

But for more than a year, O'Connell refused to tell parishioners at St. Aloysius why the priest had been pulled, an omission that advocates for victims of clergy sex abuse call a flagrant violation of the church's pledge of transparency.

Moreover, the former pastor, the Rev. Kevin Keelan, chastised parishioners for asking questions about Riedlinger's removal, saying in the church bulletin that "blabbing" was a sin and that they were not entitled to more information.

O'Connell informed parishioners of the complaints in a statement only last weekend, a day after The Star-Ledger questioned the diocese about Riedlinger and the decision to withhold information about the allegations.

Timothy Schmalz, 23, stands before the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. Schmalz, originally from Howell, was an altar server at the shrine when he met the Rev. Matthew Riedlinger, who has since been removed from ministry in the Diocese of Trenton.

Barbara L. Salisbury/For The Star-Ledger

Even then, the statement makes no mention of the fact that Riedlinger believed he was corresponding with a 16-year-old boy during sexually explicit conversations.

"Father Riedlinger has been the subject of two complaints to the diocese over the past few years regarding his participation in inappropriate cell phone text communication over a period of some years with adults," according to the statement, which was read aloud at weekend Masses. "There was no sexual contact, assault or abuse referenced in the complaints."

The statement called Riedlinger's behavior "deeply troubling" and said it is "in no way to be tolerated in the life and ministry of a priest."

O'Connell declined to be interviewed for this story. The full statement can be found [here \(https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/798853-diocese-statement-to-st-aloyisus-parish-about.html\)](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/798853-diocese-statement-to-st-aloyisus-parish-about.html).

Riedlinger, a 30-year-old Ohio native, could not be reached by phone and did not respond to a request for comment sent to his personal e-mail address. In recent months, he has been living at the Villa Vianney retirement home for priests in Lawrenceville and tending to the needs of retired Bishop John M. Smith.

On Monday, he was granted a leave from the priesthood.

"Determining that media coverage will impede his efforts to recover from the problems that have unfolded, Father Riedlinger has decided to leave the diocese and has asked for an indefinite leave of absence from the priesthood," Rayanne Bennett, a spokeswoman for the diocese, said in a statement. "Bishop O'Connell has granted his request, effective immediately."

The Star-Ledger has obtained copies of the text messages. The phone number from which they originated — now disconnected — had been listed under Riedlinger's name in public records.

The diocese notified the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office of the second complaint against Riedlinger immediately after O'Connell received it.

Al Della Fave, a spokesman for that office, confirmed the referral and said investigators conducted a review but ultimately closed the case.

"There were jurisdictional issues that prevented us from bringing any criminal charges," Della Fave said, declining to elaborate.

A law enforcement official familiar with the probe said the case was compromised in part because Schmalz was not in New Jersey when the sting took place. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said authorities also were concerned because the operation had been conducted by a civilian. The authenticity of the texts was not in question, the official said.

The Rev. John Bambrick, who was named administrator of St. Aloysius in January of this year, after Riedlinger's removal, said he had heard rumors but did

The Rev. Matthew Riedlinger pushes retired Trenton Bishop John M. Smith in his wheelchair during a priest's funeral in Burlington County earlier this month. The diocese said Riedlinger was given special permission to wear clerical garb in public to help Smith. The photo was on the public website of The Monitor, a publication of the diocese.

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not know the extent of the complaints. Parishioners have told him Riedlinger was a well-liked priest, Bambrick said, calling the situation "sad for everyone involved."

"This is one of those tough situations," said Bambrick, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse and a member of the group Catholic Whistleblowers, formed earlier this year with the aim of holding the church and its bishops more accountable for abuse cases.

Though Riedlinger engaged in "highly destructive behavior," Bambrick said, there is no evidence the priest interacted inappropriately with a real minor, and he said he did not think Riedlinger was a danger because his ministry no longer involved children and because he was undergoing therapy.

"He committed a grievous sin, but what do we do with someone like that?" Bambrick asked. "Do we cast him away? Throw him into the abyss? Or do we give him something constructive to do?"

Schmalz, a Howell native now studying at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, carried out the sting with his college roommate, who said he, too, was besieged by Riedlinger's relentless sexual chatter.

The roommate spoke on the condition that The Star-Ledger use only his first name, Ryan, because his family has business dealings with a Catholic diocese. He said he feared the business would be harmed if his full name was disclosed.

All five men reached by the newspaper said they considered Riedlinger a risk.

"Wherever he is, he will be a danger to kids, especially boys," Schmalz said. "If he did this with us, if he thought he was doing this with a 16-year-old boy, who else did he do it with? This could ruin someone's life."

Stephen Webster, one of those interviewed, was an 18-year-old seminarian at Seton Hall University when he met Riedlinger at a retreat in Long Branch four years ago. Riedlinger, less than a year from ordination at the time, held himself out as a mentor, Webster said.

Matthew Riedlinger, formerly an assistant pastor at St. Aloysius Church in Jackson, speaks with students at an outdoor ceremony in 2011. The photo was on the public website of The Monitor, a publication of the Diocese of Trenton.

But their conversations soon morphed, Webster said. Riedlinger began with dirty jokes, he said, then took to discussing his struggles with pornography and masturbation.

"He would say, 'Pray for me,' but then he would text me when he was doing it, how he was doing it and when he was done," Webster said. "It was twisted."

Webster said he repeatedly told Riedlinger to stop but that the behavior persisted for a year, until the teen cut off contact altogether. Now 22, Webster said the experience contributed to his decision to abandon the seminary.

"As a priest, you represent the Catholic Church. You represent Christ. You hear confessions. And then you're sexting over Facebook," Webster said. "It's a disgrace."

Once, Schmalz and his roommate thought they might be priests, too.

Schmalz, a graduate of Christian Brothers Academy in the Lincroft section of Middletown, and Ryan, now a student at Catholic University's Columbus School of Law, were regular altar servers at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The church, the largest cathedral in North America, lies on property donated by the university.

The men said they met Riedlinger, a Catholic University graduate who was approaching ordination, through the shrine's rector, Msgr. Walter Rossi.

Rossi was good friends with Riedlinger and recommended they seek him out as a mentor, Schmalz said.

But the young friendship soon turned odd, they said. Riedlinger began peppering them with questions on Facebook about pornography, masturbation and homosexuality.

"The next day he would say he was drunk and that it would never happen again," Schmalz said. "He would always close by saying, 'Once I become a priest, I'll forgive all your sins. Whatever you do is okay.'"

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Despite their protestations, the behavior continued even after Riedlinger was ordained in June 2010 and assigned to St. Aloysius in Jackson, the two men said. It was a bizarre phone call in the spring of 2011 that pushed Ryan over the edge, he said.

He was studying for finals in a cafeteria with his girlfriend when Riedlinger called from Rome, where he said he was vacationing with Rossi.

"He started asking me questions about my girlfriend, whether I had sex with her or oral sex or anal sex and things like that," Ryan said. "I told him it was really inappropriate and hung up."

The two students had concerns beyond their own discomfort, saying Riedlinger told them he was teaching sex education to middle school-age children at the St. Aloysius parish school.

"He would say how physically mature they were for their ages and how some even had facial hair," Ryan said. "It raised alarm bells."

After asking advice from a professor at Catholic University, the two wrote a synopsis of their experience and forwarded it, along with transcripts of Facebook chats, to Bishop O'Connell in Trenton around October 2011, they said.

In its statement last weekend, the diocese said Riedlinger was assigned to outpatient counseling after that first complaint. Schmalz and Ryan were told through an intermediary — the Catholic University professor — that Riedlinger also was given a stern lecture. Both men said they considered the response insufficient but decided against pushing it further.

Then in the spring of 2012, Schmalz said, he was chatting with a group of people visiting the shrine from the Diocese of Trenton when a woman mentioned Riedlinger. Her 18-year-old son, a seminarian, had become very close with the priest, she said.

"She was thinking it was a good thing, but it got me really concerned," Schmalz said. "I feared he would be walking into what Ryan and I had walked into before."

Schmalz and Ryan had both seen the television series "To Catch a Predator," in which a news reporter posed as a minor in online chat rooms. When an adult approached in a sexual manner, a meeting was set up and filmed, typically resulting in arrests.

The two friends said they weren't looking to have Riedlinger charged. They said they wanted to prove to the diocese the priest had a problem and should not be in ministry.

Their vehicle: Josh McDonald, a fictitious 16-year-old boy who had just moved to Newton, in Sussex County, and who was interested in the priesthood. Schmalz and Ryan created a Facebook profile with a picture they found on the internet. To draw Riedlinger in, they "liked" religious Facebook pages.

They friended Riedlinger in early July of last year. Within 45 minutes, he accepted and asked who "Josh" was. Schmalz wrote that Josh had originally lived in Brick and attended one of his Masses in Jackson. Most of the conversations that followed were in text messages.

The Google Voice account Schmalz and Ryan created allowed them to send and receive texts on a computer, at the same time saving each text in the format of a chat, with dates and time stamps.

The first two weeks, Riedlinger was cautious.

"Something's not right," the priest wrote at 10:24 p.m. July 15, 2012. "U friend me on Facebook randomly, they (sic) you start texting me, You reveal many secrets to me, you speak to me more as a 'bro' than a priest, and u refuse to actually talk but insist on only texting. ... For obvious reasons, priests must be very careful."

Schmalz said he ultimately complied with Riedlinger's insistence on a phone call.

"I quite literally held my nose and spoke in the highest voice possible," Schmalz said. "He said, 'Hey, you're real. So nice to hear your voice.' And then we continued our conversation online."

The messages show Riedlinger needed little or no invitation to steer the conversation to sex. He spoke of past encounters and the size of his penis, encouraged Josh to enjoy sex with his boyfriend and repeatedly told him how alike they were in their thirst for pornography and sex.

"I love u dude. Ur a sick (expletive) like me," Riedlinger wrote.

Riedlinger occasionally sent a message saying he was near Newton, suggesting a get-together. On those occasions, Schmalz declined to respond and made up an excuse later.

The conversations culminated in a graphic, six-hour texting session in the early morning hours of Aug. 3, 2012. The next day, Riedlinger asked to do it again.

Schmalz and his roommate cut off contact two days later and forwarded the transcript and other materials to O'Connell.

On Aug. 7, the bishop **wrote back** (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/798847-letter-from-trenton-bishop-david-m-oconnell-on.html>), thanking them for the documents and saying he had personally escorted Riedlinger to a hospital for in-patient treatment. The diocese, citing federal health law, declined to say where Riedlinger was treated or how long he remained in the facility.

Schmalz and Ryan said they continued to press the diocese to notify parishioners at St. Aloysius, saying they worried Riedlinger might have spoken to other teens the way he spoke to them.

Two months ago, the diocese's victim assistance coordinator, Maureen Fitzsimmons, flatly told Ryan in an e-mail that O'Connell would not do so, according to a copy of the correspondence.

"I hear your request for the bishop to share information with the parish; however, as I mentioned to you in October, it was bishop's decision not to do so," Fitzsimmons wrote. "That has not changed."

Bennett, the diocese's spokeswoman, said the decision was reversed after The Star-Ledger's inquiry "to prepare the community for the media coverage and to answer any questions parishioners might have as a result."

She added that the case does not fall under the auspices of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People — a landmark document approved by the nation's bishops in 2002 — because it did not involve a juvenile.

Mark Crawford, the New Jersey director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, a national advocacy group, argued it was "reckless" for O'Connell not to have taken more aggressive action against Riedlinger after the first complaint in 2011. Crawford also said the bishop had a "moral obligation" to notify the parish earlier.

"The bishops promised to be open and transparent about anything of this nature," he said. "This is an example of them not being open and honest at all."

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