

Archabbot Douglas Nowicki
Saint Vincent Archabbey
Latrobe, Pennsylvania

March 21, 2010

Archabbot Nowicki,

I am writing now to try to expunge some demons that have plagued me for years.

I attended Saint Vincent Scholasticate, commonly called Saint Vincent Prep, from 1966 to 1970. Our class graduated only 16, the class after us 12, after which the school was closed, never to re-open.

About ten years ago, many of us from several classes started attending annual reunions. Those occasions offered an opportunity both to catch up on news and to reflect upon our time in school together. It was at those gatherings that some of us began to talk about how we were treated, and sometimes mistreated, by a couple priests there.

The priest most talked about was Father Herman Ubinger (deceased), who taught Latin to freshmen and sophomores while being the dorm monitor for the juniors and seniors. During the Latin classes, he would stand behind many of the students at their desks while quizzing them. If they hesitated at all, he would begin to tickle and poke them in the ribs and belly. Sometimes he seemed to go lower.

He once tried that with me. Even though I was able to answer the questions correctly, he insisted on poking and tickling anyway, trying to get some sort of reaction. My response was to put up a wall against expressing any emotion. It was my shield, my defense mechanism, my way of dealing with behavior that was apparently accepted by the institution. And it worked. He just harrumphed and moved on to the next freshman. I maintained that emotional control throughout my time there, and well beyond.

During sophomore year, he was doing it to Dennis Ward, who was particularly ticklish. But when Father Herman seemed to go very low, Dennis yelled, "Stop groping me, you pervert!" or something like that. Father Herman immediately went back to the front of the room, his face very red. And at the end of the term, Dennis Ward was asked to leave.

There are some at our alumni gatherings who don't think it was that bad, but many others were bothered by the unwelcome touching. Indeed, some spoke of classmates who stayed away even from our gatherings because of those episodes. There is also the Class of 1969, who reportedly agreed as a group never to return to Saint Vincent. With rare exception, they have kept that pledge.

The other priest is Father Stanley Markowicz. I will speak only of my personal experience.

Father Stanley used a thick wooden paddle to discipline students. We were told he was acting in loco parentis, though my parents hadn't spanked me since pre-school. He decided to discipline me one day for seeking permission from another priest for something that he had already denied.

Every night we had study hall for two hours, freshmen and sophomores in one big room. Stanley's office was in the next room. During study hall, he takes me in, tells me of the transgression, then paddles me till I'm screaming and crying, all heard by the students in the study hall. He then has me lie on a daybed, explaining that he had to rub alcohol on my naked butt to take care of the pain and swelling, which he proceeded to do thoroughly.

I was more embarrassed than at any other moment in my life. I felt ashamed, powerless, and without anyone to turn to. Massive anxieties now accompanied an emotional shutdown.

They still do. That's why I'm writing.

Now I'm not sure if this behavior amounts to sexual abuse, though some might say technically yes. It was certainly unwelcome touching, and the effects on the lives of those who experienced it, though a wide spectrum, are undeniable.

It has certainly affected my life. I have done all I can to address the other factors that affect my current well-being, and I must now address this one. Yes, I still have dreams where I am at Saint Vincent, being chased by people whose faces I never see, looking for hiding places and escapes in the various buildings and tunnels that I knew as a scholastic. And waking up in a sweat if ever I was about to be caught.

What used to be called demons are now anxieties, and as I said at the beginning, I am still bedeviled by them. I am hoping that this letter will start the process of reducing their effect on my life, and perhaps the lives of others. From what I hear in the news, the church is starting to pay more attention to these acts and their effects, even when done long ago in the past.

Please help.

Sincerely,

Dennis O'Brien
Class of 1970

Cc: Delegate for Child Protection