

### A priest who refused to look the other way

By Lee Roberts

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[http://www.journaltimes.com/articles/2005/02/13/local/iq\\_3379090.txt](http://www.journaltimes.com/articles/2005/02/13/local/iq_3379090.txt)

Amid what is described as a disturbing account of the events that took place during the cover-up of a priest's sexual crimes is a ray of light provided by a member of Racine's clergy, according to Peter Isely, Midwest director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests.

That light comes in the form of words spoken by the Rev. Paul Esser, of St. Paul the Apostle Church, 6400 Spring St., back in the 1970s, in regard to the sexual abuse case of the late Rev. Siegfried Widera.

Widera was a Wisconsin priest who was convicted of sexual misconduct with a teenage boy in Wisconsin in 1973 and charged with 42 counts of child molestation in Wisconsin and California when he died in May 2003 after leaping from a hotel balcony in Mexico.

When the archdiocese was considering transferring Widera to a parish in California following his conviction, Esser, who was serving on the Milwaukee Archdiocese's Priests Personnel Board at the time, spoke out in objection to the transfer.

Esser's comments appear to be the only objection noted during a meeting of the Priest's Personnel Board that took place in 1976, according to recently published documents from the archive of the Archdiocese, Isely said. And he and others feel Esser should be honored for his actions in trying to stop the transfer of the pedophile priest.

Members of SNAP will be outside St. Paul the Apostle Church this morning, following the 8:30 a.m. Mass, handing out leaflets urging parishioners to ask Archbishop Dolan to honor Esser for his bravery.

"Father Esser's comments show his concern for children and his courage. He wanted children to be safe from Father Widera and he was brave enough to say so," said Mary Guentner, a Milwaukee representative of SNAP.

SNAP would like people to help spread the word about what they feel are Father Esser's exemplary actions by calling Dolan at (414) 769-3300 and urging him to hold a public event honoring Esser. The organization would like to have a voice in planning that event, and hopes it will encourage other clergy and lay people to follow Esser's example by calling police, prosecutors, therapists and self-help groups when they suspect child abuse has taken place or is taking place.

"If those who show bravery are recognized, perhaps more adults - church employees, clerics, even parents - will find the courage to report suspected sex crimes in the future," Guentner said.

Esser, who first heard of SNAP's proposal to honor him when called by Saturday night by The Journal Times, said he would like to be able to review the 29-year-old documents before commenting further on the Widera case. He confirmed that he was on the Priests Personnel Board at the time. While he doesn't recall the exact conversation from the documented meeting, he certainly would have opposed the transfer of anyone with a record of sexual abuse to another parish.

"I have always tried to stand up for what is right," Esser said.

Esser's 1976 comments were made public as the result of a lawsuit, filed against the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee, by a man who says he was abused by Widera in the 1970s after the priest was transferred to a new parish without any warning of his past.

The lawsuit said the archdiocese transferred Widera from Port Washington to the St. Andrew parish in Delavan in 1973 without warning anyone of his conviction of sexual misconduct earlier that year. The

archdiocese later transferred Widera to California after he finished his three-year probation for the offense.

"It appears Father Esser tried to stop that transfer," said Isely, himself a sex-abuse survivor. "And it is very important to us that when someone within the senior management of the church takes this kind of stand, he is recognized."

"We would also like to encourage people to thank Father Esser in person and give him the credit he deserves," Guentner said. "He is one of the few bright spots in a terribly sad and painful crisis that, sadly, still looms over our church."

Founded in 1989, SNAP is the oldest and largest organization of survivors of sexual abuse by religious authority figures, with more than 5,000 members in 53 chapters. For more information about the organization, including the documents with Father Esser's comments, go to: <http://www.snapnetwork.org>

SNAP's Wisconsin branch can be reached by phone at (414) 429-7259.