

November, 2018 | Man's allegations of abuse by Fostoria priest surface after 40 years

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FOSTORIA — Riley Kinn thought he was handling it.

Nevermind the drinking, the substance abuse, the difficulty in interpersonal relationships that had intermittently plagued him since he was a teenager.

He'd been to therapy. He thought he'd managed to push down and push away the months of grooming and abuse by the Rev. Joseph Schmelzer, predatory behavior that he says culminated in sexual assault in the rectory of St. Wendelin Parish in 1980.

Then came 2015. Mr. Kinn took a new client for his information technology business — his childhood parish in Fostoria. Once on site to run new wires for the internet and phone systems, he found himself drawn to the rectory bedroom. The memories flooded back. So did a fierce panic attack. He fled to his truck and took off.

Mr. Kinn, 51, is speaking publicly about his allegations for the first time. That decision, after nearly 40 years of silence, comes as he's struggled to understand why the Diocese of Toledo, where he reported the abuse last year, found his claims not substantiated, despite two other previous credible accusations that led to Father Schmelzer's permanent removal from public ministry in 2007.

That Mr. Kinn's allegations would be denied "defies logic," said Claudia Vercellotti, a leader in the Toledo chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"Father Schmelzer is a perpetrator that the diocese has paid a settlement on. They've released his name publicly on their own website," she said. "So why Riley was found not to be credible — and by what process — it's revictimizing, it's retraumatizing. It's not a fair process."

Mr. Kinn's decision to go public follows the recent Pennsylvania grand jury report that rekindled attention in the Catholic Church's history of clergy abuse and cover up. Subsequent public comments by Toledo Bishop Daniel Thomas promised transparency and a commitment "to providing support and assistance to those who have been hurt."

But advocates for church reform say the internal process to evaluate abuse allegations remains unfriendly to victims. Critics say the church has handled abuse cases in a way that willfully prevents a full accounting of the damage done by priests or the number of victims in the Toledo diocese.

Attorneys general in more than a dozen states have launched investigations into the Catholic Church, in an effort to determine the scope of clerical abuse reaching back decades. Ohio is not among the states with an open investigation, as Attorney General Mike DeWine — now governor-elect — has said his office does not have the power to impanel a grand jury without a request from a local prosecutor.

In Ohio, prosecutors can pursue charges for childhood sexual abuse up to 20 years after a child turns 18.

The Diocese of Toledo refused to make Bishop Thomas available for an interview with The Blade. Spokesman Kelly Donaghy said in a written statement that Father Schmelzer's status "remains unchanged: that is, since 2007 he has been permanently barred from public ministry as a priest."

Father Schmelzer did not answer the door at his Van Wert County home when journalists visited twice in October, and did not respond to letters sent to the home, a post office box listed in his name, and left at the home during those visits.

Mr. Kinn was not allowed to testify before a review board convened to consider his allegations, but was sent a letter in December stating his accusations were deemed not substantiated.

"I thought this would help me heal and help rid the diocese of some of these predator priests," he said of his decision to report his allegations to the Toledo diocese. "But I don't think they really want to rid themselves of these predator priests. And it's frustrating; I was hoping to get some type of closure and instead it just kind of deepened the wound."

### **Months of grooming**

Soon after Father Schmelzer arrived in Fostoria in 1980 as the school principal, he invited Mr. Kinn and another student to play tennis, a "pretty cool" request to the then-13-year-old, Mr. Kinn recalled.

It was the first interaction of what Mr. Kinn looks back on as months of grooming — techniques experts say abusers use to build trust with victims. Father Schmelzer connected with teens through a juvenile sense of humor and an enviable record collection.

And he made young people feel special.

“At a time in my life where I didn't have a lot of self-confidence, as many young teenagers don't,” Mr. Kinn said. “It made me feel very special to have this relationship.”

As the priest built a rapport with Mr. Kinn, he crossed appropriate physical boundaries. Lingering touches escalated to drives through town ending in a parking lot. There, Mr. Kinn said, the priest would try to touch the boy's crotch and encourage him to reciprocate.

Mr. Kinn disclosed the abuse to no one at the time. But his father, John — whom he told in 2015 — remembers a noticeable change in his son's behavior.

His once-social boy became withdrawn, secluding himself in his bedroom after dinner rather than joining the rest of the family for television and homework.

On one morning drive to school, the distraught teenager said he was scared and didn't want to go to school. The father took his son on a short detour to collect himself.

“I suspected maybe he was being bullied by somebody or something and it would just go away,” the elder Mr. Kinn said. “That sticks out clearly.”

The tipping point came in the rectory. After consuming “a third to a half of a beer” provided by the priest in the living room, Mr. Kinn said, his memory goes blank. He awoke in the priest's bedroom and discovered injuries and other physical evidence of sexual assault. He believes, based on the minimal amount of alcohol he consumed, he was also drugged.

Mr. Kinn avoided the priest from then on.

“I had to pretend like it never happened,” he said. “I buried myself in band, I buried myself in sports. I learned to drink in high school pretty good. [I] tried everything to not think about it, to avoid it, to pretend like it never happened.”

Father Schmelzer left the school shortly before Mr. Kinn's senior year, around the same time that an unwitting John Kinn noticed his son seemed to shake off whatever had been upsetting him.

**‘A program of prayer and penance’**

Father Schmelzer's reassignment to St. Clement Parish in Toledo came as a relief to Mr. Kinn, but put the priest in the path of another teenager, Jon Schoonmaker, the first to publicly and credibly accuse the cleric of abuse.

Father Schmelzer took on the role of "spiritual director" to Mr. Schoonmaker, an aspiring seminarian who came from a family of "front-row Catholics."

In his case, the interactions culminated with a sexual assault at St. Louis Church in Custar, Ohio, on New Year's Eve in 1985. Mr. Schoonmaker, then 19, said he, too, was provided alcohol by the priest.

Mr. Schoonmaker reported the abuse to then-Bishop James Hoffman in 1992, and the bishop assured him in a hand-written letter that Father Schmelzer would receive counseling and be monitored. At the time, Mr. Schoonmaker thought this response was acceptable, and he didn't question whether the diocese would follow through on those assurances until 2002, when the clergy abuse scandal erupted across the country.

Mr. Schoonmaker renewed his allegations at that point, distinguishing himself as one of the earliest and most prominent accusers to come forward locally. In early 2003, he became the first accuser to address the just-established Diocesan Review Board, which ultimately found his claim credible.

Father Schmelzer was permanently removed from public ministry in 2007, after he unsuccessfully appealed to the Vatican; he had been on leave from St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Van Wert since 2003.

Bishop Leonard Blair, in addressing St. Mary's parishioners regarding Father Schmelzer's removal, revealed in 2007 that a second anonymous accuser had come forward with additional credible allegations against Father Schmelzer.

"It's one thing when you have one accusation," Bishop Blair said at the time. "It's quite another when you have a second."

Father Schmelzer continues to live near his last assigned parish. Despite Bishop Hoffman's assurances to Mr. Schoonmaker and the later recommendations of the review board that heard his allegations, the diocese has not informed Mr. Schoonmaker nor Mr. Kinn of any oversight measures in place to monitor the priest's contact with children.

Ms. Donaghy, the spokesman, said in an email that individuals are required to "check in with the vicar for clergy regularly," in addition to adhering to case-specific supervision measures that might include periodic mental health evaluations or restrictions against being alone with minors. The specific circumstances of Father Schmelzer's supervision were not disclosed by the diocese.

In a letter Mr. Kinn received in December, informing him that his claims were not found substantiated, diocesan victim assistance coordinator Frank DiLallo wrote: "It is important to note here that Joseph Schmelzer remains on a program of prayer and penance that was imposed by then Bishop Leonard P. Blair in February 2007."

### Asking for answers

Mr. Kinn first made diocesan officials aware of his complaint in a letter sent in 2005 or 2006, he said. Although the diocese has acknowledged receiving that letter in later interactions, Mr. Kinn said, he received no response at the time.

Mr. Kinn said he is not the anonymous accuser that Bishop Blair referenced in 2007.

When he re-reported his accusations to the diocese in May, 2017, he spoke with Mr. DiLallo, and later with retired Toledo police Detective Jim Couch, now an investigator for the diocese.

Despite what Mr. Kinn described as assurances from Mr. DiLallo that he would have an opportunity to address the review board, he never did. Ms. Donaghy said in an email that "Mr. Kinn was told that addressing the Review Board 'may be an option,'" and it is up to the review board whether it wants to meet with the accusers and accused.

Mr. Kinn, who was not aware that the board had even been convened months before his receipt of the letter, said he was "floored" when he found out his claims had been unsubstantiated.

"I was extremely surprised. I was dumbfounded," he said. "How could they not find this credible?"

Mr. Kinn has not filed a lawsuit against the diocese and has said he has no desire to do so.

The Policy for the Protection of Minors and Young People, which lays out the procedures that the Toledo diocese enacts in response to allegations of sexual abuse, does not address whether an accuser will have an opportunity to directly address a review board.

In another letter to Mr. Kinn in April, 2018, Mr. DiLallo explained the board "does not meet with any of the people involved in an alleged incident of sexual abuse," but instead "hears a set of facts gathered by an investigator."

Ms. Donaghy said this is so not to "re-victimize the victim."

She did not comment on when or why the diocese adopted this approach, given that as of 2003 — when Mr. Schoonmaker testified — victims were invited to address the board.

Asked why a review board would be convened in Mr. Kinn's case, given that the accused priest had already been removed from ministry, she said in an email that "the Diocesan Review Board reviews every case of allegations of abuse against a minor because there may be further recommendations for the Bishop to consider. An example may be to continue with current restrictions, to recommend laicization, etc."

In the nearly a year that has followed, Mr. Kinn said his attempts to get an explanation from the diocese have been largely rebuffed. He received two letters from Mr. DiLallo, one of which was sent after The Blade contacted Ms. Donaghy in October and neither of which addressed why his claims were not substantiated.

Earlier this month, he said, the diocese responded to his voicemails with letters sent via certified mail offering to respond to questions Mr. Kinn would submit in writing. Mr. Kinn said he does not feel this is a satisfactory response and has declined to do so.

Ms. Donaghy also stressed that the Diocesan Review Board is "not sitting in judgment of the allegation, but in judgment of the priest." Its role is in "making a recommendation if that priest should still be removed from ministry or not."

Victims won't feel safe to come forward until the church is willing to fully reckon with its past, including a complete accounting of Father Schmelzer and all predator priests in the Toledo diocese, Mr. Kinn, Mr. Schoonmaker, and Ms. Vercellotti said.

Ms. Vercellotti pointed to a detailed parish history on the website of St. Mary of the Assumption that glosses over the circumstances of Father Schmelzer's removal but details his successful fund-raising efforts to get air conditioning in the parish. The narrative makes no mention of why the priest was removed, but referred only to another priest serving the parish's "sacramental needs" in his absence.

Still prominently featured on the website is an undated photograph of a smiling Father Schmelzer with his hands on the shoulders of a young boy, whose palms are pressed together in prayer.

It's not enough to say those accused have been removed from ministry if the diocese won't recognize all of its victims, Mr. Schoonmaker said.

"If the church says they're about healing," he said, "then they've got to give people the opportunity to begin that healing journey."

Those looking to report sexual abuse of a child should contact local law enforcement, according to SNAP, the victim support group. More information and resources can be found at [snapnetwork.org](http://snapnetwork.org).