

CONNECTICUT

The rise and fall of Rev. Daniel McSheffery, the 'sickest, sociopathic monster ever to wear a Roman Catholic collar in Connecticut'



By DAVE ALTIMARI
HARTFORD COURANT | FEB 01, 2019





The Rev. Daniel F. McSheffery of St. Augustine's Church receives fire badge from City Manager Freedman in 1964, following his appointment as Catholic fire chaplain. At right is Fire Chief Thomas F. Lee. (Maurice Murray / Hartford Courant)

A grainy photograph from 1964 shows a collar-wearing Rev. Daniel McSheffery receiving his badge from Hartford's city manager and fire chief – the young priest towering over the city officials appointing him fire chaplain.

It was the beginning of the ascendancy of Hartford-born McSheffery: over the next eight years he became head administrator of the local Catholic school and the archdiocese's first-ever pastor-associate. In time, he grew so close to city and state officials that in 1972 the city declared a "Daniel McSheffery Day." More than 600 people turned out for a dinner honoring him at the Valle's steakhouse where the keynote speaker was state Attorney General Robert Killian.

But by 2005, McSheffery was sitting at a table in a nondescript Florida office, his eyes avoiding a video camera fixed on him. During that lawsuit deposition, he was confronted with a long list of individuals who accused the church's former rising star of sexually assaulting them when they were children.

[The Hartford Archdiocese has released names of priests accused of sexual abuse. Here's who they are and where they served. »](#)

He was asked whether he had assaulted each accuser. Over 35 minutes, McSheffery declined to answer 56 times, citing his Fifth Amendment rights against answering even basic questions like where he was born. When attorney Joel Faxon asked him pointed questions about accusations of raping young boys in church rectories and school offices, McSheffery avoided eye contact, removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes and shrunk his 6-foot-4 body deeper into his chair.

Last week the Archdiocese of Hartford released a list of priests who had been "credibly accused" of molesting children and revealed it had paid \$50.6 million to settle lawsuits. It said there was one priest who had 20 claims settled against him for nearly \$11 million.

While the archdiocese did not identify that priest, The Courant has determined through court records and interviews with attorneys that it is McSheffery. The 20 claims making him the second-most sued in Connecticut history, just shy of the 21 claims made against former priest Raymond Pcolka from the Bridgeport Diocese.

When the lawsuits began piling up, the church removed McSheffery from ministry and he moved to Florida in 2002. Neither the Vatican nor the archdiocese, which declined to comment on McSheffery, took more drastic action against the priest. He was not laicized, which would have removed his status as a member of the clergy, or sentenced to a life of "prayer and

penance.” The distinction means the church continued paying McSheffery a stipend and health benefits.

McSheffery died in Florida in 2014, but he left a devastating legacy.

“He was probably the most cunning, deceitful, sickest, sociopathic monster ever to wear a Roman Catholic collar in Connecticut,” New Haven attorney Thomas McNamara said.

He was probably the most cunning, deceitful,
sickest, sociopathic monster ever to wear a Roman
Catholic collar in Connecticut.

— NEW HAVEN ATTORNEY THOMAS MCNAMARA

Share quote & link



Father McSheffery Day

McSheffery was born in Hartford and as a teenager he survived one of the worst fires in U.S. history – the infamous **Hartford circus fire** of 1944 – where 167 people died and more than 700 were injured.

The then-14-year-old McSheffery was with a friend in the top row of the grandstand when the fire broke out. McSheffery and his friend escaped by leaping out of the grandstand and running out of the burning tent. He hurt himself slightly when he jumped.

He graduated from the Immaculate Conception School before going to seminary school. McSheffery was ordained a priest in 1956 and sent to Branford for his first assignment. But it would be less than eight years before the prodigal son returned to Hartford and St. Augustine’s Church in 1963 as associate pastor.

Before long McSheffery was named director of the St. Augustine School, a position he held for several years. In some of the lawsuits filed years later, students alleged that McSheffery molested them in the school. The lawsuits alleged that he sometimes called the boys out of class and to his office where he would assault him.

[From the archives: Claiming sex abuse, ex-students sue priest »](#)

In the community, McSheffery was seen as a rising star who had the ear of everyone from the police chief to then Mayor George Athanson. Some privately called him “Roger” because he bore a resemblance to Roger Moore, who was playing James Bond at the time.

In October 1972 he was named the first pastor-associate in archdiocese history by Bishop John Whealon. The designation allowed him to assume decision-making duties at St. Augustine’s in the absence of The Rev. Patrick J. Speer but that didn’t stop city officials from making a big deal of it.

Within weeks of that new appointment Hartford Police Chief Thomas J. Vaughan organized a testimonial for McSheffery. More than 600 people attended the dinner on Nov. 16, 1972.

The guest list was a who’s who of the Hartford political power circle – Athanson, Vaughan, Chief Circuit Court Judge John Daly and Killian. Gov. Meskill couldn’t attend but sent a letter of congratulations. In his keynote address Killian referred to the testimonial as “an outpouring of respect and affection for Father McSheffery.”

McSheffery had told city officials he didn’t want money from the dinner guests so instead they gave McSheffery, a long-time Red Sox fan, membership in the BoSox Club that entitled him to meet players at private dinners in Boston and attend games and spring training for free.

“McSheffery fit right in with the Irish and Greeks who were the political powers back then,” said attorney Hubert Santos. He would later file some of the first lawsuits against McSheffery representing adults who had been molested as children at St. Augustine’s.

Heaven

The archdiocese has never revealed when it got its first complaint against McSheffery. One of the accusers who sued him said he was molested by McSheffery at St. Augustine’s Church in the early 1970s. The accuser said the molestation occurred when he was in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

“Everybody loved Father McSheffery, he was the big statuesque person,” the accuser, who filed under John Doe, said in a recent interview. “He would get close to your family and your parents would end up believing him and not you because they didn’t think such a priest would do such things.”

“This was a man who would come into your house and sit down and eat dinner with your family while at the same time at the church he put you on this wood bench and hang you over the rail over the staircase so you’d be preoccupied with being afraid of falling over and then he’d fondle you.”

Attorneys who later filed lawsuits against McSheffery said that was a common response in the 1970s when many of the alleged abuses took place.

It was in the early 1970s that McSheffery purchased a cottage in Old Saybrook that he called Heaven. He owned the property until 2006 when the Archdiocese of Hartford purchased it for \$525,000 as part of a \$22 million settlement the diocese made with 43 plaintiffs that had sued them. The diocese forced McSheffery to give up the property because at least three of his victims had filed liens on the cottage and wouldn’t agree to a settlement unless the church took the property away from the priest.

[From the archive: Abuse victims benefit from sale of retired priest's cottage »](#)

The diocese flipped the cottage months later, selling it for \$550,000 to a Guilford attorney. The diocese said at the time the funds were used to pay part of that \$22 million settlement.

The four-room cottage sits on Long Island Sound, its back porch less than 20 yards from the waves lapping at the shoreline. For many, it would seem an idyllic place to visit, but for many of McSheffery's victims it was a house of horrors — a place they alleged in lawsuits he took them sometimes, plied them with liquor and then molested them.

“John Doe” said McSheffery invited a group of boys to the cottage often and he said although he was never molested there, he said there were stories of McSheffery giving boys alcohol and then abusing them. Doe said his parents were invited to the cottage several times.

McSheffery moved to the shoreline in 1974 when he was appointed pastor of St. George's Church in Guilford, and according to one lawsuit later settled by the archdiocese he started molesting altar boys almost immediately. In a 2007 lawsuit Michael Doe alleged that he was an 11-year-old altar boy in 1974 when McSheffery abused him until finally one time the boy ran out of the sacristy, a room used to prepare for Mass, never to return.

The first lawsuit where the victim put his name on it was filed by Peter Sinclair, who was an altar boy at St. George's when he alleged McSheffery abused him in 1978 when he was 11. In the lawsuit, Sinclair outlined a terrible cycle of abuse: McSheffery would tell him, ‘God had great plans for him,’ then the priest would get him alone in various rooms inside the church and abuse him.

In 1986 McSheffery was transferred for the final time to St. Augustine's Church in North Branford, where he made news as the first co-minister with a woman, Elaine Blondin Kriedel, who had a master's degree from the Yale Divinity School. She was the first lay woman appointed by the diocese.

McSheffery stayed there until 2002 when the first lawsuit was filed against him.

Kind of creepy

While the diocese has never said when it became aware of potential issues with one of its celebrated priests, the diocese publicly announced McSheffery was under investigation in May of 2002 when it removed him as pastor at St. Augustine's. The diocese told parishioners in a statement read at several Masses that allegations had been made against him. As was often the case with these cases, parishioners quickly came to McSheffery's defense.

"We don't have any idea if the allegations are true or not," Deacon John L. Hart told The Courant in 2002. "Whatever happened it was a long time ago before he came to St. Augustine. Some of us are shocked at the allegation; some are heartbroken. He is the holiest, most dedicated priest I've ever met."

Within a month of his removal the first lawsuit was filed against McSheffery by Santos on behalf of two men who alleged they were abused while attending the St. Augustine School in Hartford in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

One of the first victims said he decided to file a lawsuit after McSheffery showed up at his mother's funeral and told him it was all just a misunderstanding.

The two boys, who didn't know each other, told similar stories of abuse in various rooms of the church and school including the church altar and his

office at the Catholic school where he would call them out of class and make them sit on his lap. By the end of 2002 five more lawsuits had been filed naming McSheffery as the abuser. By then he had gone to Florida where he would live the rest of his life. The church kept paying him a stipend although he was barred from celebrating Mass or hearing confession and he could no longer wear the priest's collar.

It was while McSheffery was living in Delray Beach, Fla., that the deposition was taken by Faxon. His attorney, Hugh Keefe, sat by McSheffery's side at times interjecting to scold Faxon about his questions, particularly one about whether McSheffery had ever abused a boy with another priest.

The deposition starts with McSheffery answering 11 simple questions – from if he had a middle name to if he understood what “under oath” meant, to his height, which was 6-4. The last question he answered was his birthday – Aug. 21, 1930.



This is a video conference deposition of Father Daniel F. McSheffery taken on Nov. 11, 2005 as part of a series of lawsuits filed by attorney Joel Faxon starting in 2002.

He then proceeded to plead the Fifth Amendment to every question Faxon asked after that for 30 minutes. In a monotone voice he recited the same line

56 times - "on advice of counsel I respectfully decline to answer, pursuant to my rights under the United States and Connecticut Constitutions and Statutes."

As the questions got more graphic and Faxon describes an alleged sex act where McSheffery bent the boy over a couch in the rectory, the priest noticeably shifts in his seat, looks away from the camera, and removes his glasses and puts his hands to his face.

"I just remember how creepy the deposition was," Faxon said. "That case settled within three or four months of that deposition. For years the church opposed discovery on cases involving McSheffery and aggressively tried to interview victims' families and friends until they ultimately realized how bad he was for them."

In December 2005 the diocese announced the \$22 million settlement for 43 claims, seven of which were cases against McSheffery, according to court records. Faxon settled one of his cases for \$1.6 million, the largest settlement given out by the diocese. All of the claims against McSheffery dating to his St. Augustine days in Hartford were also settled.

Keefe declined to comment for this story, he said, out of respect for McSheffery's surviving family.

But he has routinely been critical of the archdiocese for settling the claims without ever consulting the priest or their private attorneys. Keefe has represented several accused priests pro bono over the years.

"Father McSheffery has never admitted anything," Keefe told The Courant in 2006. "Not one single court anywhere has ever found him guilty of anything. We were always prepared to go to trial but the church decided to settle all of the cases."

The massive settlement wasn't the end of the diocese's problems with McSheffery. After that at least four more lawsuits were filed against him between 2007-2010 and all were settled by the diocese, according to court records. A 2010 lawsuit filed by Faxon on behalf of Anthony Cessario alleged McSheffery abused Cessario in the rectory of the St. Augustine's Church when he was 13 in 1974.

"Given everything we now know about him this guy was a child predator from the very beginning," Faxon said. "They (the diocese) just kept shifting him around and ultimately 'retired' him to Florida."

Despite his death, the legal battles involving McSheffery aren't over.

There is still one pending lawsuit filed in 2017 where a former altar boy at St. George's Church alleges that McSheffery abused him more than 250 times starting in 1977 when the boy was 9 years old and continued until he was 14.

McNamara is trying to prove that the church fraudulently concealed the fact it knew McSheffery was a child abuser, intentionally putting children in harm's way. The lawsuit charges that the church had two secret files containing allegations of sexual abuse against McSheffery, known as "379 file" and "489 file," that were accessible only to Whealon and a few others.

The archdiocese has acknowledged in legal filings that there were separate personnel files on McSheffery, but it has denied allegations that it deliberately concealed them from parishioners, such the altar boy now suing them. They have asked the court to dismiss the lawsuit because it is beyond the statute of limitations.

McNamara said McSheffery acted as the accuser's counselor, adviser and even his tutor, helping him with homework and gaining his confidence before abusing him.

“Parishioners hung on his every word and he (McSheffery) used his charisma to inflict lifelong harm on the most defenseless,” McNamara said. “When McSheffery was accused he said he was in shock. Sure, McSheffery was in shock, not because of the allegations themselves, but because he believed his dual-life performance would work in perpetuity, never realizing that doe-eyed altar boys eventually become angry young men.”

Dave Altimari can be reached at daltimari@courant.com.



Dave Altimari



Dave Altimari is a reporter on the Courant’s investigative desk. He has reported on stories that have been named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, won a George Polk Award as part of a team that exposed corruption in the administration of former Gov. John G. Rowland and a National Headliner Award for coverage of the Hartford Distributors shooting.