

Written Testimony for Susan Leighnor, M.A. – March 23, 2023
SB 317 Permitting the prosecution of childhood sexual abuse

Good morning Madam Chair and Committee Members,

Thank you for having this hearing today on SB 317 for permitting the prosecution of childhood sexual abuse.

More importantly, thank you for considering my testimony about my childhood sexual abuse in Kansas.

My name is Susan Leighnor. I was born in Hutchinson, Kansas into a Catholic family. My family attended the Church of the Holy Cross. I attended Holy Cross Catholic School for first grade, fourth grade and CCD classes.

This is a photo of me in 1966 when I was 10 years old and in 4th grade.



Mass was always held in the morning before the school day began. After mass we would go back into the classrooms. One day after mass when I was 10 years old and in fourth grade, a boy came to our classroom and told my teacher, who was a nun, that I needed to go see Father, Monsignor Irvin F. Lampe. It was always an older boy who came to the classroom. He could have been an altar boy. I was led into the sacristy that was to the right of the altar where Monsignor Lampe was waiting for me. The boy went back out into the church and sat in a pew just outside the sacristy. As I stepped into the sacristy, Lampe was removing the white top he had worn during mass. He then sat down and pulled me close to him. He began talking to me about my parents getting a divorce. Lampe would go on to rape me.

After raping me, he held my hands and looked me in the face and told me that I was not going to talk about this. He told me this was like confession. We don't talk about what happens in confession so you are not going to talk about this. And if you do, you will go to hell.

I understood clearly that I could go to hell if I spoke about what had happened.

At some point, Lampe also told me that he was like God here on earth. If I was talking to him, I was, in fact, talking to God. This concept of a priest being God was not new to me. I learned throughout my catholic schooling that the priest was like God. I heard this many times from the nuns when I was in school.

I still remember the priest telling me to go back to class. So I walked back to my classroom, trying to straighten out my underpants as I walked down the hallway. I was confused, angry and unsure what had happened. I am sure I cried walking back to class. By the time I got back to class, I would have stuffed my tears because the nuns hated it when a child cried.

I was raped at least three times by Lampe. I know this because the first time I walked directly back to class. The second time, I decided to go into the restroom and straighten myself out. Another time, I stayed too long in the restroom and my teacher came looking for me. I had lost track of time. I remember standing at the sink, washing my hands, and the nun standing behind me talking, blah, blah, blah ...

One time when the boy came to class to get me, instead of walking out the door, I summoned the courage to walk up to the teacher's desk and tell her quietly that I did not want to go see Father. The nun looked at me and told me I had to go see Father. I told her again I did not want to go see Father. And again, she told me I had to go. As I walked out the door, I stopped and looked back over my shoulder at the teacher, hoping she would tell me not to go, but instead she told me I had to go, so I did.

The pattern was the same; the boy would come get me out of class and take me to the sacristy. The boy would sit in the pew. Lampe would shut the door.

I remember touching his penis.

One time, I struggled to get away from Lampe, but a 10 year old little girl is no match to a grown man.

Afterwards, I walked past the boy in the pew and returned to class.

Imagine, I was expected to continue learning for the rest of the day after being raped in the sacristy, by a man who was God here on earth. Let that sink in. For the rest of the day, I was expected to learn in class, have lunch with my friends, and play recess 3 times a day. And act as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

I was not the only child who was called to see the priest. I saw others get called to see him.

I never spoke about what happened to me to my parents, or anyone. Out of pure fear, I did not want to go to hell. This fear of going to hell was reinforced in me when a classmate, a little girl, was injured on the playground and died a day later. I remember thinking that I could die on the playground. And if I died on the playground, I did not want to go to hell.

You see, the concept of hell being a burning inferno with people screaming out in agony was real for me, and I certainly did not want to ever go to hell.

As the school year went on, Lampe was gone, or at least he was not at the school.

During this time, there were visiting priests who came to church and school. I was raped twice by an unknown visiting priest.

Towards the end of fourth grade, after mass, someone came to the classroom and told my teacher that Father wanted to see me. So I went to the sacristy. This time, Father Francis Cox was there. (He had said the morning mass before school.) As Cox sat in the chair, he called me over to come near him. He held out his arm and wrapped it around me. Cox told me he wanted to introduce me to the new priest who was going to take over when Father Lampe left. He motioned for me to sit on the bench to his left which I did. After I sat down, I noticed another priest across the room. Cox then introduced me to Father William Wheeler. After introducing me, Cox walked out of the room. I watched him leave and I was scared to death. I knew Cox but I did not know this new priest. Within a minute or two of meeting Wheeler, he was raping me.

There was no grooming involved with Wheeler. It was a full-on attack within a minute or two. The next thing I remember is Wheeler sitting close to me on my left side talking, blah blah, blah ... I was terrified.

Both Cox and Wheeler were Irish priests.

As I had done in the past, I went back to class...to learn...to eat lunch...to play recess.

A day or two later, as I was walking down the hall for recess, I was officially introduced to Wheeler by the principal. He was standing slightly behind her as she was talking. He gave me a stone-cold look that went right through me, as if to say, I will kill you if you say anything about meeting me before. I never said a word about meeting Wheeler or being raped.

I went to public schools after fourth grade.

I attended CCD class at Holy Cross when I was 12 years old. CCD was on Wednesdays after school. Early in the semester, after CCD class started, my teacher told me that Father wanted to see me. She said I was to go over to the rectory to see him. I had no choice, so I walked over and met with Wheeler. I was raped again by Wheeler. Afterwards, I walked back to the school and hid out in the bathroom until I left for home. I do not think I went back to the CCD classes ever again. I never told anyone what happened.

This was truly horrific. I was a 12 year old girl who had just begun menstruating several months before. Imagine, being a 12 year old girl and having a priest know that you are menstruating. It happened to me...

I repressed all the memories of my rapes by Lampe, Wheeler, and the visiting priest. Never to be spoken of until 50 years later when the memories returned. I was in my early 60s when I first

spoke of being raped in school. My repressed memories are the result of multiple traumatic events I endured as a child at Catholic school, i.e. sexual assault, rape and being terrorized.

According to the book "Unto Us A Child: Abuse and Deception in the Catholic Church" by Donald T. Phillips, Wheeler was known as a problem priest for years. He was a problem priest back in the 50s when he was sexually abusing children. Yet, he was sent to Holy Cross in Hutchinson in the 1960s and 70s.

As investigations continue around the country and details emerge about clergy abuse, i.e. Colorado and Pennsylvania, the Catholic Church was aware of sexual predators for decades in their churches and schools and continued to provide safe harbor for these priests. Their solution to problem priests was to move them around from parish to parish and school to school.

In good faith, my family trusted the church to teach and protect their daughter and granddaughter. The education I received from the church/school was not what my parents sent me to school to learn. No parent wants their child terrorized and abused the way I was terrorized and abused.

The Catholic Church and any institution that protects serial sexual predators should be held accountable for what happened under their roof. As in my case, I was raped multiple times in their sacristy and in their rectory. SB 317 will help lift the veil of secrecy that only serves to protect serial sexual predators, and the institutions and organizations that shield them from accountability.

According to research conducted by John Jay College, and issued in a report to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2011, incidences of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church was highest between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s. 94% of incidences of sexual abuse from 1950 through 2009 took place before 1990. Any amendment limiting or capping the time allotted for victims and survivors to report sexual abuse will, in fact, eliminate the most prolific years of sexual abuse in the catholic church.

All survivors of childhood sexual abuse must be able to find justice for the harm done to them, no matter how long it takes for a victim-survivor to come forward.

For these reasons, I support SB 317 and ask the Committee to vote "yes" to pass this critical piece of legislation.

Thank you for considering my testimony and for allowing me to share with you a painful, heartbreaking, and destructive part of my childhood.

Respectfully,
Susan Leighnor, M.A.