

Man Testifies That As a 14-Year-Old, He Tried to Warn about Abusive Priest

By Kay Luna
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In 1960, when Ed Thomas was about 14 years old, he needed help dealing with his priest's inappropriate advances. He went to another priest in a neighboring Davenport parish, who happened to be Rev. James Janssen, who also is now accused of sexual abuse.

Thomas, 58, of Des Moines, testified Tuesday in Clinton County District Court that he met the Rev. Francis Bass in about 1957 and knew him about three years, during which he experienced several incidents of inappropriate behavior with the priest, but never was sexually abused.

He said the priest often wrestled with the boys in such a way that made Thomas uncomfortable, and one time coaxed a group of them to swim without their swimming trunks.

A trip to Chicago to stay overnight with Bass' aunt and uncle was the last time Thomas spent any time with the priest, who he claims called him to his bedroom and made him tie a "purity string" around his waist to "prevent me from sexual disorders or misconduct," he said.

Thomas said the priest then told him to confess his sins, focusing a long time with talk about sex, and then said he needed to sleep with him in his bed. That's when he claims Bass rolled over and attempted to touch his private parts, but Thomas — a wrestler in school — was able to duck under the priest's arm and escape, he testified.

"He told me, 'You better not scandalize me,' " Thomas said. "I remember those words."

After the trip, Thomas said he told his parents and anyone else who would listen. They told him to stay away from Bass, but the experience still haunted him.

Thomas reported the abuse in 1960 to Janssen, who Thomas testified told him the abuse attempt didn't happen and to stop talking about it.

He since abandoned the church, but continued reporting the incident to the diocese in 1974, in 1992 and again in 2001 or 2002. Nothing ever happened, Thomas said.

"This has haunted me for years, not for what he did to me, but for what he's doing to others," Thomas said. "I really wanted to stop him from hurting other kids."

A church document entered into the court record Tuesday details Thomas' call to the diocese in 1992, reviewing his timeline of calls to the diocese about the matter.

The plaintiffs' attorney Craig Levien said if Thomas had not come forward to make his name public, that document would not have been allowed in court, under the diocese's request to keep the names of victims confidential.