


ARCHDIOCESE OF MILWAUKEE

OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

July 17, 1996

His Eminence, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger
Prefect, The Sacred Congregation for
the Doctrine of the Faith
00120 Vatican City State
Europe

Your Eminence,

I am writing to inform you of two situations in which two priests of this Archdiocese have been accused of solicitation of a penitent so as to commit a sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue (c. 1387). The cases are completely unrelated and happened at very different points in time, but only recently have come to light. I now seek your counsel as to the procedure I should follow.

Shortly before I began my sabbatical on January 1, 1996, I directed my Vice Chancellor, the Reverend James E. Connell, J.C.D., to investigate the allegations that had been made against the two priests. Now, upon my return on July 1st, Father Connell informs me that in both cases sworn testimony has been given concerning the charges I mentioned above. Father Connell believes that the testimony has been given to the Church in good faith and must be taken seriously, and I concur.

The first case concerns the Reverend Lawrence C. Murphy, a priest whose only assignment was as Chaplain, and eventually Director, of Saint John School for the Deaf in Milwaukee from 1950 to 1974. According to the person who has given the sworn testimony concerning Father Murphy's use of the confessional to solicit sinful actions against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue, many other students were also victims of Father Murphy in this same manner, and we are now in the process of gathering additional testimony from some of these other persons. Although allegations against Father Murphy had been brought to my predecessor, allegations that resulted in a civil suit that was later dropped, this is the first that I had heard of the abuse of the confessional. I find that the deaf community tends to keep its problems and embarrassments to themselves, thus explaining the reluctance of these victims to bring forth allegations earlier.

Father Murphy was ordained a priest in May of 1950, began a leave of absence during September of 1974, and has never lived within the territory of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee during my years as Archbishop. Soon after I took office, I became aware that Father Murphy's leave of absence was due to sexual matters, but it was only less than one year ago when I learned of the possibility that solicitation in the confessional might be part of the situation. That is when I decided to have Father Connell conduct an investigation. My concern now is not simply for necessary justice, I am even more interested in a healing response from the Church to the deaf community within the Archdiocese so that their anger may be defused and their trust in ecclesiastical ministers be restored.

The second case concerns the Reverend Michael T. Neuberger, a priest who has had a variety of sexual and financial allegations brought against him in recent years. Dealing with Father Neuberger included a process to remove him from the office of pastor of a parish in Milwaukee. Also, suggestions came forth that Father might have used the confessional to solicit sinful actions against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue. Thus I decided to have Father Connell investigate this matter as well. As a result of Father Connell's investigation, sworn testimony has been obtained from three highly respected and credible persons that Father Neuberger admitted this crime to them, thus establishing an "extra-judicial" confession (cc. 1536, §2 and 1537). The three witnesses are a psychologist employed by the Catholic Social Services of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and two licensed clinical social workers employed by the State of Wisconsin who specialize in the assessment and treatment of sex offenders. These witnesses proclaim under oath to Father Connell that during their discussions with Father Neuberger about the sexual allegations that had been made against him, Father in fact acknowledged a variety of crimes, including use of the confessional for the purpose of solicitation.

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Let me also say that once I became aware of the possibility that both Father Murphy and had committed the crime of solicitation (c. 1387), I discussed the particulars of the cases with my canonists and requested that they research what canonical process is appropriate, given the length of time since the crimes, or if this subject matter is reserved to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (c. 1362, §1, 1°), thus not under the norms of prescription presented in the Code of Canon Law. Now that the investigations have been conducted and the canonists have researched the issue, I have the understanding that this offense is under your jurisdiction. So I seek your counsel on how to proceed.

Finally, Your Eminence, while my comments in this letter have been very factual and legalistic in tone, please be assured that my primary concern is the spiritual well being of all the persons involved with these cases, and that includes Father Murphy and

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Thank you for your assistance, and I have the honor to be, Your Eminence,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

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Most Reverend Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B.
Archbishop of Milwaukee

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