

29 Questions for Abbot John Klassen, OSB

“Employee Open Forum with Abbot John Klassen”
CSB, SJU, and OSB Faculty, Staff, and Administration
Pellegrene Auditorium, SJU
February 3, 2016 3:00-4:00 p.m.

Background: According to the CSB/SJU Human Rights Office web site: “The College of Saint Benedict (CSB) and Saint John’s University (SJU) have zero tolerance for sexual misconduct in any form.”

Question 1: What does “zero tolerance” mean and is it defined and/or are the consequences the same for monks, lay personnel, and students on campus?

Background: Saint John’s Abbey once publicly listed members of its community who were credibly accused of sexual misconduct with vulnerable adults and well as those monks who were credibly accused of sexual abuse of minors. For example, Abbot John Eidenschink, Brother Steven Lilly and Brother Isaac Connolly were listed (in 2002 and 2011) as having been credibly accused of sexual misconduct. Brother Isaac Connolly is still at the abbey. His file wasn’t produced on January 19, 2016.

Q 2: What restrictions have been placed on Brother Isaac Connolly?

Q 3: Is Brother Isaac Connolly allowed in the Prep School, the locker room and/or any dorm rooms on campus?

Background: In the past four years, Father Tom Andert, Father Timothy Backous, Father Mel Taylor and Father Dan Ward have each been accused of sexual abuse and/or sexual misconduct. According to statements from the abbey, all four of these monks have been subject to an investigation, Taylor and Ward in 2012, Backous in 2014, and Andert in 2015.

Q 4: Were these monks investigated for sexual abuse of minors or sexual misconduct (of any kind)?

Q 5: Was the purpose of the four investigations to determine whether any civil liability existed or whether “sexual misconduct in any form” had occurred?

Q 6: What were the results of each investigation?

Q 7: What, if any, restrictions have been placed on these monks?

Q 8: Are Father Tom Andert, Father Timothy Backous, Father Mel Taylor and Father Dan Ward allowed in the Prep School, the Palestra locker room and/or any dorm rooms on campus?

Background: Ben Spanier's suicide in 2014 brought attention to his relationship with Father Tom Andert. Father Andert claims he didn't sexually abuse Ben. Father Andert did admit, in December of 2015, that while Ben was a minor and a student at the Prep School in the mid-1990s, he bought Ben alcohol. Father Andert also admitted to "caressing Ben's forehead" in a hotel room they shared.

Q 9: Where is the line?

Q 10: How does Saint John's Abbey deal with monks who admit to sexual misconduct with a minor but claim that no "abuse" occurred?

Q 11: Doesn't the community deserve to know about these individuals?

Background: Has any member of the Saint John's monastic community been removed from their position at Saint John's Prep School after caught viewing child pornography?

Q 12: Who investigated these claims?

Q 13: What restrictions were placed on the monk?

Q 14: Are they still in effect?

Background: A condition of the settlement of a lawsuit against Father Allen Tarlton in April of 2015 required that the abbey release the personnel files of all monks who sexually abused minors. In an email regarding this "Employee Open Forum with Abbot John Klassen" and on its web site, the abbey claims that it "voluntarily" released the monk files on January 19, 2016.

Q 15: Would the abbey have released the monk files if their release hadn't been a condition of the settlement with Mr. Bramledge?

Background: In the Abbey's rush to release the monks' files to the new "Minnesota Transparency Initiative" web site (www.MNTransparencyInitiative.com), the abbey failed to protect the privacy of several victims. In one instance, a victim's last name, her brother's name along with her medical and other confidential records were made public by Saint John's Abbey. The abbey made no apology but said, "If any identifiers have been overlooked, it is unintentional and we welcome the reporting of any specific pages that raise concerns or call for further review."

Q 16: Who redacted the files and how did they fail so miserably?

Q 17: In removing the entirety of the file (Hohmann #6) containing documents related to the woman (above) the abbey also removed personal notes and important correspondence to and from Abbot John Klassen. Does the abbey intend to repost a redacted version of this file?

Background: When Saint John's Abbey released the monk files on January 19, 2016, the files were posted to a new web site called the "Minnesota Transparency Initiative" web site (www.MNTransparencyInitiative.com).

Q 18: Will the web site someday include files from other Minnesota institutions?

Q 19: Why weren't the monk files posted on the abbey's web site?

Q 20: How long will the web site be available to the public?

Background: In December of 2013, Father Angelo Zankl, a Saint John's Abbey monk who served in nearby St. Joseph, was included on the Diocese of Duluth's list of priests "credibly accused of sexually abusing children."

Q 21: Why wasn't Father Angelo Zankl's file released on January 19, 2016?

Background: In 2006, the Archdiocese of New York reported to Saint John's Abbey that Father Agustin Cerezo Murillo had been credibly accused of sexual abuse while serving in the Bronx in the late 1960's. His victim, a female, would have been 12 years old at the time of the abuse. The Archdiocese reported that there were "other episodes."

Q 22: Why wasn't Father Agustin Cerezo Murillo's file released on January 19, 2016?

Background: In 2006, Father Tom Gillespie's personnel file contained a handwritten, personal accounting of many of his victims. Father Gillespie wrote:

1977 14 year old boy; teaching at St. Bernards
1978 Masturbated the 14 year old
1978 13 year old boy - hands in pants, rubbed buttocks
197? One year relationship with 15 year old
1987 10 year old, hands down pants while wrestling

Gillespie also wrote: "I pray for those I have injured through my addiction" and "I feel that I am making amends to them by living a good life and sticking to my new way of life. Some of them might not even be aware that I abused them."

This information is missing from the files that were released on January 19, 2016, making it appear that Father Gillespie has just one victim.

Q 23: What happened to this page from Father Gillespie's file?

Q 24: What steps has Saint John's Abbey taken to ensure that all of Father Gillespie's victims have their experiences validated?

Background: In May of 2002, Abbot John Klassen took credit for taking a “dramatic step” when he claimed to be proactive in releasing the names of 15 monks, ahead of an October settlement with almost a dozen survivors. Klassen said, “we need more transparency” to “end the culture of secrecy” and “rebuild trust” and “promote healing.”

The January 19, 2016 production of monk files shows that in July of 2003, Abbot John Klassen wrote to Notger Wolf, OSB in Rome regarding Father Francisco Schulte:

“However, there are two other allegations in his file that are serious. Francisco had an inappropriate sexual relationship with a teenage boy in North Carolina back in the 1980s. This has never become public and has never become a lawsuit. However, it could do both at any time, given the charged climate in the United States. Francisco also had several inappropriate sexual relationships with teenage boys when he was a member of San Antonio Abad monastery in Puerto Rico. It is doubtful that these will ever become public knowledge but one never knows. “

In November of 2004, however, Abbot John Klassen reported to the External Review Board that there was “nothing” in Francisco Schulte’s file regarding sexual abuse.

Q 25: In concealing this information from the public and the External Review Board, did Abbot Klassen fail in his pledge to be “more transparent” and “rebuild trust” and “promote healing” for the Saint John’s community?

Q 26: When did St. John’s Abbey first learn of allegations against Father Schulte?

Since 2004, at least two former Prep School students settled complaints against Father Schulte.

Q 27: What type of outreach, from the first time the abbey learned of abuse until today, has been made specifically to Father Francisco Schulte’s victims at the Prep School, his victims in North Carolina and his victims in Puerto Rico?

Background: In 2002, a complaint was settled regarding sexual abuse of a minor by Terry DeSutter, a lay employee at Saint John’s Prep School in the 1980s. Other lay personnel (Roger Julkowski and Steve Pavkovich, among others) and visiting monks (Fr. Anthony Smithwick, Fr. Bede Parry, Fr. Paul GoPaul and Fr. Michael Brunovsky, for example) have also been credibly accused of sexual abuse and/or misconduct. The files for eighteen monks were released on January 19, 2016 contain the records of no lay personnel.

Q 28: What resources are available to members of the Saint John’s community who want to learn the identities of all personnel credibly accused of sexual abuse and/or misconduct?

Background: Yes, much of the “sexual abuse” occurred decades ago. This oft-repeated statement minimizes the damage done, not only to those who were “abused,” but also to those who were the victims of sexual misconduct. There are still too many unanswered questions.

Q 29: Moving forward, who will lead the effort for transparency and full disclosure?