

Collateral Damage

By Brian McGrory
Boston Globe
June 15, 2011

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2011/06/15/an_innocent_priest_dies_of_a_broken_heart/

The first time the Rev. Charles Murphy was cleared of accusations that he improperly touched a minor, a girl 25 years earlier, everyone who ever met him said they had never doubted his innocence.

It was 2006 and priests were all over the news for every awful reason, most of them deservedly so. But Father Murphy swore his innocence, the archdiocese ruled the allegations lacked substance, and the woman dropped her suit on the eve of trial.

When Murphy triumphantly returned to the pulpit of his sun-splashed church in South Weymouth, the applause could be heard across the South Shore. Father Charlie, as he was known, was back — back cracking cornball jokes from the altar, back as a fanatical hockey fan, back as the mad plow driver clearing the parking lot at the hint of snow. He was also back ministering in prisons and helping the deaf, a man of the cloth to his core.

"He was just the same guy as before the accusation, a bubbly guy, fun, a little bit of a jokester, but a diligent priest," said Joe Corcoran, the developer who befriended Murphy decades earlier at St. Agatha in Milton.

Amid so much joy, it would have been impossible to imagine the turn that Murphy's life would eventually take.

That turn came in April 2010, when lawyer Mitchell Garabedian, who had lodged the first unfounded complaint, brought another. This one involved a man, not a woman. It went back 40 years rather than 25. It centered on accusations of fondling at the old Paragon Park in Hull and on a ski trip up north.

When the charges hit, Murphy canceled a long-planned party celebrating his 50th anniversary as a priest. He cleaned out his room in the church rectory and went to live with his brother. Two accusations in four years, he knew, did not look good.

But it didn't matter to the prominent friends and everyday parishioners who refused to give up their faith. They hired a lawyer, who in turn brought in a private investigator, who discovered that the alleged victim was mired in financial problems, had a long list of liens placed against him, and faced massive credibility issues even within his own family.

It took nearly six months — about five months longer than it should have — before an archdiocesan review board cleared Murphy of the allegations in September and Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley restored him as a senior priest. But this time, there was no triumphant return to the pulpit. In fact, when Murphy reappeared at St. Francis Xavier in South Weymouth to say Mass, he couldn't summon the strength to deliver a sermon.

"He would say to me, 'I just can't preach. I just don't have it in me,'" said Jack Pender, his longtime confidant. "It was so frustrating for him."

His spirit was evaporating. His antidepressant medicine kept him up at night. He moved to Regina Cleri, a North End residence for retired priests, where he continued his tortured descent.

Garabedian is a talented lawyer who has done vital work on behalf of hundreds of victims of abusive priests, but in terms of Murphy, what he did is a disgrace. Garabedian told me this week his Milton client was "credible." He wasn't. He lashed out at what he described as a "kangaroo court," the respected, independent archdiocesan panel that cleared Murphy. He didn't utter the only words worth hearing: I made a mistake.

They brought Murphy to a hospice in Haverhill a couple of weeks ago after doctors determined there was nothing left to be done. There was no cancer, no apparent physical disease, just a broken 77-year-old heart that refused to mend.

And that's where he died Saturday evening, a wisp of the man he once was. Garabedian lost his compass on this case, and thousands of people all over Massachusetts lost a truly wonderful priest.

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