

“He’s walked the path of sin like the rest of us. His sin was just more public than ours.”
— Gail Shetler, talking about her pastor, the Rev. Jean Vogler



BOB GWALTNEY / Courier & Press

The Rev. Jean Vogler, in his office at Holy Trinity Catholic Church, spent 10 months in prison on a charge of ordering child pornography through the mail.

Priest finds forgiveness in flock

By MAUREEN HAYDEN
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If today is like most Sundays, Gail and Tom Shetler will leave their North Side home and drive into Downtown Evansville to attend Mass. There are churches closer to home, but the Shetlers and their seven children prefer Holy Trinity Catholic Church and the priest who

has been there for three years.

For the Shetlers, there is an intimacy in the small church and an empathy among the priest and parishioners as they begin the worship service with the penitential rite in which they confess to God and to each other that they are sinners in need of redemption.

“He’s walked the path of sin like the rest of us,” said Gail Shetler of her pastor, the Rev. Jean Vogler. “His

sin was just more public than ours.”

That public sin, first revealed six years ago, has re-emerged in the wake of a scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. This past week, the 57-year-old Vogler was targeted by national media pursuing the story on pedophilia in the priesthood.

What was reported was something the Shetlers, their fellow Catholics and much of the Evansville community have long known — that

Vogler was arrested in December 1995 as part of an undercover investigation into child pornography.

He spent 10 months in a federal prison on a charge of ordering child pornography through the mail. Federal officials who investigated and prosecuted Vogler said there were never any allegations of abuse of a child, nor have any allegations arisen since.

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The national news story implied that Vogler's past was a secret, akin to the recent revelations that dozens of pedophile priests had their crimes against children covered up by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

But neither Vogler nor his boss, Evansville Bishop Gerald Gettelfinger, has kept Vogler's crime hidden. Instead, they've used the very public nature of it to build a different kind of ministry. And an unforeseen consequence has occurred: Under Vogler's guidance, Holy Trinity is a growing church.

Every day before Mass, Vogler dons his floor-length black cassock, with its 33 buttons representing each year of the life of Jesus, and enters the confessional booth. Some days, he worries whether he'll be finished in time to start Mass on schedule. Catholics from across the Tri-State come and wait in line to take part in the sacrament of reconciliation — a kind of getting right with God that requires admission of sin, true remorse and completion of penance.

Vogler said the multitude of sins confessed to him, in private and in confidence, range from minor failings to major transgressions. People come to him, he said, wanting to know just how far God's mercy extends.

Far, very far, he tells them. "I would never, ever, ever, God forbid, make myself out to be a role model," said Vogler. "But a lot of people are carrying heavy burdens, a lot of people think that God could never forgive them for what they've done. That's despair. And it's an incredible joy to be a comfort to them."

He offers more than absolution. He offers his own story of shame and despair, of admitting to sins and paying a heavy price for them, for finding ways to repair the harm, and for turning harm into healing.

"Once you experience the warmth of God's love, it changes you," said Vogler.

Four years ago, Vogler was the focus of controversy after Gettelfinger appointed him chaplain at St. Mary's Medical Center, the largest Catholic hospital in Southern Indiana. The decision prompted a public outcry, the intensity of which caught Gettelfinger off-guard.

A week after the appointment became public, Gettelfinger rescinded his decision.

"I underestimated the feelings and fears of people in the community," said Gettelfinger, in an interview.

Gettelfinger made the appointment based on the advice of doctors who had treated Vogler during a seven-month intensive therapy program at a major psychiatric institution that treats sex offenders.

Vogler's doctors encouraged Gettelfinger to let the priest return to active ministry, with three conditions: that he continue in a lifelong therapy program, that he not have private access to children, and that he not be put in a position where he'd be isolated from people.

Gettelfinger thought the hospital ministry was ideal. A place of physical healing where Vogler could be a symbol of spiritual healing.

Vogler sees the controversy now as part of a greater plan.

"This is where I'm supposed to be," said Vogler, of his job as associate pastor at Holy Trinity. "Sometimes God needs to hit us over the head with a 2-by-4 to get us to hear him."

When Vogler was a young seminarian he chose St. Jean-



DENNY SIMMONS / Courier & Press

The Rev. Eugene Schmitt performs Mass at Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in Evansville on Friday morning. Schmitt said recent national exposure re-

garding allegations of abuse in the priesthood has been trying for local priests, but "the people here have been very supportive."

Local priests struggle to find ways to respond

By MAUREEN HAYDN

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As each new wave of allegations of abuse in the priesthood emerges in the media, the Rev. Eugene Schmitt finds himself repeating the same advice: Keep the faith.

It's guidance not just for the people in his parish but for himself as well.

"I'd be lying if I said it doesn't affect me," said Schmitt. "I go out in public with my collar on, and wonder if people are looking at me and wondering, 'Is that another pedophile priest?'"

Schmitt, who is associate pastor at Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in Evansville's North Side, said those feelings are cause for him to be even more visible.

"I can't change the way people see me," said the 39-year-old priest, who was ordained less than two years ago. "I still have to witness to the world. Maybe now more than ever before."

Schmitt's feelings are echoed by priests throughout the Evansville Catholic diocese, struggling to find ways to respond to a growing scandal in their church.

Some remind people that the allegations of sexual abuse of children involve a small fraction of the nation's 48,000 priests. And they say the media fails to report incidents of abuse outside the priesthood, among other professions.

But like their bishop, they also believe the church can no longer deny there is a problem.

"We can't be afraid to confront these

"I go out in public with my collar on and wonder if people are looking at me and wondering 'Is that another pedophile priest?'"

—The Rev. Eugene Schmitt

hard issues," said Evansville Catholic Bishop Gerald Gettelfinger. "They're not fatal. We don't have to let them become a cancer growing on the church."

Gettelfinger doesn't want to diminish the seriousness of the scandal, but he does find it heartening that Catholics don't seem to be abandoning their parishes.

Gettelfinger celebrated Easter Sun-

day Mass with an overflowing crowd at St. Benedict Cathedral, and priests throughout the diocese say attendance at Mass remains strong and contributions to church efforts remain steady.

A test may come next week as the diocese kicks off its annual fund-raising campaign.

But Gettelfinger believes Catholics won't waver.

"Their faith doesn't reside within the hierarchy of the church," said Gettelfinger. "Their faith is in God."

Meanwhile, Schmitt has already found some good emerging from the pain.

"The people here have been very supportive," said Schmitt. "They'll stop me and say, 'We're praying for you, Father.'"

Baptiste-Marie Vianney as his patron saint, following the tradition of Catholics who believe the saints may act as intercessors with God, and to whom they may turn for guidance.

Vogler learned later that the 19th century French priest struggled with his own demons. Vianney, considered unworthy for a prominent role in the church, spent most of his priesthood in a remote French hamlet hearing confessions all day. Sainthood was granted in part because of his reported ability to elicit confessions from those too ashamed by their secret sins.

After Vogler lost his appointment to St. Mary's Medical Center, he became a kind of roaming priest, officially "unassigned," but helping out in parishes when pastors were ill, absent or on vacation. He began celebrating weekday and Sunday Masses in churches throughout the diocese.

He was apprehensive, concerned about the emotional pain he might cause the people in the pews. But the apprehension was needless. Church members welcomed him, often with surprising words.

"What I repeatedly heard from people was, 'Father, I'm a sinner, too,'" said Vogler. "Maybe that was their way of saying to me,

"This is what it means to be a Christian."

When Vogler was appointed associate pastor at Holy Trinity in 1999, there were about 100 families registered as members of the church, but most of those who attended were the elderly.

The church now has more than 150 families registered, including a number of them with children. Among those who joined after Vogler was assigned to Holy Trinity was Charlie Korossel, a 51-year-old Evansville man now studying to be a permanent deacon in a diocesan-wide program that Vogler heads.

"People come here because of Father Jean," said Korossel. "They know his history... They come here because he is open to who they are, just as they are, with love and without judgment. People gravitate to that."

It was Vogler, Korossel said, who brought up his past the very first time he preached from Holy Trinity's pulpit, telling the congregation: "My sin is known to you."

That honesty impressed Holy Trinity member Dusty Barnes, a 29-year-old seminarian who hopes to be ordained in May.

"There is a humility about him that's inspiring," said Barnes. "I need to remember that when I become a priest. I need to

remember we're all walking together in this journey."

Some church members have been criticized by other Catholics for attending Holy Trinity and for their willingness to support Vogler. But the Shetlers see it as a Christian response.

"Forgiveness is very hard," said Gail Shetler. "Sometimes it comes at a price. You have to give up your own anger. Forgiveness doesn't mean accepting the sin or approving of it. It means accepting the person, seeing him apart from his sin."

Part of Vogler's recovery has involved owning up to his sin and acknowledging the harm caused by it. It begins with the children pictured in the pornography he purchased, and continues through to the Catholics he disappointed, embarrassed or angered. And he believes he harmed his fellow priests, who were tainted by the scandal.

"I feel badly for my brother priests," he said. "They'd done nothing wrong, but had to pay the price for my sins."

Vogler believes the current scandal could be turned around and become a good thing for the church.

"We don't need to cover it up. We need to talk about it," said Vogler. "We could be a stronger church because of this."

Vogler's active ministry is a cause for concern for some.

The federal prosecutors and investigators involved in the undercover investigation that resulted in his arrest are wary about the nature of pedophilia, which is the sexual desire for children.

Like alcoholism, pedophilia is now seen as an incurable disease, difficult to control without therapy, that may last a lifetime. Treatment for sexual offenders of children often involves an ongoing 12-step program much like the one developed by Alcoholics Anonymous.

But those who treat sexual offenders say the potential for controlling the disease increases dramatically for those who take responsibility for their actions and follow the therapeutic program.

"There is an erroneous impression out there that all sex offenders are untreatable," said the Rev. Stephen Rosetti, director of the St. Luke Institute, a psychiatric hospital in Maryland that specializes in treating clergy with sexual dysfunctions. "The sexual offenders who own up to the seriousness of the crime and who commit themselves to recovery are the ones who make progress."

Rosetti said a recent study that monitored sexual offenders who received treatment at St. Luke and continued in therapy showed a relapse rate of less than 2.6 percent. "We have a saying, 'It works if you work it,'" said Rosetti.

Rosetti has publicly criticized the Catholic leadership who ignored or hid the problem of pedophile priests in the best interest of children.

"You can't throw people away," said Rosetti. "If we decide only to punish people and not treat them, then all that happens is that they disappear back into society where they're more likely to hurt a child again. It just ignores the problem."

Rosetti said Gettelfinger's decision to return Vogler to the active ministry to a place where the parishioners knew his past — yet willingly accept him — was an appropriate response. Rosetti also believes it has the potential to be a model for other bishops.

"We need to make a distinction between the wounded wanderer and the wounded healer," said Rosetti. "We need to ask the question, 'Have we given them enough healing to be a source of healing for others, or are they a source of hurt for others?'"