

Seven priests named in Pennsylvania report received treatment in Aurora

By Brock Weir

An explosive Grand Jury report on clergy sexual abuse in Pennsylvania dating back to 1947 released last week reveals that seven of more than 300 'predator priests' within the Catholic church received treatment at a facility formerly in Aurora.

The interim report into more than 1,000 cases of abuse published last Tuesday revealed that seven of the accused - John P. Connor, John S. Hoehl, William P. O'Malley III, Benedict J. Van der Putten, Michael G. Barletta, Michael Robert Freeman, and Thomas C. Kelley, were sent for 'rehabilitation' at the Southdown Institute, which used to be located on the south side of St. John's Sideroad between Leslie Street and Bayview Avenue.

Now located in Holland Landing, after the Aurora site was razed five years ago to make way for the 2C housing development, Southdown was founded over 50 years ago with a mission to 'provide preventative and restorative care to clergy and vowed religious using the integration of psychological, physical and interpersonal practice with the wisdom of the Catholic Spiritual Tradition.'

The Grand Jury Report, however, reveals that the local dioceses in Pennsylvania did not uniformly follow the recommendations and prescribed treatments that were prescribed by the facilitators at Southdown.

John P. Connor was arrested in New Jersey in 1984 for sexually molesting a 14-year-old.

The Grand Jury Report indicates that notes regarding Connor from Southdown indicated that 'because of Connor's problem with alcohol, 'he acts out sexually with some preference to late adolescent males.' They specifically warned against giving Connor responsibility for adolescence. In a September 3, 1985 memorandum to Bishop George Guilfoyle of Camden from the Executive Director of Southdown, specifically cautioned that 'because of the incident for which he was apprehended, we would not recommend any ministry would directly put him in a position of responsibility for adolescents such as a teaching situation.' Indeed, the Grand Jury report indicates this was the case for a time as Connor was bounced around, but by 1986, he was reassigned to a new church with 'an unrestricted ministry. There was no warning to the parishioners of the church that he was an admitted child molester.'

'The Grand Jury further heard that Archbishop Bevilacqua also neglected to tell the pastor that Father Connor had a history of alcohol abuse and that Southdown had warned that excessive use of alcohol could increase the risk that the priest would act out sexually with adolescents. Thus, when Father Connor continued to drink, Father Donlon did not know to be especially concerned.' Fifteen men came forward with claims of sexual abuse and inappropriate touching at the hands of John S. Hoehl from the 1970s through to the 1990s.

The report notes that Hoehl was sent to Southdown for treatment in 1986 following the first report of abuse. His course of treatment was 'approximately six months' and he was released on November 21 of the same year.

'During his treatment at Southdown, the Director informed the Diocese that Hoehl had admitted he had been sexually involved with several high school students when headmaster at Quigley College (Baden, PA). At the conclusion of his treatment, Southdown provided the Diocese with an assessment that Hoehl, in fact was/is a pedophile.'

O'Malley, who died in 2004, is cited in at least two cases of sexual assault and, in some cases, taking photographs of teen boys in their underwear.

He was in treatment at Southdown for much of 1998, according to the report, with correspondence dating back to February of that year indicating O'Malley 'stated he had a fantasy for 'well-built 16, 17 or 18-year-olds,' along with continued over-involvement with youth and an inappropriate pre-occupation with things that attract youth.'

Van der Putten was the subject of numerous accusations of sexual assault on young women.

After admitting involvement with a 16-year-old girl, including kissing, touching her breasts, and exposing his genitalia, arguing that the acts were 'just attempts to build trust,' he was sent to Southdown in 2002.

'He admitted to recently fondling a young woman he met while on Christmas vacation in 2001,' notes the report. 'The Southdown Institute found Van der Putten had 'predatory behaviour.'

Barletta, who was ordained in 1966, and was treated at Southdown in 1995, is cited in the report with eight clear victims but notes those within the church have stated this number is closer to 25.

'In 1994, the Diocese listed Barletta as being on sabbatical. He had actually been sent to Southdown Treatment Centre. This information was never released to the parishioners of the Diocese of Erie. Barletta was housed, fed, and given therapy at Southdown at a significant cost to the parishioners of Erie, which is detailed in Diocesan records.

Deeper in the recesses of the diocesan secret archives was a handwritten note from 1968. In this note, [The Bishop] wrote that Barletta, 'spends much time in counselling high school boys - a small number only.' Thus, the concerns about Barletta appear to have been raised early in his career.

Freeman did two stints at Southdown after 'he admitted to sexually violating children in at least five of his six ministry assignments.

Kelley, too, was at Southdown on two separate occasions, according to the report. The first was for a psychological assessment which lasted a week in September 1995. The second was residential treatment from April to September of 1996. He was accused of inappropriate sexual conduct with at least five victims between the ages of 18 and 25.

Per his [assessment at Southdown] it was determined that Kelley should have restricted ministry that kept him away from young parishioners. Kelley disagreed with this assessment and asked Bishop Trautman to send him to a different facility for a second opinion.

A physician from DuBois, PA saw Kelley in 1996 and in March of that year agreed with the course of action that Southdown recommended. Soon afterward, Kelley was sent to Southdown for several months of treatment.

He died in 2005.

On Monday, Pope Francis released a letter to 'the people of God' responding to these cases in Pennsylvania and others around the globe, stating 'we showed no care for the little ones.'

'With shame and repentance, we acknowledge as an ecclesial community that we were not where we should have been, that we did not act in a timely manner, realizing the magnitude and the gravity of the damage done to so many lives,' he wrote.

'We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them. I make my own the words of the then Cardinal Ratzinger when, during the Way of the Cross composed for Good Friday 2005, he identified with the cry of pain of so many victims and exclaimed: 'How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to [Christ]! How much pride, how much self-complacency! Christ's betrayal by his disciples, their unworthy reception of his body and blood, is certainly the greatest suffering endured by the Redeemer; it pierces his heart.'