

Seminarian Sex Trafficking

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by **Gene Thomas Gomulka** • ChurchMilitant.com • October 26, 2021

Foreign-born students at the mercy of predators



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People often associate the term "sex trafficking" with women or minors being transported across international borders to be used as sex slaves for high-paying clients. What many do not realize is that Catholic seminarians are also being trafficked for sexual purposes by priests or bishops.



Fr. Ryszard Biernat and Fr. Art Smith

Foreign-born young men have come to the United States to study for the priesthood only to find themselves groomed, harassed and abused in seminaries and rectories. Many of these victims are unaware of their legal rights and dependent upon their bishops for immigration permits. They have routinely been targets of predation and cover-ups.

Polish Seminarians' Experience

Polish seminarian Ryszard Biernat alleged Fr. Art Smith sexually assaulted him in 2003. Biernat also reported that Buffalo auxiliary bishop Edward Grosz — Fr. Smith's close friend and classmate — threatened to have him deported if he told anyone what Fr. Smith had done. Unfamiliar with the U.S. legal system, Biernat did not know that both Smith and Grosz could have been criminally prosecuted and incarcerated for what he claimed they did.

Smith was later accused of abusing his 9-year-old nephew. Meanwhile, Grosz was accused of having abused a 15-year-old boy in 1990.

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Biernat was ordained a priest after keeping quiet. But he was later suspended by Bp. Richard Malone for leaking audio recordings to the media that revealed how Malone attempted to conceal alleged clerical sex abuse. Neither interim administrator Bp. Edward Scharfenberger of Albany nor current ordinary Bp. Michael Fisher have lifted Biernat's unjust suspension.

The Vortex: Time to Go

Like Biernat, Polish seminarian Wieslaw Walawender also experienced misconduct in reprisal as a Buffalo seminarian. In 1992, while working at Queen of All Saints parish in Lackawanna, New York, Walawender reported witnessing a young boy running out of Fr. Dennis Riter's rectory with semen "on his shirt, face and in his hair." Walawender, who had been shown a very positive evaluation from Riter the same day as the incident, was forced to leave the diocese after reporting Riter to Bp. Edward Head and Bp. Edward Grosz in a letter dated May 9, 1992.



Bp. Edward Grosz

Walawender went on to be accepted for the archdiocese of Baltimore, only allegedly to be drugged and sodomized by Baltimore's Msgr. Edward Staub in 1996. Ironically, Fr. William Simms — himself accused in two sex-abuse lawsuits that were settled out of court — was appointed by Abp. William Keeler to "investigate" the rape charge. Simms negotiated a deal in which Walawender would be ordained if he kept quiet about Staub's alleged criminal sex act.

Walawender was told his silence would be a test of his ability to be a good confessor. He did not know that both his alleged abuser and those who covered it up could have been criminally prosecuted. Walawender was ordained a transitional deacon after keeping quiet about the sexual assault.

Episcopal Sodomy: Two Lives Destroyed

Just three months later, he was offered a one-way plane ticket back to Poland and told he would not be ordained a priest. The archdiocese of Baltimore has attempted for about 20 years to get Walawender to request laicization. The archdiocese has also refused to compensate him for the multiple psychological and financial injustices he suffered.



Fr. Miroslaw Krol and ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick

Much like how seminarians Biernat and Walawender were threatened into silence, another Polish seminarian has alleged he was threatened in 2006 by his New Jersey bishop never to be ordained if he revealed his allegation that Fr. Miroslaw Krol sexually abused him.

Krol was chancellor of Sts. Cyril and Methodius Seminary near Detroit. He had been ordained for the Newark archdiocese by now-laicized Theodore McCarrick.

In December 2020, a young priest and a layman brought a federal suit against Krol, claiming they were fired or forced to resign after they reported being sexually abused by him.



Oakland priest Fr. Van Dinh

Mexican Seminarian's Experience

Krol is not the only accused predator who has faced a lawsuit by a foreign-born seminarian. In 2019, a Mexican former seminarian of Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon brought a suit against Oakland priest Fr. Van Dinh. In the lawsuit, the former seminarian alleges Fr. Dinh blindfolded him, tied his hands tied in front of him and raped him.

When police detectives served a search warrant at the church, they discovered — among other items — a glass meth pipe and thong underwear hidden in a locked closet, a blindfold found inside a nightstand drawer and sex toys behind a mirror on the floor.

Upon completion of the investigation, the case was forwarded to the district attorney's office with a recommendation Dinh be charged with two felonies: "Sodomy by force, violence, or fear" and "oral copulation by force or fear."

More Foreign-Born Seminarians, Little Awareness

A 2020 CARA study showed the percentage of foreign-born seminarians who were ordained over the past 20 years in the United States is 29%.

Every U.S. ordinary was sent copies of a July 16, 2020 letter addressed to the Secretariat of the Polish Episcopal Conference. This letter discussed how foreign-born seminarians have been sexually exploited by U.S. bishops and priests. The letter — essentially an "immigration advisory" — warned Poland's bishops conference how U.S. bishops have covered up sexual abuse of seminarians while retaliating against whistleblowers.

Foreign seminarians need to report their abuse to federal authorities in keeping with U.S. Code Title 18 Section 2421, which states: "Whoever knowingly transports any individual in interstate or foreign commerce ... with intent that such individual engage in prostitution or in any sexual activity for which any person can be charged with a criminal offense ... shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than 10 years or both."

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Additionally, international students and workers should be provided information by their embassies on how they should report being exploited sexually or in other ways harassed by their U.S. sponsors.

Unfortunately, sexually abused foreign seminarians may be unaware that it is a crime in this country to engage even an adult in non-consensual sex. By the time these truly vulnerable adults learn about their legal rights (after years of being manipulated), statutes of limitations often prevent them from filing criminal or civil charges.

Persecuted Seminarian Summit

If the statute of limitations for abuse cases involving vulnerable adults were to be lifted — as it has been in many states for cases involving the sexual abuse of minors — one can anticipate large numbers of victimized former seminarians and priests coming forward with lawsuits.

If this were to happen, those convicted of abusing seminarians or covering up their abuse could face civil and ecclesiastical penalties — including imprisonment and laicization. Victims' advocates are hopeful that a groundbreaking lawsuit against New York cardinal Timothy Dolan and North American College officials may become a landmark case for all seminarians who have suffered retaliation or abuse.

Anyone wishing to support the Save Our Seminarians Fund in the effort to apply legal protections for seminarians who have been victims of abuse or cover-up may contribute here.

Gene Thomas Gomulka is a victims' abuse advocate, investigative reporter, former seminary faculty member and instructor, and retired Navy captain/chaplain. Gomulka was ordained a priest for the diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, Pennsylvania and was later made a prelate of honor (monsignor) by St. Pope John Paul II.

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