

## **The Story of Mike Wegs:**

*Combined from the 3-part article by Phillip O'Connor*

[https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2004\\_07\\_12/2004\\_11\\_13\\_OConnor\\_SecretsSins.htm](https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2004_07_12/2004_11_13_OConnor_SecretsSins.htm)

<http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/news/stories.nsf/stlouiscitycounty/story/0958D07B6CE7AD1286256F4B0062F52B>

### **Part 1:**

#### **A mystical, magical place**

For Michael Wegs, St. Thomas offered a chance to escape the private hell that was his home in Moberly, Mo., in the fall of 1967.

Wegs' father was a cruel and violent alcoholic who often beat his wife and physically and verbally tormented his sons and daughters, according to Wegs' deposition in a suit.

On a summer day, a priest pulled into the family's driveway for an unexpected visit.

Word of Wegs' interest in the priesthood had reached the Rev. Anthony O'Connell. Born in 1938, O'Connell had emigrated from Ireland to St. Louis in 1959 to attend college seminary.

Ordained by the Jefferson City Diocese in 1963, he'd immediately joined the faculty at St. Thomas, where he taught English, physics and chemistry, and helped recruit students to the seminary. The young, short, roly-poly man with the thick, dark, wavy hair, cherubic cheeks and heavy black-rimmed glasses charmed Wegs' parents. His sales pitch of a no-strings-attached, quality education unavailable in the public schools won them over. At best, their son would someday be an ordained priest. At worst, he'd acquire a first-rate college prep education.

When Wegs arrived at St. Thomas that fall, the seminary seemed a mystical, magical place with an inviting smell of polished wood, incense and candle beeswax.

The school sat on six acres in the middle of a residential neighborhood on a high, tree-covered hill, just blocks from the Mississippi River in the town that native son Samuel Clemens made famous.

Students slept in bunk beds in large open dorms on two floors at the west end of a red-brick, turn-of-the-century building that originally served as an orphanage. The aroma of hot pancakes and the clanking and banging of a handyman firing up the heating system signaled the start of many cold winter mornings.

School bells signaled changes in long, carefully planned days centered on academics, chores and prayer.

In the evenings, the boys sat at cafeteria tables and dined family-style on dinners such as meatloaf or fried chicken cooked by doting local women who also washed the boys' clothes.

St. Thomas had opened in 1957 as a quick way to produce priests for the newly created diocese of mostly small country parishes spread across 38 counties of farmland and low Ozarks hill country.

In those early years, church leaders also looked overseas for priests to help meet the demands of a growing diocese that today numbers 90,000 members. At one point, a third of the priests in the diocese were from Ireland.

The men of the cloth who ran St. Thomas seemed worldly and intelligent, men the boys could look up to, confide in and model themselves after.

In O'Connell, Wegs, for the first time, found an adult male who seemed to care about the tall, quiet boy's life and problems.

At one point, O'Connell told Wegs that he was now his father and the church his family.

Wegs enjoyed what he saw as the favored treatment he received - the special attention, being treated as if he was a "little God."

### **Groomed for abuse**

Days at St. Thomas followed a boot camp-like routine of early to bed, early to rise. The priests maintained tight control. They reviewed all reading material.

They handled money sent from home. Students joked about the "invisible wire" that prevented them from venturing beyond the campus perimeter.

Rules and advice were everywhere. During his first few weeks, Wegs recalls how the Rev. Richard Kaiser, then the rector and now deceased, even instructed the boys not to wear underwear to bed. That would help prevent infections and disease and "let their manhood breathe," he told the boys.

At night, after the evening prayer, several faculty members would meet individually with students for spiritual counseling.

O'Connell's book-filled office and Spartan sleeping quarters sat on the main floor, apart from other priest quarters and near the chapel. It was here that the counseling sessions took place and the grooming for abuse began, according to Wegs.

The conversation during Wegs' sessions with O'Connell turned to the troubled marriage of Wegs' parents and the student's volatile home life.

After time, Wegs' spiritual sessions with O'Connell took a new turn that other former students said O'Connell would repeat dozens of times over the next 25 years, according to lawsuits. O'Connell began to ask pointed sexual questions and to have Wegs talk about his fantasies in graphic detail.

As he listened, O'Connell placed "Clyde," a large stuffed hippo covered in purple and green flowers, on his lap and rubbed it around. While Wegs couldn't see exactly what O'Connell was doing, Wegs believed the priest was masturbating. That happened on about six occasions, Wegs said in a court deposition.

Wegs also claimed in the deposition that on another half-dozen occasions, O'Connell watched him masturbate late at night in the altar boy's sacristy.

Wegs, who had no sexual experience at the time, felt troubled by what was happening. But he also feared the loss of attention, care and comfort that O'Connell lavished on him.

Eventually, Wegs said, he grew uncomfortable and stopped the sexual activity with O'Connell.

Although they would be in contact several times over the years, Wegs and O'Connell would never again discuss what happened.

Neither Wegs nor T.L., another STAS student, ever told anyone at the time what was happening to them.

But they often wondered about other students who received similar attention from O'Connell.

Wegs, now 51, lives with his partner in Minneapolis. He has been treated for clinical depression since 1998. Last year, he tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of antidepressants. He suffers from skin disorders, headaches and anxiety and has had trouble holding a job.

Wegs, who had sued the diocese and O'Connell, reached a settlement in July. The diocese agreed to pay Wegs \$20,000. O'Connell agreed to pay him \$5,000, but has yet to do so.