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## April 17, 2015 in City

# Weitensteiner, longtime director of Morning Star Boys Ranch, reinstated as priest

Catholic Diocese returns Rev. Joseph Weitensteiner into active ministry after last sex abuse claims denied

John Stucke The Spokesman-Review

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Dan Pelle photo

**The Rev. Joseph Weitensteiner, the former director of the Morning Star Boys Ranch, has been reinstated into the active Catholic ministry.**

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The Rev. Joseph Weitensteiner, the former director of the Morning Star Boys' Ranch, has been reinstated as an active priest after the last sex abuse claims against him were rejected by a retired federal judge hired to rule on the credibility of the cases.

Referred to as Father Joe by a Catholic community that admired his decades of work with troubled boys, Weitensteiner, now 82, has never wavered in his insistence that he didn't molest boys entrusted to his care at the ranch southeast of Spokane.

But faced with a growing number of people who said they were sexually or physically abused by Weitensteiner or his staff at the boys' ranch, former Spokane Bishop William Skylstad removed him from ministry in 2006.

The Morning Star allegations were made in 19 lawsuits that paralleled the bankruptcy of the Spokane Catholic Diocese. The Diocese case included more than two dozen clergy, 180 potential victims and ultimately cost more than \$50 million to resolve.

While the Diocese paid out claims in bankruptcy rather than fight the allegations at trial, Weitensteiner and Morningstar employed attorney Jim King to fight the sex abuse claims in court. Only one of the lawsuits went to trial, and Weitensteiner won. Some claims against Morning Star were settled out of court.

One of King's legal assistants said the attorney was traveling and unavailable for comment.

Other charges against Weitensteiner were investigated or reviewed as part of a broader Diocese process by retired federal judge Michael Hogan. The review was done outside the courts, and in secret.

"One by one each of those claims were denied or declared non-credible" by Hogan, according to the Diocese.

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Last month Hogan rejected the last four claims of sex abuse brought against Weitensteiner by former Morning Star clients.

A review of Hogan’s rulings by two Diocese advisory groups – the Diocesan Review Board, group of mostly lay people who are not employed by the church, and a panel of priests called the College of Consultors — led to the recommendation that Weitensteiner be reinstated.

An organization advocating for clergy sex abuse victims criticized the reinstatement.

“No details were given about the unusual and untested process (Did the panel interview the accuser? How many other people did the panel talk with?),” David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, wrote in an email. “SNAP wants diocesan officials to be more forthcoming about the procedure he used in this case and others.”

The Rev. Michael Savelesky, who is leading the diocese until new Bishop Thomas Daly is installed May 20, announced the decision this week.

“There is no question that these past few years have burdened Father Weitensteiner with much anguish and personal suffering,” Savelesky wrote in a statement. “Father Weitensteiner has given amazing priestly witness to quiet suffering under duress.

“An individual’s good name, once besmirched, is hard to restore completely; the diocese stands at the ready to do what it can to that end for Father Weitensteiner,” the statement said.

Morning Star came under scrutiny in 2005 when The Spokesman-Review began reporting on sex abuse accusations made by former residents. Many said they were beaten, molested and raped by Weitensteiner, now-deceased Morning Star counselor Doyle Gillum and admitted pedophile priest Patrick O’Donnell, who would visit boys at the ranch.

Weitensteiner has acknowledged that he used corporal punishment to keep order at the boys’ ranch. He has said those practices were within the accepted norms of the times – the 1960s, ’70s and early ’80s.

Upon his retirement from the ranch in 2006, Weitensteiner issued a statement offering “forgiveness and reconciliation to those who are making these false accusations.”

He was hired as Morning Star’s first counselor in 1957 and soon after was asked to run the ranch in its formative years. He left in 1959 to study for the priesthood. By 1966 he was back in Spokane to run Morning Star for 40 years.

Savelesky said the diocese continues to take seriously allegations of clergy sex abuse.

“It would be unfortunate if this exoneration of Father Weitensteiner were seen as a generic sign of disrespect for any victim of abuse,” he wrote in the statement. “Hundreds of hours of careful listening have been devoted to these concerns. We share a common commitment to justice.”

- Yes
- No
- No opinion

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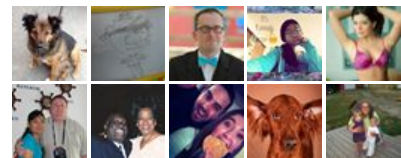
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