



Response to Star Tribune article – 24 November 2015

by Abbot John Klassen, OSB

Following the press conference at attorney Jeff Anderson's office on November 24, 2015, Abbot John Klassen submitted the following opinion article to the Star Tribune in Minneapolis in order to clarify a number of misleading or inaccurate statements made during the press conference, and to shed light on the steps Saint John's Abbey has taken to ensure a safe and healthy environment for all students, staff, and guests on our campus. The Star Tribune rejected the article for publication. We put it forth on our own initiative, therefore, in order that the public may have access to information Mr. Anderson and the news media may fail to understand or share.

In the more than 150 years since the founding of Saint John's Abbey, nearly a thousand monks have devoted their lives to compassionate service, dedicating their talents to pursuits ranging from teaching to pastoral ministry to the preservation of culture in hostile areas of today's war-torn Middle East.

Since 2000, I have had the privilege of serving as abbot of Saint John's. A sad but vital part of my role has been to hold accountable monks who committed abuse against minors and to assure that future misconduct is prevented. Meeting with survivors and hearing their stories has been a good thing for all concerned. We in the monastic community grieve the pain and suffering of those who have been harmed, whose lives have been diminished by the pain they suffered.

In some instances, however, facts about these wrongdoings have given way to misleading exaggeration. A case in point is the recent press conference regarding the release of the files of five monks. These are not "secret files," as the law firm suggested at its press conference, but personal letters, medical records, legal documents, and other papers that document every aspect of these monks' lives. State and Federal Law actually restrict the release of educational and medical records, but these and the files still to be released were given voluntarily by the Abbey and the monks in question in the hope that disclosure would benefit survivors and further transparency. Instead, the information was presented in a sensationalized manner, painting an unfair and distorted picture of the Abbey.

Here are the facts: First, and most importantly, no incident of sexual abuse of a minor by a monk of Saint John's has occurred in more than two decades. Statements surrounding the release of the files cleverly cited recent dates of unrelated events, giving the impression that abuse is an ongoing occurrence at the Abbey. It is not. I say this not to diminish past incidents or to evade accountability. Rather, I want to emphasize that since the allegations of abuse first came to light, Saint John's Abbey has taken specific and effective actions to halt and prevent abuse. We have created a safe environment, one that has stood the test of time.

Second, in one case a monk disregarded his vow of celibate chastity and had consensual sex with adults and paid prostitutes on foreign trips. His actions came to light in the course of a therapeutic assessment twenty years after he had been removed from any work involving students. The documents show that the Abbey imposed increasing restrictions on him as past actions came to light. For the past several years this monk has lived away from Saint John's in a secure facility.

Still, the press conference portrayed this monk as a current threat to students at Saint John's. That approach left the impression that most or all his transgressions were abusive, involved minors, and that the Abbey covered up his behavior. None of that is true.

Third, the press conference included an allegation that the Abbey paid "hush money" as part of a deal with a monk to leave the monastery. Incredibly, the media made no effort to confirm this absurd claim, reporting it as fact. It is fiction. Because monks do not receive a salary or accrue benefits while they are members of the monastery, monks who leave the order are routinely provided some funds in lieu of retirement and health care benefits to help them during the time of transition. The payment wasn't "hush money," but a normal and equitable practice.

The facts support a very different portrait of Saint John's than the false one painted by the law firm:

- We have implemented a rigorous process to address and investigate allegations of abuse, retaining independent investigators to examine claims and make reports to an external board for review. In addition, Saint John's has cooperated fully with investigations and processes of law enforcement.
- Those monks who have offended live under restrictive safety plans. Their actions are limited and they are supervised.
- Saint John's has enhanced the screening of men seeking to enter the monastery. Thorough assessments are part of a rigorous process of identifying appropriate candidates. Today, Saint John's Abbey is a community of monks, including many young men, who live lives of service and leadership, creating a future for the monastery as bright as it ever has been.

It is essential that we do all we can to listen and help survivors heal, to hold accountable those who have abused minors and to be proactive in preventing new incidents. Our efforts have created a safe environment at Saint John's. That is a truthful statement that stands up to scrutiny.

(Abbot John Klassen, OSB, became a Benedictine monk of Saint John's Abbey in 1972 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1977. He was elected the 10th abbot of Saint John's in 2000.)