

Jon Schoonmaker's Lecture
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SS. Simon & Jude
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I stumbled into the criminal sexual behavior of Fr. Joseph Schmelzer, a Catholic priest of the Diocese of Toledo, when I was sixteen.

Early in life I realized that I had a heart for serving God's people and, being Catholic, decided to explore the possibility of the priesthood. At the time, my adolescence was in full-bloom with the characteristic awkwardness and confusion. For me, that awkwardness and confusion was compounded by memories of inappropriate sexual touch by a family member as a small child. I was vulnerable and desperately needed someone to guide my discernment and bring insight to my struggles. While on a youth retreat, I came to know Fr. Schmelzer. He was charismatic, affirming and affectionate.

Father Schmelzer entered into my life and became, in his terms, my "spiritual director." He quickly initiated meeting times that were personal and intense. He enthusiastically affirmed the direction of the priesthood for me; he allowed me to voice the painful memories of my childhood for the first time; and he accepted me even in my awkwardness and confusion. In a short time I came to trust him implicitly. However, slowly and methodically, he manipulated my deep trust in him and destroyed the boundaries of moral, loving, appropriate and legal touch.

In retrospect, it is clear that for two years I was sexually desensitized and groomed. In retrospect, it is clear that I was sexually violated by his frequent, unsolicited touch and overly affectionate contact with me. At one point I reported Fr. Schmelzer's actions to another trusted priest. He assured me that I was in no danger and that Fr. Schmelzer's actions were merely the misguided affections of a lonely man. I continued to trust.

At the age of eighteen I left for the seminary – a little less awkward, a little more confident – yet, still very naïve. My experience at St. Meinrad Seminary was devastating. I witnessed blatant homosexual activity and alcohol abuse on campus. I suffered through one semester and never went back.

Upon my return from the seminary, in late December 1985, I sought the consolation of Fr. Schmelzer. He invited me to come and spend New Year's Eve with him at his rectory in Custar, Ohio. I accepted his invitation. The early part of the evening was spent in talking; and then he offered me alcohol. I had never had alcohol before and, after his intense manipulative insistence, I accepted. Later that evening, after my defenses had been deliberately muted, Fr. Schmelzer raped me.

I immediately cut off all contact with him, stuffed the experience away, and tried to pull my life together. I still had a heart for serving God's people; so, because I was Catholic, I looked to the Church for ministry options. I discovered a natural gift for youth ministry and quickly established an outstanding reputation in the diocese. After six years in ministry, I began to see that both ministry and social relationships in my life were being negatively impacted by poor self-esteem, self-hatred, an inability to trust, a fear of sexual intimacy, and isolation. At that time Barbara Blaine, the founder of SNAP, began speaking publicly about her abuse by a priest. As I followed her story, all that I had stuffed away began to emerge.

In 1992 I entered counseling, shared my story with my parents, and made a report to the Diocese of Toledo. Because we were good Catholics, my parents and I quietly took my complaint to Bishop Hoffman, who pledged to bring resolution to my situation. After months of meetings and internal investigations, the Bishop instituted several mandates that he assured me would protect others from Father Schmelzer. My parents and I trusted Bishop Hoffman. I felt satisfied and moved on with my life.

Over the next ten years I found healing. I married, created a family, recorded two albums of Catholic music, secured employment as a youth minister in the Diocese of Lansing, and began to expand my youth ministry reputation at the national level.

And then along came January 2002 and BOSTON.

Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder began to plague me. All of the emotion baggage that I thought I had moved beyond returned. The cover-up in Boston made me question if children had been protected from Father Schmelzer following my complaint ten years earlier. I did some investigating and could no evidence that Father Schmelzer was held to even one of the mandates issued by Bishop Hoffman. Because I was a good Catholic I respectfully registered my outrage with Bishop Hoffman, who could offer no explanation. He suggested that I present my complaint to the Diocesan Review Board that was formed per the Dallas Charter. After months of stall-and-delay in the formation of this Board, I could stay silent no longer.

With integrity, I relinquished my anonymity for the sake of protecting children and healing the Body of Christ. I truly believed that once the Church understood the truth, it would embrace the truth and act with compassion and justice. I could not have been more wrong!

I was totally unprepared for the re-victimization by the Diocese of Toledo and the Diocese of Lansing that I would experience because I chose to speak the truth:

- After its formation, I reported my abuse to the Diocesan Lay Review Board. This Board unequivocally concluded that Fr. Joseph Schmelzer is “a risk to the Church and society at large,” and they recommended his immediate removal and placement in sex offender treatment. However, the Diocese of Toledo reported that the findings of the DLRB were inconclusive and placed Fr. Schmelzer on a leave of absence. Schmelzer appealed this decision to the Vatican.
- I was forbidden to speak about my story in my church of employment – the home parish of my family. I was told that whatever the parishioners needed to know they could read in the newspapers. Vicious rumors began and our home church no longer felt like a place of sanctuary.
- The Chancellor of Toledo publicly mischaracterized me on the radio and implied that I was lying about my abuse. He has never apologized.
- Members of the church where Schmelzer was serving when he was placed on leave began a campaign of attack against me and my credibility. This campaign was led by a lay pastoral leader who was also a licensed counselor. I was sent threatening letters; members of the church where I was working were sent letters, the Bishop of Lansing was sent letters; and my pastor was sent letters. Members of his church even called into the local radio station in my town and called me a liar... the radio station would not give me an opportunity to respond. I pleaded with the Diocese of Toledo to intervene; and they refused. The State of Ohio did intervene on my behalf and formally reprimanded the lay pastoral leader.
- I filed a civil law suit against the Diocese of Toledo; and the following day, I was forced from my youth ministry job and blacklisted from providing freelance ministry in the Diocese of Lansing. Just a week ago, I was told by a diocesan employee that I am not welcome to minister in the Diocese of Lansing.
- Priests who stood with me in both Toledo and Lansing have abandoned me. One told me that he cannot be associated with me because it would jeopardize his standing with other priests in the diocese.
- The Diocese of Toledo offered to settle my civil lawsuit. The non-economic conditions I asked of the Diocese were that they would fully implement the recommendations of their DLRB, that the Diocese would provide all documents pertaining to my complaint to me, and that the diocese would alert all parishes where Schmelzer has served that their children were at risk. The Diocese refused all of these conditions and offered me \$12,000. to go away. Totally defeated, I took my money and gave it to a bunch of teens to go on a mission trip.
- Two days ago, the Vatican denied Schmelzer’s appeal and he was removed from public ecclesiastical ministry. However, the Diocese of Toledo publicity announced that he resigned.

Where is the pain? My kids do not want to go to church because of what the Church did to me. Other victims of Schmelsberger do not want to come forward. It is the victims who have the burden of telling the truth. Stand up and say, “Enough! Stop covering it up.” Thank you for listening. [Applause]