

The Case of Father Francis J. Fromholzer

Known Assignments

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| 05/1958 – 09/1959 | Holy Ghost, Bethlehem |
| 06/1959 – 06/1965 | Allentown Central Catholic High School |
| 06/1962 – 09/1962 | Holy Ghost (summer assignment) |
| 03/1963 – 06/1965 | Mary, Queen of Peace, Pottsville |
| 06/1965 – 10/1970 | St. Paul, Reading |
| 10/1970 – 08/1975 | St. Mary, Hamburg |
| 08/1975 – 04/1980 | St. Paul, Reading |
| 04/1980 – 07/1980 | Sick leave |
| 07/1980 – 09/1980 | Holy Family Manner, Bethlehem |
| 11/1982 – 06/1992 | St. Paul, Allentown |
| 06/1992 – 06/1995 | St. Peter, Coplay |
| 06/1995 – 09/2002 | St. Paul, Allentown |
| 10/2002 | Retired |

The case of Father Francis “Frank” Fromholzer highlights the immense challenges faced by victims when seeking redress from a Diocese that chose to take a position hostile to the victim. The influence of the institution is evident in many cases. In the case of Frank Fromholzer, it is particularly evident.

Fromholzer sexually abused at least two students while serving as a religion teacher at Allentown Central Catholic High School. On June 12, 2016, the victims testified under oath before the Grand Jury that they were sexually abused by Fromholzer in 1965 when they were approximately 13 or 14 years old. One victim was Julianne, now 68 years old.

Julianne recalled that, during a trip to the Poconos in approximately 1964, Fromholzer took Julianne and at least one other girl for a ride in his car. The trip was unsupervised and Julianne’s family was comfortable with the trip since Fromholzer was a trusted priest. Fromholzer groped the girls as he encouraged them to take turns sitting next to him. Fromholzer’s conduct escalated and he touched Julianne under her clothes.

Once at their destination, Fromholzer retrieved a blanket and radio from the car and took his collar off. Fromholzer told the girls that, while they were on the trip, they were not to call him Father but to call him Frank. Julianne testified, “Then we went – he laid out a blanket and he started kissing, feeling, put his finger in me. That hurt. It was confusing because – you were always told you were going to Hell if you let anybody touch you. But then you’ve got Father doing it.”

Julianne described to the Grand Jury the position of power that priests hold within the Catholic faith. She testified, “They – there wasn’t anybody that was more important than, not just him, but any priest. They were – and to some degree still are, but they are much above anybody else in your family or they are God in the flesh.”

Julianne went on to describe other incidents after the trip to the Poconos in which Fromholzer had sexual or inappropriate contact with her. She testified that there was a gym in the basement of the ninth grade building at Central Catholic. Fromholzer would follow her into the basement and make comments that she gained a little weight and needed to get on a scale. Fromholzer would then lift her onto the scale from behind, holding her breast to get her on the scale. Fromholzer would constantly nuzzle and kiss her neck as well as “kiss and touch.” After the trip to the Poconos, the touching occurred on top of her clothing and panties.

Julianne told the Grand Jury of an incident in which Fromholzer humiliated her in front of her religion class. She was participating in a reading of the Passion of Christ around Easter season. Fromholzer had her read aloud the portion of the story where the words “the cock crows three times” appear. Fromholzer had her repeat the words several times, which evoked laughter from Fromholzer and the boys in the class. As Julianne left class that day, Fromholzer leaned in and nuzzled her neck and asked the victim if she knew what a cock was.

The victim testified that the abuse stopped only when she moved on to tenth grade and was no longer in the same building as Fromholzer.

Julianne's friend also testified in front of the Grand Jury about being abused by Fromholzer. The second victim was taken to the Poconos by Fromholzer with Julianne. She was in ninth grade and approximately 14 years old when the abuse occurred. On the way to the Poconos, she observed Fromholzer rubbing his elbow against Julianne's breasts. Once at the location in the Poconos, the second victim was also sexually abused by Fromholzer. Fromholzer began kissing her on the lips and touching her breasts. Reluctantly, she laid down on a blanket where Fromholzer, using his hands, proceeded to touch her on her vaginal area, inside her clothing.

The second victim reported the abuse to her principal at the time, Father Robert M. Forst. She told Forst about the trip to the Poconos and how Fromholzer touched her and her friend inappropriately. Forst responded by indicating to the second victim that the discussion they were having had "ended." Forst told her that she was expelled from school and indicated she needed to bring her father to the school. The second victim came from a single-parent home in which her mother had left after no longer being able to live with her father. Both parents were alcoholics and her father was physically abusive. When her father arrived at the school, there was a meeting between the second victim, her father, and Forst. The second victim recalled Forst telling her, "Now, I want you to tell that story that you said – the made-up story that you said about the priest to your father – with your father here." She again told them about how she was abused by Fromholzer. Her father did not believe her and proceeded to drag her home, yelling at her and slapping her along the way. When they finally got home, she was beaten more by her father, this time with a belt so that the belt buckle would strike her.

The second victim told the Grand Jury that the school then failed her in English and Algebra, two courses that she loved. She expressed to the Grand Jury how hard it was to talk of the abuse since she had not told anyone most of her life. The abuse haunted the second victim her entire life, resulting in two marriages that ended in divorce. Talking about the abuse she endured at the hands of Fromholzer, she testified, “You can’t get rid of it. You don’t talk about it. It is always there.” Coming from a broken home, she had counted on the understanding of priests and nuns. The second victim said that, after being expelled for reporting being sexually abused by Fromholzer, she felt “worthless.”

The second victim broke years of silence when she testified before the Grand Jury. Her friend, Julianne, told the Grand Jury that it took her until she was in her thirties, nearly twenty years later, to find the courage to try to report the abuse to someone in the Diocese. Unfortunately for Julianne, she tried to report the abuse to another priest, Father Weasel. Weasel was considered a family friend. When the victim began to tell Weasel of the abuse, he stopped her and told her, “No, I don’t want to hear it. You go to confession and you pray for him.” As a result, Julianne said nothing more about the abuse until she was unable to stay silent any longer.

Julianne reported Fromholzer’s conduct to Monsignor John Murphy of St. Thomas Moore Parish. As she tried to confess the abuse, Murphy told her, “Don’t say the name.” At the time Julianne tried to report the abuse to Murphy in the 1980’s, Fromholzer was continuing to practice as a priest at St. Paul’s Church in Allentown.

It was not until approximately August 2002, after the *Boston Globe* broke the story of child sexual abuse within the Archdiocese of Boston, that Julianne was ready to pursue reporting Fromholzer’s criminal conduct to law enforcement. She contacted the Allentown Police Department to file a police report and informed the police that Fromholzer was still working at a

church that had a grade school. Julianne also personally reported the abuse to the District Attorney and informed him that Fromholzer was still working at a church with a grade school. The District Attorney elected not to pursue the matter and cited the statute of limitations.

Julianne told the Grand Jury that, if it were not for the clergy abuse being revealed in the Boston Archdiocese, she would not have come forward to report the abuse she endured. She also indicated how grateful she was, having been able to tell the Grand Jury about the abuse and Fromholzer.

Julianne subsequently became involved with a clergy abuse victim's network. She testified that she is aware from fielding phone calls that there are hundreds of victims who have not yet come forward. She described calls in the middle of the night with full-grown men weeping into the phone as they recounted their sexual abuse at the hands of Roman Catholic priests. This is a volunteer effort on Julianne's part, motivated by her own victimization and a desire to help others. At the close of her testimony, Julianne thanked the Grand Jury for listening to her story and providing her the opportunity to express their pain. Julianne stated, "... so what does it mean to have somebody care? It means a lot. So I thank you."

On September 1, 2016, the Grand Jury issued a subpoena to the Diocese for any and all records related to clergy or church officials against whom complaints of child sexual abuse had been made. Records received by the Office of Attorney General from the Diocese numbered into the thousands. The testimony of the victims was cross-referenced with the records of the Diocese. Internal Diocesan records do not contain any information from Julianne's reports to Weasel or Murphy. However, it is evident that, once Julianne made contact with the Diocese in 2002, the Diocese and its attorney, Thomas Traud, attempted to undermine and discredit Julianne and her family.

In 2002, the Diocese was made aware of reports of child sexual abuse against Fromholzer by Julianne and her friend, Victim Two. Fromholzer was still in active ministry. Internal Diocesan records show that the Diocese immediately disregarded these complaints as false. However, Fromholzer “volunteered” to retire.

On September 3, 2002, a fax was sent to Monsignors Schlert and Gobitas. The fax bore the timestamp of 09:55 A.M. from the Traud Law Offices. After some discussion regarding an attempt to schedule a meeting with Julianne, Traud reported that he had received information from a relative of Monsignor Leo Fink. This informant told the Diocese that she had been the closest of friends with Julianne in high school and that they shared every secret. She reported that Julianne had once danced as a go-go dancer in the 1960’s and that she believed her to be sexually active. Traud’s informant stated that she believed it possible that Julianne was one of the girls who had an affair with a coach at Central Catholic. The informant reported that Julianne also had a family member once go to prison. Traud reported all of this to the Diocese, specifically to Schlert and Gobitas. He went on to note that he knew his informant well and that she had been “so candid and honest.”

Having received a report that one of their priests had violated children, the Diocese and its attorney immediately began to exchange information meant to discredit the victim with unrelated and irrelevant attacks on her and her family. Moreover, the fact that information that a Central Catholic coach may have been sexually abusing students was used as evidence against the victim. In reality, it is the report of yet another crime not reported to the police.

A memorandum dated September 11, 2002, by Gobitas, recorded a meeting of September 10 between Julianne, her attorney, Gobitas, Schlert, and Traud. In that memorandum, Julianne’s account of abuse is recorded. Julianne stated that there was a witness to at least one assault. The

Diocese recorded the meeting as positive and amicable. The next day a memo was generated by Gobitas that recorded his interview of that witness. The witness recalled that she observed Fromholzer rub his arm on Julianne's breasts on one occasion in a car in front of Allentown Catholic High School. The witness identified another, possibly a third, victim by first name.

FILE



DIocese OF ALLENTOWN
SECRETARIAT FOR CLERGY

MEMORANDUM

TO: THE REVEREND FRANCIS FROMHOLZER FILE
FROM: MONSIGNOR GERALD E. GOBITAS *N&N*
DATE: 13 SEPTEMBER 2002
RE: [REDACTED]

I met with [REDACTED] by myself on Friday, 13 September 2002 at 9:00 a.m. in the Chancery. [REDACTED] said that she was never sexually assaulted by Father Fromholzer but she alleged to have witnessed him inappropriately rubbing his arm over Juliann [REDACTED] breasts on one occasion in a car in front of Allentown Central Catholic High School when she and [REDACTED] were both freshmen. [REDACTED] was seated in the back seat of the car. Juliann was in the middle in the front seat. [REDACTED] stated the Father Fromholzer's hands never went underneath Juliann's clothing.

[REDACTED] said she knows of another girl named [REDACTED] who may have been assaulted by Father Fromholzer. She said that she still has some contact with [REDACTED]. I gave her my card and encouraged her to have [REDACTED] call me.

[REDACTED] stated that she does not need any counseling she just wanted to confirm the truth of Juliann's allegations.



The Witness Interview Memo

On September 16, 2002, at 2:48 p.m., a fax was sent from Traud Law Offices to Schlert and Gobitas. The message contained impressions of the meeting on September 10th. Among other things, the memo noted that Tom Traud found Julianne to be “overly dramatic in that there were some times she was crying in the meeting” and that “this woman made an awful amount of assumptions that just were unwarranted.”

This pattern of investigating the victim continued through 2004 in letters from Traud dated January 22, 2004, and April 12, 2002. In the first letter to Gobitas and Schlert, Traud noted that Julianne was recently in the news and was pursuing her lawsuit and that he received information from a local attorney. The attorney told Traud that Julianne’s daughter was a witness for the Commonwealth in a murder case. Traud noted that, because Julianne became involved, she could either be “a mother looking out for her child; or, maybe this is a woman who repeatedly wants her fifteen minutes of fame.” In the second letter, Traud informed the Diocese that Julianne’s husband was associated with the Christian Motorcyclists Association which Traud labeled the husband’s brainchild.

In contrast to the efforts to investigate and discredit the victims of child sexual abuse who dared to report their abuse to the Diocese and/or report to civil authorities, the internal documentation regarding the diocesan investigation of Fromholzer is starkly different. The Diocese asked Fromholzer if he did it. Fromholzer said no. Fromholzer then suggested it might be a good time for him to retire.

The report of abuse and subsequent investigation of the victim all occurred on the watch of Cullen. In 2009, Barres took command of the Diocese. In an effort to comply with Diocesan policy and state law, the Diocese formally reported the complaints against Fromholzer to the

District Attorney. Similarly, Julianne's lawsuit against the Diocese was dismissed due to the civil statute of limitations. She has received no recovery or recompense for her suffering.

The Grand Jury finds that the Diocese of Allentown and the Allentown Central Catholic High School knew full well the criminal conduct of Fromholzer. Yet, knowing that Fromholzer was preying on young girls, the Diocese and School took no action. The victims were told to let it go. When these victims came forward again years later, they were met with disbelief and scorn. Ultimately, internal records show that the Diocese itself deemed Julianne's complaint against Fromholzer to be credible.

Victims are reluctant to report to law enforcement or take any action for fear of retaliation from the Dioceses. That retaliation and intimidation takes many forms. Originally Julianne did not seek any legal action against the Diocese. She simply wished to inform Weasel and Murphy of her concerns and for the Diocese to take action. Action only occurred when Julianne began to speak to parties empowered to scrutinize the conduct of the Diocese: her own attorneys, law enforcement, and the press.