 2022 for Buffalo Police records on the unsolved 1966 murder of Buffalo Diocese Monsignor Francis J. O'Connor.

He and reporter Dan Herbeck were given access to the Police Department's box of approximately 100 reports on the case.

In addition, they interviewed more than

120 people, including retired police officers who worked on the case, people who talked with the Buffalo Police homicide chief who oversaw the investigation, and relatives and acquaintances of O'Connor and of three diocesan employees who were once suspects.

This is the 11th in an 18-part serial on the unsolved murder.

Read the rest of the series in upcoming issues of The Buffalo News.

On BuffaloNews.com:



- SCAN THE QR CODE AT LEFT ON ANY MOBILE DEVICE TO ACCESS THE LATEST ENTRIES OF THE BUFFALO NEWS SERIAL.
- WATCH NOW: CHIEF OF DETECTIVES RALPH DEGENHART AT 1966 NEWS CONFERENCE ON MONSIGNOR'S MURDER.
- WATCH NOW: MICHEL AND HERBECK TALK ABOUT REPORTS.

police officials told The News that the department — for decades — would report allegations of crimes by priests to leaders of the Buffalo Diocese, rather than arresting the priests.

The News could find no record of Buffalo police arresting any priest for molesting a youth in the previous 70 years.

"We should have been arresting them, but we didn't," a retired police captain told The News on the condition he not be identified. "It was wrong, but that was our policy at that time ... Turn it over to the diocese and let them handle it."

That policy helped Lewandowski avoid arrest, even after several witnesses in the O'Connor probe told detectives of Lewandowski's questionable conduct with boys.

Lewandowski's boss at Assumption Church told detectives that Lewandowski had been removed from his parish about six months before the murder.

Pastor Maximilian T. Bogacki told detectives that he had Lewandowski sent away after Lewandowski had been accused of getting a teenage boy drunk and keeping him out all night. Bogacki said he complained to the bishop and two other top Buffalo Diocese officials about Lewandowski's conduct.

Lewandowski was sent for a brief time to the Abbey of the Genesee monastery near Genesee, the pastor said, and then transferred to a parish in Salamanca.

But the pastor said Lewandowski's "past caught up to him" in Salamanca, and he was moved again to a Buffalo Diocese retreat house in Bemus Point, which police described as "a penal house for wayward priests."

The seven Child Victims Act lawsuits accusing him of molesting boys at four different parishes and a Boys & Girls club are on hold in the state courts as a resolution is negotiated in the Buffalo Diocese's bankruptcy petition.

The News asked some of Lewandowski's accusers if they thought he was capable of killing someone.

"I am not surprised to hear that he was the suspect in the murder," said one of the men, now 75. "This man was so big, so muscular. I was a skinny kid. He didn't threaten to kill me, but he told me and my friends, 'I know how to kill you or cripple you for the rest of your life.' That really scared me."

until 1970, and he died in 1982 at age 49.

The diocese has "no record" that police told any diocese official that Lewandowski was a suspect in the O'Connor murder, said Joseph Martone, a spokesman for the diocese.

In 2018, the diocese identified Lewandowski

as one of 78 priests from the diocese who had been "credibly accused" of sexually abusing children.

Like nearly all other Buffalo priests who were suspected of molesting children, Lewandowski was never arrested. Retired Buffalo