Conviction
of priest
for molestation
isn’t enough
for a mom who
believes the
entire church
shares the guilt

By Cheryl Lavin

On Dec. 11, Rev.
Robert Mayer was
found guilty of sex-
ually abusing a
teenage girl while he
was pastor at St. Odilo
Catholic Church in
Berwyn. On Friday, he is
scheduled to be sen-
tenced.

Planning to be there is
Jeanne Miller, 45, who
has followed the case
with more than just casu-
al interest. In fact, she
has followed every step of
Mayer’s career for 10
years.

“I know more about
him than his own mother,” says Miller.

In 1982, Mayer was a parish priest at
St. Edna’s Catholic Church in Arlington
Heights, the church Miller attended with
her family. And in 1982, Miller’s 13-
year-old son claimed he had been
molested by Mayer during an outing to
Fox Lake.

Her response was, “A priest wouldn’t
do that.”

Then she learned that, perhaps, a
priest would do that.

Then she came to believe that the
Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago
would do little about it.

When Miller brought her son’s allega-
tions to church officials, she says she
was first ignored, then stonewalled and
finally threatened with communica-
tion. The chancellor of the archdiocese,
John Richard Keating, now the bishop
of Arlington, Va., told her she would be
breaking canon law if she sued a priest.

Through a spokesman, Keating says that “any
allegations of improper procedure are unfounded
and simply false.”

During the past 10
years, Miller, who now
lives in Palatine, says she
has learned that her treat-
ment is not unusual.

Through The Linkup, an
advocacy group she start-
ed in 1991 and originally
called VOCAL, she has
learned that she met with
the typical church re-
ponse. In the past year,
she has been in touch with more than
3,000 victims and their family members
nationwide. Their stories are so similar
that she has come to believe that there
exists “a major institutional cover-up.”

“I get eight or nine calls and letters a
day,” Miller says. “I wait for the one
that says, ‘Father So-and-So abused my
child and I went to the church and they
weren’t wonderful. They provided my
child with counseling, they removed the priest
from his parish and they reported him
to the local authorities. That call has
never come.”

Jeanne Miller was born in Chicago.
She attended Catholic school, St.
Eugene’s in Norridge.

“I remember the nun would say that in
every family there is one child who is
called to serve a religious life. And there
was just my brother and me, and I knew
it wasn’t my brother, so in about 2nd
grade I thought, ‘It must be me,’” she
says.

After a year of college, she entered a
convent in Dubuque, Iowa, run by the
Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin
Mary. She stayed two years.

“It was the 4th of July and I was
standing on this cliff, watching the Mis-
sissippi River flow by. My veil was
blowing in the wind and I thought, ‘This
is the Sound of Music.’ This isn’t real.
I’m being trained to go out and save the
world and I don’t know a thing about
it.’ I was holding a sparkler in one hand
and a lemonade in the other. I looked at
them and thought, ‘I should have a mar-
tini and a cigarette.’”

Miller left the next morning and
returned home. She got married and
started having babies. In 1982, Miller and
her husband and four children were
living in Arlington Heights, attending St.
Edna’s. The church was the center of
the family’s life. “Our heartbeat,” Miller
calls it. She taught religious education,
and her husband was a teen minister.
Her oldest son, Tom, was an altar boy,
and her next son was in training to be
come one. When the new parish priest,
Rev. Mayer, invited Tom to his family’s
summer cottage, Miller was “thrilled.”

“Tom was making some noises about
maybe he’d like to be a priest, and I
figured this would be a wonderful way
for him to feel closer to the church,
just to get to know a priest personally.
I just thought it was great.”

Tom returned a different boy.
“‘He had been this perfect child,’” Mill-
er says. “When he got home he was de-

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Problem with young boys." Somerville, who was unsuccessful in getting the archdiocese to confront Mayer and is now retired, confirmed the conversation.

Miller discussed the allegations with the director of religious education, Marilyn Steffel, who told her that Mayer had already been reported to the archdiocese.

"Our staff had asked for guidance because we were all a little lost on what to do," Mayer told Miller. "She was incredible."

Miller attended the funeral of her brother, who had died of a heart attack. She went to speak with Rev. Kenneth Velo, now Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's executive assistant, because she was also the diocese personnel head.

"I couldn't speak," Miller says. "It was like speaking to a wall." Mayer told her that she was just giving in to the "motherly instincts" and that she couldn't prove a thing.

"Velo was unavailable for comment," Miller says.

"I don't think that point, Miller says, all she wanted was for Mayer's access to children to be restricted and for the boys to get counseling. "It never occurred to us to see her and make her go to the police," Miller says.

Eventually, Miller learned that Mayer's problems began before he got to St. Edna's. After being contacted by Miller's attorney, family members at his previous parish, St. Mary's in Lake Forest, signed affidavits accusing him of appearing nude in front of young boys, giving them beer and making sexual advances.

"I was dying," Miller says. "I couldn't breathe." Miller believes she was with Mayer at the time.

When the Lake County state's attorney's office said it had insufficient evidence to proceed against Mayer, Miller hired a lawyer, the only one she knew, who had handled the closing of her house. Suddenly, she found herself in the middle of a church that told her to "forgive and forget," and that she should move on. But Mayer's behavior continued, and Miller was afraid to use the bathroom at school.

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