

The Case of Father George Zirwas

Known Assignments

10/1979 - 05/18/1980	Resurrection, Brookline
05/1980 - 04/1981	St. Adalbert, South Side
04/1981 - 02/1982	St. Joseph the Worker, New Castle
02/1982 - 06/1989	St. Michael, Elizabeth
06/1989 - 12/1991	St. Bartholomew, Penn Hills
12/1991 - 05/1994	St. Scholastica, Aspinwall
05/1994 - 12/1994	St. Joseph, Verona
12/1994 - 07/1995	Leave of Absence, Personal Reasons
07/1995 - 11/2/1995	St. Maurice, Forest Hills
11/1995 - 05/2001	Leave of Absence, Personal Reasons

Father George Zirwas was ordained in September 1979. Zirwas was assigned to eight different parishes as Parochial Vicar until 1995 when he was placed on a leave of absence. He appeared to have remained in this status until his death in May 2001.

On September 1, 2016, the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General served the Diocese of Pittsburgh with a Grand Jury subpoena requesting any and all documents related to clergy members or diocesan leadership personnel who had been accused of sexually abusing children. In response, the Diocese produced thousands of documents. In the course of this investigation, the Grand Jury took testimony from live witnesses, reviewed Diocesan records, and consulted with experts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the field of behavioral analysis. However, the Grand Jury learned that some original documents related to deceased priests were intentionally destroyed by the Diocese. Fortunately, Canon 489 of the Canon Law governing the operations of the Roman Catholic Church requires the maintenance of a summary of the facts and any text of a definitive judgement. In the case of Zirwas, while many original records were destroyed, the

summary of meetings, memoranda, and Diocesan actions remained.⁶ The Grand Jury learned that the Diocese was aware of complaints against Zirwas for sexually abusing children as early as 1987. Additional complaints were received between 1987 and 1995. However, Zirwas continued to function as a priest during this period and was reassigned to several parishes.

Documents obtained by the Grand Jury from the secret or confidential files of the Diocese recorded that in October, 1987, Father Garbin met with a little boy and his family about an “incident of inappropriate touch” by Zirwas at St. Joseph the Worker parish. No action was taken by Bishop Anthony Bevilacqua, nor the Diocese, and Zirwas remained in ministry.

In February, 1988, another internal memorandum recorded that Father Ted Rutkowski met with Zirwas. The meeting was arranged after Zirwas was accused of unwanted sexual contact with a young man. Zirwas admitted to having contact with the young man in multiple parish rectories and explained that the young man had asked Zirwas to massage his legs. Zirwas stated that he massaged his legs, but did nothing more. He noted that sometime after the contact, the “boy left, then the allegation came.” Zirwas was thereafter sent to St. Francis Hospital for an evaluation in March, 1988. Upon his release, he continued in ministry.

In November, 1988, Diocesan officials met with a mother who reported that her 16-year-old son was given alcohol by Zirwas and that Zirwas fondled the boy’s genitals. That same month, the Diocese received another report from a victim who revealed that he was groped by Zirwas when he was 17 years old. Zirwas was sent to St. Luke’s Institute for an evaluation in December, 1988. Upon his release he once again continued in ministry.

⁶ The Grand Jury notes that where any institution or individual destroys evidence of a crime when an investigation is about to be instituted, such conduct could be pursued as a criminal offense in Pennsylvania under 18 Pa. C.S.A. §4910, Tampering with or Fabricating Physical Evidence.

Internal assignment records documented that from January, 1989 until June, 1989 Zirwas served as Parochial Vicar of St. Michael. From June, 1989 to December, 1991, he served at St. Bartholomew as Parochial Vicar. In June, 1991, a meeting was held between Father David Zubick, Father Downs, and Father Robert Guay with respect to a victim's complaint regarding his contact with Zirwas. Among other things, this victim reported that Zirwas massaged his feet, calves, thighs, and then groped his penis. The victim informed the Diocese that he was too embarrassed to speak publically regarding the abuse or go to court.

In December, 1991, Zirwas was reassigned to St. Scholastica as Parochial Vicar. Then, in May, 1994, Zirwas was again reassigned to St. Joseph as Parochial Vicar. Diocesan records, obtained by the Grand Jury, revealed that Zirwas was then placed on a leave of absence for "personal reasons" in December, 1994.

In July, 1995, Zirwas met with Zubik and requested permission to take an assignment in Miami, Florida. Zirwas stated that his desire to leave the Diocese was due to "false rumors about him." Zirwas threatened to pursue legal action against other Diocesan personnel for "raising the consciousness of some of the people at St. Joseph Parish concerning his relationship to the public scandals which surfaced in 1988." This meeting was memorialized in a confidential internal memorandum obtained by the Grand Jury.

Within days, Zirwas was returned to ministry by Bishop Donald Wuerl. In 1995, Zirwas was assigned as Parochial Vicar of St. Maurice. In November, 1995, the Diocese received another complaint from a victim who reported that Zirwas fondled him and performed oral sex on him when he was approximately 15 years old. In response, Zirwas was again placed on a leave of absence for "personal reasons." A status he would keep until the time of his death.

In January, 1996, a mother of a victim demanded a meeting with the Diocese. That meeting was granted. Diocesan records noted the mother's outrage and disappointment. She stated that she had originally reported her son's abuse in 1988 and believed that proper action would be taken to remove Zirwas from ministry. However, she learned that this did not occur. She noted that she had written at least one letter and received no response. Moreover, when she pursued the matter, she was told by Father Ted Rutkowski that it was "a one-time occurrence and that it had been handled."

After being placed on a leave of absence in 1995, Zirwas relocated to Florida before ultimately moving to Cuba. Zirwas's activities in Florida and Cuba are largely unknown and no detailed Diocesan records were provided to the Grand Jury. However, in 1996, Zirwas informed the Diocese that he had knowledge of other Pittsburgh Diocese priests' involvement in illegal sexual activity. In exchange for this information, he demanded that his sustenance payments be increased.

In response to this request, Wuerl instructed him to document in writing the names of the priests involved, or, state that he had no knowledge of what he had previously claimed. Wuerl advised that this action had to be undertaken before Zirwas could receive any additional assistance. After Zirwas disavowed any knowledge of priest involvement in illegal sexual activity in a letter to the Diocese, he was granted an additional financial stipend and his sustenance payments were continued. Zirwas continued to work with the poor and needy in Cuba until May 2001, when he was murdered inside his Havana apartment.

During the course of this investigation, the Grand Jury uncovered a ring of predatory priests operating within the Diocese who shared intelligence or information regarding victims as well as exchanging the victims amongst themselves. This ring also manufactured child pornography on

Diocesan property, including parishes and rectories. This group included: Zirwas, Francis Pucci, Robert Wolk, and Richard Zula. This group of priests used whips, violence and sadism in raping their victims.

On December 17, 2017, a victim (hereinafter identified as “George”) appeared before the Grand Jury to provide information regarding his sexual abuse as a child by priests in the Diocese. George’s experience is not only a personal tragedy but an institutional tragedy. His testimony corroborated evidence found within Diocesan records that predatory priests existed; that these predators shared information; and, that these men sexually offended on children.

George was raised as a Catholic and attended Catholic School from first through twelfth grade. While at St. Adalbert’s on the South Side of Pittsburgh, George served as an altar boy.

George became friends with Zirwas in the mid-1970’s. Zirwas would spend time at George’s home and take George to lunch or dinner on occasion. George’s family encouraged the contact with Zirwas based upon the belief that Zirwas would be a good influence on George. George noted that that his Catholic family looked at priests as “very truth worthy, very elevated.” As George was transitioning from middle school to high school, Zirwas took him on trips, took him to see St. Paul Seminary, and, even taught him how to drive. Over time, Zirwas began to take George with him as he carried out priestly duties and on his visits with parishioners.

Zirwas started introducing George to his “friends” who were priests who seemed to share similar interests. On one occasion, Zirwas took George to a parish rectory in Munhall where the following priests were present: Father Francis L. Pucci, Father Richard Zula, and Father Francis Luddy of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. The priests began a conversation about religious statues and asked George to get up on a bed. As the priests watched, they asked George to remove his shirt. They then drew an analogy to the image of Christ on the cross, and told George to remove

his pants so that his pose would be more consistent with the image of Christ in a loincloth. At that point, the priests began taking Polaroid pictures of George. As the picture taking continued, the priests directed George to take off his underwear. George was nervous and complied.

George recalled that either Zula or Pucci operated the camera. He stated that all of the men giggled and stated that the pictures would be used as a reference for new religious statues for the parishes. George testified that this occurred before he turned 18-years-old and that his genitals were exposed in the photographs. George stated that his photographs were added to a collection of similar photographs depicting other teenage boys.

George recalled that each of these priests had a group of favored boys who they would take on trips. The boys received gifts; specifically, gold cross necklaces. George stated, “He [Zirwas] had told me that they, the priests, would give their boys, their altar boys or their favorite boys these crosses. So he gave me a big gold cross to wear.” The Grand Jury observed that these crosses served another purpose beyond the grooming of the victims: They were a visible designation that these children were victims of sexual abuse. They were a signal to other predators that the children had been desensitized to sexual abuse and were optimal targets for further victimization.⁷

⁷ George still has the cross and it was shown to the Grand Jury.



The Cross that Zirwas Gave to Altar Boys

The Grand Jury noted that George's testimony revealed how a group of priests, all offenders in their own right, collaborated together to manufacture child pornography within the

Diocese of Pittsburgh. George's last contact with Zirwas occurred prior to his departure to join the United States military. However, other boys became victims of abuse.

In 1988, the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office charged Zula, Pucci and Wolk with sexually assaulting two altar boys. Zula pled guilty and was sentenced to up to five years in prison. Wolk was sentenced to up to ten years in prison. Pucci's charges were dropped because the criminal statute of limitations had expired.

Zula was a pastor at Saints Mary and Ann Church in Marianna. Wolk had been a pastor of St. Thomas Church in Bethel Park.

George testified that he looks back now with disdain. He questions how this activity could occur, involve multiple priests, and not have created suspicion on the part of Diocesan administrators. George stated,

To me, between going to St. Paul Seminary, Father Zula, Father Pucci, that there was just an insidious pedophile community that permeated through at least the Pittsburgh Diocese. And you know, my assumption as I grow older is that this was something that was happening all over the United States and it just – you know, it is very disappointing.

George went on to explain his reluctance to come forward, stating,

I don't think there was anybody I could trust to tell, number 1. There was never – who do you tell? Like, at the time, I was a tough kid from the South Side. It didn't like – I just kind of – I was a survivor at the time. So that was just part of the lifestyle, I guess, and you know, I just kind of moved on... as a man, you know, who do you want to tell that other priests took pictures of you. It was pretty degrading. It is humiliating. I know some people it went further than that. I'm lucky it hasn't. It is still really hard to get it out there that you were in a room when you were 14 or 15 and getting naked pictures taken from priests.

George's testimony to the Grand Jury was one of the first times he had ever disclosed his abuse. The Grand Jury's review of records revealed that the Diocese was aware of the conduct of these predatory priests and the records corroborated George's testimony. It does not appear that the Diocese disclosed any information to the police during the prosecution of some of these

offenders in the late 1980's. Moreover, it does not appear that the Diocese shared with the police Zirwas's statement that he had information on other priests' criminal activity.

After Zirwas' death in 2001, the spokesman for the Diocese was interviewed by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Among other things, the Diocese refused to disclose any of the reasons why Zirwas was placed on a leave of absence, citing the confidentiality of his personnel files. However, when Wuerl presided over Zirwas' funeral, he stated, among other things, that "a priest is a priest. Once he is ordained, he is a priest forever."