

Victim Nabs Priest Abuser in Sexting Sting

The text messages read as if they've been ripped from a pornographic novel.

Matthew Riedlinger quizzed his texting partner about sex videos, pressed for details about intimate liaisons, described sexual acts and encouraged mutual masturbation.

He also repeatedly asked to meet. "Promise me you will never breath [sic] a word of this to anyone—ok?" he wrote.

Riedlinger, 30, had good reason for discretion. He was a priest at St. Aloysius Church in Jackson, N.J., and while exchanging more than 1,200 text messages over four weeks last year, he thought he was talking to a 16-year-old boy.

In reality, Riedlinger was the target of an elaborate sting by a 23-year-old man who says the priest sexually harassed him for years.

'It Was Twisted'

Timothy Schmalz, who lives in Washington after graduating from Catholic University, said he was moved to action after his first complaint about Riedlinger in 2011 resulted in what he characterized as a slap on the wrist by Trenton Bishop David M. O'Connell.

Schmalz is one of five young men who provided similar accounts of harassment and sexual obsession by the priest. Four of the five were in their late teens or early 20s when Riedlinger began inappropriate and persistent sexual dialogues with them, they said. The fifth was in his late 20s.

The sting, initiated on Facebook and carried out through the use of a Google Voice account, partially served its purpose.

After Schmalz forwarded transcripts of the text messages and other materials to O'Connell in August 2012, Riedlinger was removed from the parish and placed in an in-patient treatment program. He was later assigned to restricted ministry away from children.

Schmalz, who is now studying at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, carried out the sting with his college roommate, who said he, too, was besieged by Riedlinger's relentless sexual chatter.

"Wherever he is, he will be a danger to kids, especially boys," Schmalz said. "If he did this with us, if he thought he was doing this with a 16-year-old boy, who else did he do it with? This could ruin someone's life."

One of the harassment victims, Stephen Webster, was an 18-year-old seminarian at Seton Hall University when he met Riedlinger at a retreat four years ago. Riedlinger, who was less than a year from ordination at the time, held himself out as a mentor.

But their conversations soon morphed, Webster said. Riedlinger began with dirty jokes, he said, then took to discussing his struggles with pornography and masturbation.

"He would say, 'Pray for me,' but then he would text me when he was doing it, how he was doing it and when he was done," Webster said. "It was twisted."

Webster said he repeatedly told Riedlinger to stop but that the behavior persisted for a year, until the teen cut off contact altogether. Now 22, Webster said the experience contributed to his decision to abandon the seminary.

"As a priest, you represent the Catholic Church. You represent Christ. You hear confessions. And then you're sexting over Facebook," Webster said. "It's a disgrace."

'Something's Not Right'

Schmalz met the young priest at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception near the Catholic University campus while Schmalz was still a student. He and his friend, Ryan (who asked that his full name not be used), soon became friends with the priest.

The friendship soon turned odd. Riedlinger began peppering Schmalz and other men with questions on Facebook about pornography, masturbation and homosexuality.

"The next day he would say he was drunk and that it would never happen again," Schmalz said. "He would always close by saying, 'Once I become a priest, I'll forgive all your sins. Whatever you do is okay.'"

Despite their protestations, the behavior continued even after Riedlinger was ordained in June 2010 and assigned to St. Aloysius, the men said. It was a bizarre phone call in the spring of 2011 that pushed Ryan over the edge, he said.

He was studying for finals when Riedlinger called from Rome, where he said he was vacationing.

"He started asking me questions about my girlfriend, whether I had sex with her ...," Ryan said. "I told him it was really inappropriate and hung up."

The two students had concerns beyond their own discomfort, saying Riedlinger told them he was teaching sex education to middle school-age children at St. Aloysius.

"He would say how physically mature they were for their ages and how some even had facial hair," Ryan said. "It raised alarm bells."

The two wrote a synopsis of their experience and forwarded it, along with transcripts of Facebook chats, to O'Connell in Trenton around October 2011, they said.

In its statement last weekend, the diocese said Riedlinger was assigned to outpatient counseling after that first complaint. Schmalz and Ryan were told that Riedlinger also was given a stern lecture. Both men said they considered the response insufficient but decided against pushing it further.

Then in the spring of 2012, Schmalz said, he was chatting with a group of people visiting the shrine from the Diocese of Trenton when a woman mentioned Riedlinger. Her 18-year-old son, a seminarian, had become very close with the priest, she said.

"She was thinking it was a good thing, but it got me really concerned," Schmalz said. "I feared he would be walking into what Ryan and I had walked into before."

Schmalz and Ryan said they weren't looking to have Riedlinger charged. They said they wanted to prove to the diocese the priest had a problem and should not be in ministry.

Their vehicle: Josh McDonald, a fictitious 16-year-old boy who had just moved to New Jersey and was interested in the priesthood. Schmalz and Ryan created a Facebook profile with a picture they found on the Internet. To draw Riedlinger in, they "liked" religious Facebook pages.

They friended Riedlinger in early July of last year. Within 45 minutes, he accepted and asked who "Josh" was. Schmalz wrote that Josh had attended one of his Masses in Jackson. Most of the conversations that followed were in text messages.

The Google Voice account Schmalz and Ryan created allowed them to send and receive texts on a computer, at the same time saving each text in the format of a chat, with dates and time stamps.

The first two weeks, Riedlinger was cautious.

"Something's not right," the priest wrote at 10:24 p.m. July

15, 2012. "U friend me on Facebook randomly, they [sic] you start texting me, You reveal many secrets to me, you speak to me more as a 'bro' than a priest, and u refuse to actually talk but insist on only texting. ... For obvious reasons, priests must be very careful."

Schmalz said he ultimately complied with Riedlinger's insistence on a phone call.

"I quite literally held my nose and spoke in the highest voice possible," Schmalz said. "He said, 'Hey, you're real. So nice to hear your voice.' And then we continued our conversation online."

The messages show Riedlinger needed little or no invitation to steer the conversation to sex. He spoke of past encounters, encouraged Josh to enjoy sex with his boyfriend and repeatedly told him how alike they were in their thirst for pornography and sex.

"I love u dude. Ur a sick [expletive] like me," Riedlinger wrote.

Riedlinger occasionally sent a message saying he was nearby, suggesting a get-together. On those occasions, Schmalz declined to respond and made up an excuse later.

The conversations culminated in a graphic, six-hour texting session in the early morning hours of Aug. 3, 2012. The next day, Riedlinger asked to do it again.

Schmalz and his roommate cut off contact two days later and forwarded the transcript and other materials to the bishop.

'Deeply Troubling'

On Aug. 7, the bishop wrote back, saying he had personally escorted Riedlinger to a hospital for in-patient treatment. The diocese, citing federal health law, declined to say where Riedlinger was treated or how long he remained in the

facility.

Schmalz and Ryan said they continued to press the diocese to notify parishioners at St. Aloysius, saying they worried Riedlinger might have spoken to other teens the way he spoke to them.

O'Connell informed parishioners of the complaints in a statement after *The Star-Ledger* questioned the diocese about Riedlinger and the decision to withhold information about the allegations.

Even then, the statement makes no mention of the fact that Riedlinger believed he was corresponding with a 16-year-old boy.

"Father Riedlinger has been the subject of two complaints to the diocese over the past few years regarding his participation in inappropriate cell phone text communication over a period of some years with adults," according to the statement, which was read aloud at weekend Masses on Sept. 21-22. "There was no sexual contact, assault or abuse referenced in the complaints."

The statement called Riedlinger's behavior "deeply troubling" and said it is "in no way to be tolerated in the life and ministry of a priest."

In recent months, Riedlinger has been living at a retirement home for priests in New Jersey.

He recently was granted a leave from the priesthood.

"Determining that media coverage will impede his efforts to recover from the problems that have unfolded, Father Riedlinger has decided to leave the diocese and has asked for an indefinite leave of absence from the priesthood," Rayanne Bennett, a spokeswoman for the diocese, said in a statement. "Bishop O'Connell has granted his request, effective

immediately.”