


Man who says he was sexually assaulted by priest seeks help from diocese

Published October 27, 2018 5:58PM | Updated October 28, 2018 7:51PM

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In April, a black Cadillac pulled up outside therapist Regina Walsh's office in Chester. Out stepped The Most Rev. Michael Cote, the bishop of the Diocese of Norwich, accompanied by a retired state trooper who investigates reports of sexual abuse by priests for the diocese.

They went inside, and for the next 90 minutes, met with Walsh and one of her clients, a 59-year-old Madison man named Edward Gilbert, who says that as a 13-year-old altar boy at St. John's Church in Old Saybrook he was molested by the church's former pastor, the late Eugene Solega.

Walsh said she was surprised Cote accepted her request to meet with Gilbert so he could go on with his life.

"He didn't have to. It was wonderful he allowed himself to come here and listen," she said, while sitting in the same office where the meeting took place. "He was very apologetic. I think he really heard Ed."

Gilbert, who told his story to Cote and cried, first kissed the bishop's ring, a Catholic tradition for lay people when introduced to a bishop.

"He was apologetic. He looked me in the eye. He was sincere," Gilbert said during an interview at his apartment. "I genuinely think he felt badly for me.

"He kept saying over and over, maybe seven or eight times, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' But that just didn't do it for me. After 46 years it just sounded trite. It just doesn't cut it. It probably should but it doesn't."

After the meeting, Walsh wrote a letter to the investigator saying Gilbert was not looking for a financial settlement from the diocese — a statute of limitations bars him from suing — but she was looking for some financial assistance so Gilbert could receive intensive residential treatment for the abuse, alcoholism and other mental health issues that he has struggled with for much of his life.

To this day, Gilbert is awakened by nightmares in which he just sees Solega's hands.

Walsh said she has not heard back from the diocese about whether it would pay for such treatment.

While Cote has said he has **met in the past** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20180922/bishop-cote-answers-questions-about-renewed-sexual-abuse-crisis-in-church>) with those who allege they were sexually abused by diocesan priests, Walsh and Gilbert offered the first public look into what takes place inside those meetings.

Gilbert is among a handful of adult men who have contacted The Day in recent weeks to say they are victims of priest abuse who have never before spoken about what happened to them publicly. In part they were spurred to speak after seeing media reports of a Pennsylvania grand jury report that found widespread sexual abuse by priests in that state. Gilbert decided to speak out for the first time after reading recent stories in The Day about Cote and **Tim McGuire** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20180922/pennsylvania-report-prompts-more-priest-abuse-victims-to-come-forward>), a New London man who for the first time spoke about his alleged abuse by a diocesan priest last month.

'An honor' to be an altar boy

As a student at St. John's School, Gilbert was an altar boy like all the other male students. He said his mother, who died last October and was a devout Catholic, always preached the importance of being on time to Gilbert. So he would get to church 30 minutes early so he could attend to his duties, such as lighting candles.

"I really liked being an altar boy. I considered it an honor," he said.

One day after putting on his cassock in the sacristy next to the altar, he said Solega walked in and put his hands down Gilbert's pants, saying nothing. Gilbert then had to assist Solega with the Mass.

"I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to say," he recalled.

A month later the same thing happened. On a third occasion, Gilbert said Solega came up from behind him and began grinding his crotch into Gilbert's buttocks.

Gilbert said he elbowed the priest hard and yelled at him to "knock it off."

"From then on, even in the winter, I'd wait outside for the other altar boys to show up before I went inside," Gilbert said.

He was in the eighth grade at the time and after that year he went to public school. He also stopped going to church on Sundays.

"I didn't like it anymore. My mother would say, 'God gives you 144 hours a week. You can give him just one.' But I couldn't tell her why," he said.

Gilbert did not tell anyone what happened until his mother died and since then has shared his experiences only with his four sisters, a few friends and Walsh, his therapist.

He said he has only returned to St. John's Church on a few occasions, and only to attend funerals.

"I just start to sweat," he said.

'46 years of suffering'

Solega was ordained in 1941 and came to St. John's in Old Saybrook in 1969, according to a newspaper report at the time. He also was assigned to St. Joseph's in Rockville, St. Mary's in Middletown and St. Bridget's in Moodus. Gilbert said he died in 1985.

Gilbert said he always said to himself that he didn't want any money for what happened.

"But they owe me for 46 years of suffering," he said.

State law, though, does not allow victims to file lawsuits after they turn 48. Efforts in the General Assembly to abolish the statute of limitations in abuse cases have been opposed by the Catholic Church and have failed.

"Why should there be a statute of limitations on molestation? Almost every week we read about a priest molesting someone," Gilbert said.

Walsh, who said she has treated about 15 patients who say they were abused by priests, said it often takes them decades to come forward and seek help. She said they feel a tremendous amount of guilt and wonder what they did wrong.

"For Ed, his mother had to pass away before he could talk about it," she said.

It was only then he turned to Walsh, whose office he lived next door to at the time. She was the first person he told.

"I was so upset I couldn't take it anymore," he said.

When he told some relatives, they asked why he never said anything at the time.

"Because at 13 I didn't know how to articulate it," he said. "You feel guilt, embarrassment, shame, any adjective you want to put on it."

Over the years, Gilbert owned and operated Landmark Deli on Main Street in Old Saybrook and worked at other restaurants in the town where he lived most of his life. Single, he said he has had his share of relationships with women but he struggles with commitment, something he attributes to being sexually assaulted as a child. Even going to the doctor or dentist makes him nervous because he does not like people getting close to him.

It was shortly after he said he was molested by Solega that he says he began drinking to ease the pain.

“I went into my house, made sure my father was watching TV and took two beers. I went into the woods and drank them,” he said. “I can go weeks and months without drinking. But then the pain gets too much. It just eats me up. When the pain gets so intense I self medicate. I’m not happy about it.”

A supportive family

Walsh said that when Gilbert first came to her, he just needed to talk.

“At some sessions I’d say about two words,” she recalled.

She said Gilbert’s drinking has made it difficult at times to tackle the abuse issue. She said he has attended some Alcoholics Anonymous meetings but discussing why he drinks with a roomful of strangers is difficult. In addition, he has kidney failure from drinking.

“He does want to feel better,” she said. “He has accepted it wasn’t his fault and he’s talked to some dear friends about what happened. He’s handling it the best he can. His sisters are amazing. The alcoholism is difficult for them but they love him and support him. They’re doing all they can.”

But she said his clinical prognosis remains poor at this point.

“Some days he’s wonderful. But medically, psychologically he’s still a real mess,” she said.

That’s why Walsh said an inpatient treatment program is so important for Gilbert at this point in his life.

“Helping Ed financially will show he’s sorry,” she said about Cote.