

Father Thomas J. Smith

Father Thomas J. Smith, who engaged in depraved and sadistic behavior with many boys in previous parishes, lived until December 2004 at the rectory of Saint Francis of Assisi, a parish with a grade school in Springfield. He was permitted to celebrate daily and Sunday Masses and hear confessions.

On March 12, 2004, the Archdiocesan Review Board unanimously found credible allegations that “Smith took at least three boys playing the role of Jesus in the parish Passion play into a private room, required them to disrobe completely,” pinned loincloths around them, and then, during the play, encouraged “other boys in the play to whip the Jesus character to the point where some of the boys had cuts, bruises and welts.” These actions, the Review Board found, “occurred in multiple parish assignments with a number of different boys over a number of years.” The board also credited reports that Fr. Smith had told boys that the rules of a club where he took them required that the boys and priest be nude to enter the club’s hot tub.

Also contained in the priest’s Secret Archives file were reports that Fr. Smith regularly took boys camping and that he had fondled the genitals of at least one of those boys with whom he shared a tent. There were details from one of the victims who played Jesus in the Passion play, describing Fr. Smith, with pins in his mouth, kneeling in front of, and very close to, the boy’s genitals. The victim said that Fr. Smith would sometimes prick him with the pins until he bled.

When Cardinal Bevilacqua learned of these accusations in May 2002, he chose to leave Fr. Smith in residence, and ministering, at Saint Francis of Assisi parish. Two and a half years later, after receiving additional reports that Fr. Smith had abused other boys, the Archdiocese removed the priest from active ministry.

The Archdiocese minimizes the allegations of “Ian” and “Peter.”

The Grand Jury heard that on May 10, 2002, 29-year-old Ian reported to the Delaware County District Attorney’s Office and to the Archdiocese the abuse he suffered as a 13-year-old at the hands of his parish priest, Fr. Thomas J. Smith, who had been ordained in 1973. In 1986, when the abuse occurred, Fr. Smith was assistant pastor at Annunciation B.V.M. Church in Havertown. (Cardinal Bevilacqua promoted him in 1996 to become pastor at Good Shepherd Church in Philadelphia, and in 1998 named him Regional Vicar for Delaware County with a residence at Saint Francis of Assisi’s rectory in Springfield.)

Ian described to Archdiocese and law enforcement officials how, in 1986, he had felt honored when his classmates at the parish grade school elected him to play the part of Jesus in the parish's Passion play. He told how the experience became such a nightmare that he, unsuccessfully, begged his parents' permission to quit.

Father Smith, who was director of the church play, subjected Ian to humiliating and sadistic torments for two months during the boy's 8th-grade year. Before every practice and every performance, while the other children dressed in the church basement with their teachers, Fr. Smith took Ian by himself to the sacristy, locked the door, and ordered the boy to undress. The priest then took what Ian estimated to be 20 minutes to pin a costume – a loincloth and a cloak – on the boy. The ritual, according to Ian, was for the priest to kneel in front of the naked boy, uncomfortably close to his genitals. In his mouth, the priest had the pins he would use to fasten the costume. Ian said that Fr. Smith sometimes touched his penis through the cloth and would “very often . . . poke me with these pins until I would bleed.”

During the play itself, Fr. Smith directed boys playing the parts of guards to whip “Jesus” with real leather straps. Ian said that these whippings gave him bruises, welts, and cuts. Father Smith directed his plays in this fashion for years in several different parishes. He later explained that he wanted the boys to “live the part” of Jesus.

Ian told a Delaware County detective that he felt degraded by what Fr. Smith did to him and by what the priest directed others to do. He said that he began to drink alcohol after the practices and performances. When he came forward in 2002, he had been recovering from alcoholism for 10 years.

Ian also reported that Fr. Smith took boys to a hot tub at the Springton Racquet Club where the priest was a member. Father Smith told the boys that it was a club rule that they had to be nude to use the tub, and the boys complied. Ian described how the priest paraded to the hot tub in front of the boys, without even a towel around his waist. In the tub, Ian said, the priest constantly shifted around to try to get closer to the boys who were trying to move further away. An investigator for the Archdiocese Review Board found that there was no club rule – at least not in 2003 – requiring nudity to enter their hot tub. Ian named four boys who shared this hot tub experience – “Vincent,” “Charley,” “Matt,” and, Ian thought, “Dylan.”

Ian's mother, who accompanied him to the interviews, told the county detective, Roger Rozsas, and Office for Clergy officials, Msgr. Lynn and Fr. Vincent Welsh, of another victim. She said that the mother of "Peter," a boy who, a few years earlier, had played Jesus in the Passion play, told her that Fr. Smith had done exactly the same things to her son. She said that Peter had told his parents at the time, but that he was hysterical and did not want his parents to confront Fr. Smith. Peter's mother told Ian's that she regretted not doing anything then – three years before Ian played the Jesus character.

Peter's father called Msgr. Lynn on June 18, 2002, confirming Ian's and his mother's allegations. According to Msgr. Lynn's notes, Peter's father and some other parents had finally confronted Fr. Smith in 1991, and the priest had acknowledged that he had used bad judgment in how he conducted the Passion play. Monsignor Lynn's notes record Peter's father complaining that "there are potential victims and the Church is not owning up to this." Archdiocese records indicate that still no effort was made to contact the other potential victims named by Ian and his mother.

Ian's mother told Msgr. Lynn and Fr. Welsh that she knew of two families who had questioned Fr. Smith about camping trips he took with their sons.

Ian also told the detective and Msgr. Lynn and Fr. Welsh that his older brother Arthur had confided in him that Fr. Smith had molested him during a rafting and camping trip in 1984, when Arthur was 13 years old. Ian said that Arthur had become very close to Fr. Smith at that time, and that in 2002 he still did not want to come forward because he feared embarrassment. Arthur had told Ian, though, that while sleeping in the same tent with Fr. Smith, the priest had "touched" and "grabbed" the boy's genitals.

The Archdiocese interviews Father Smith but does not act.

When the Archdiocese managers interviewed Fr. Smith later in the day on May 10, 2002, Fr. Welsh recorded that they explained the difference between "inappropriate" behavior and "sexual abuse." Apparently understanding this to mean that only genital contact was considered abuse by the Archdiocese, Fr. Smith readily admitted the numerous incidents in which he humiliated boys by forcing them to undress in front of him, but he denied any touching of genitals. According to Fr. Welsh's notes, the

managers did not even question Fr. Smith about his sadistic behavior in poking the boys with pins or directing other boys to whip “Jesus” with leather straps during play rehearsals and performances.

Having heard admissions from the priest that he had, for years, made boys strip in front of him behind locked doors and in hot tubs, as well as unaddressed allegations that he poked naked boys with pins and directed others to whip them with leather straps, Msgr. Lynn asked Fr. Smith whether there were “inappropriate things [we] need to worry about.” Father Welsh’s notes record Msgr. Lynn telling Fr. Smith that they had names of other boys and that they needed to assure the Cardinal that there was nothing to worry about.

Cardinal Bevilacqua apparently was assured enough to leave Fr. Smith as Vicar of Delaware County and resident priest at Saint Francis of Assisi. On the recommendation of Msgr. Lynn and the Cardinal’s Vicar for Administration, Joseph Cistone, Cardinal Bevilacqua expressly permitted Fr. Smith to continue performing parish duties, including saying Mass and hearing confession. Father Smith resigned his position as Vicar seven months later, according to Archdiocese records, at his own request, in order to care for his sick parents.

Church officials send Father Smith for a psychological evaluation that employs inadequate and outdated methods.

On June 1, 2002, a private counseling and consulting company performed a one-day evaluation of Fr. Smith at the request of the Archdiocese. The report found a possible “failure to attend to necessary limits and boundaries that offer safety and predictability in the social environment” and a “tendency towards compulsivity,” but it offered no concrete diagnosis. It “strongly” recommended against any assignments that involved working with children. Father Smith himself provided the only facts alluded to in the report.

Thus, although the evaluators knew that Fr. Smith asked the students who played Jesus to fully undress, there is no indication that they knew that he took the boys to a private room, locked the door, knelt in front of their genitals with pins in his mouth, and pricked at least one of them until he bled. There is no mention of his directing other boys

to beat the Jesus character until cuts, welts, and bruises resulted. Nor are the allegations that he handled any boy's genitals on camping trips mentioned. Father Smith also failed to explain that he manipulated boys into being naked in the hot tub by telling them that club rules demanded it.

The Grand Jury heard that the absence of relevant facts was not the only problem with Fr. Smith's evaluation. A critique of the private counseling and consulting evaluation by Leslie M. Lothstein, Ph.D. ABPP, the Director of Psychology at The Institute for Living in Hartford, Connecticut, found that the report "was flawed and failed to meet standards of care in evaluating sex offenders. Of particular concern," he wrote, "was the failure to use specialized sex offender tests and actuarial risk assessment tools that are part of a national standard of practice to evaluate sex offenders." He criticized the the counseling and consulting group's use of outdated tests and a failure to choose tests tailored to the reasons for Fr. Smith's referral. He commented that the report "seemed almost written in code," thus obscuring its meaning.

In his analysis prepared for the Grand Jury in 2003, Dr. Lothstein said that one day was not sufficient to perform a thorough evaluation. He noted that "it is not within the area of expertise for a psychologist or psychiatrist to perform a police inquiry," but said it was important nonetheless for an evaluation to incorporate witness and victim statements and not to rely solely on the priest's self-reports.

Dr. Lothstein testified that the evidence he read suggested that Fr. Smith "is thought disordered, impulsive and engages in bizarre ritualized sexually sadistic behavior and he has probably acted out inappropriately with many minors while using religious justification for his bizarre behavior."

Dr. Lothstein found it unusual that the counseling and consulting group failed to assert that Fr. Smith was at risk of harming children, even though that was the clear implication of its recommendation that he not be placed in an assignment where he would work directly with children or teenagers. To then allow Fr. Smith to be assigned to a parish, Dr. Lothstein said, would constitute "a serious error in judgment."

Father Smith continues at Saint Francis of Assisi parish.

In January 2003, seven months after Fr. Smith's one-day psychological test, Msgr. Lynn recommended to Cardinal Bevilacqua that the priest be permitted to continue residing, saying Mass, and hearing confession at Saint Francis of Assisi parish. Without explanation, Msgr. Lynn asserted that the therapists had recommended against Fr. Smith's working with children "not for fear of his acting out but more as a matter of prudence." Monsignor Lynn informed the Cardinal that the Archdiocese's legal counsel had met with the Delaware County District Attorney and that that office's investigation was closed. Monsignor Cistone concurred with Msgr. Lynn's recommendation to leave Fr. Smith in his parish assignment and Cardinal Bevilacqua approved it.

The Archdiocese leaders left Fr. Smith in his parish assignment despite reports, found to be credible, of sadistic behavior and manipulative efforts to see boys' genitals, as well as reports of genital fondling of a victim still too embarrassed to come forward publicly. Instead of ordering meaningful psychological testing that could well indicate otherwise, Cardinal Bevilacqua and his managers apparently chose to accept Fr. Smith's assertions that the whippings he directed, the pricking of naked boys with pins, and his manipulations to bathe nude with the grade school children in his parishes, served some purpose other than sexual gratification.

The Archdiocese receives two more reports that Father Smith sexually abused boys.

Father Smith remained at Saint Francis of Assisi until December 2004, when another victim came forward. The Archdiocese did not provide the Grand Jury with the report made by the victim, "Dale," but a letter from Fr. Smith denying the allegations suggests the general nature of the incident. In a December 15 letter to the Archdiocesan Review Board, Fr. Smith discussed a trip he took to Europe in the 1970s with the victim, "another student," "Aaron," and Fr. Francis Beach (now the Regional Vicar for North Philadelphia). Father Smith told the Review Board that the four travelers shared one bedroom at a German bed and breakfast for most of the trip, but that on at least one night he shared a bedroom with only Dale. He insisted that he did not share the same bed with any of his traveling companions and that he did not "ever commit an offensive touching

of any kind let alone one of a sexual nature.” Three days after Fr. Smith wrote to the Review Board, he was placed on administrative leave.

In February 2005, yet another victim reported to the Archdiocese that Fr. Smith had abused him when he was 12 or 13 years old. According to a summary of the allegation prepared by Archdiocese officials for its lawyers, “Brent” reported that, in 1975 or 1976, he and his younger brother accompanied Fr. Smith on what they thought was to be a trip to Hershey Park. Instead, the priest took them to a motel near the King of Prussia Mall, plied them with Southern Comfort, chased them around the motel room, and put ice cubes in their underwear. Father Smith then instructed the boys to remove their underwear in order to allow it to dry overnight. The victim told the Archdiocese’s victim assistance coordinator, Martin Frick, that when he awoke in the middle of the night, he was lying naked on top of Fr. Smith. Both the priest and the boy had erections. Brent told a Review Board investigator that Fr. Smith was rubbing his body against the boy’s. He said that Fr. Smith did the same thing another time.

The Archdiocesan Review Board found Brent’s allegations credible. The board further acknowledged that, in light of the subsequent allegations, it now found “the earlier incidents regarding the passion play were more likely than not to have been motivated by a desire for sexual gratification on the part of Reverend Smith.”

On March 15, 2005, the Archdiocese restricted Fr. Smith’s faculties. His current residence was undisclosed.

Father Smith appeared before the Grand Jury and was given an opportunity to answer questions concerning the allegations against him. He chose not to do so.