

MURDER CASE STUDY

VICTIM



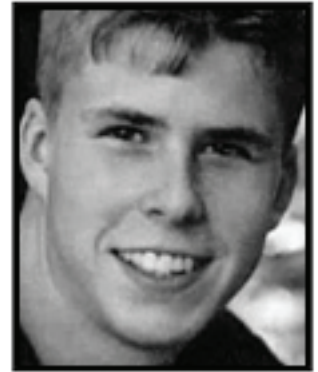
DANIEL O'CONNELL

MURDERER



REV. RYAN ERICKSON

VICTIM



JAMES ELLISON

DATE OF MURDER: FEBRUARY 5, 2008



**CROSSLAND
FOUNDATION**

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A Shadowed Past¹

Ryan Gene Erickson was born in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin on January 17, 1973. His father, Dennis, a Vietnam veteran, was a prison guard and an alcoholic, in part because of horrendous experiences he had had while he was a soldier in Vietnam.²

When he had a psychological evaluation as part of his seminary training, Ryan Erickson admitted that at the age of six he had had sexual contact with his 4-year-old male cousin.³

After attending St. Matthew's parish school and a public school, in 1988 Erickson went to high school in Campbellsport. He was active in wrestling, football, track, and cross country. A teammate on the wrestling team later said that Erickson tried to assault him sexually in 1991 when the boy was fifteen years old. They drank, watched a pornographic movie, and fell asleep. The boy woke to find Erickson groping his genitals.⁴ This may have been the same incident that Erickson admitted to seminary officials when he said that when he was seventeen years old, he had sexual contact with a boy who was fourteen.⁵

The young Ryan Erickson was polite and deferential to adults,⁶ but also drank and had violent outbursts. He later said that one of the few things he felt guilt about was being a bully.⁷ A schoolmate remembered that Erickson would "spin around and claim to be 'Wonderwoman,'" and would "intimidate" younger students.⁸ Erickson was cruel to animals: he filled gopher holes with water and then waited with a golf club to smash the gophers as they tried to escape. He

¹ After the John Doe Hearing on October 3, 2005 (State of Wisconsin, Circuit Court of St. Croix County: State of Wisconsin vs. John Doe, Case #03-JD-05; henceforth *John Doe*), the Hudson police released all investigative files about the murder except those that could not legally be released. The documents that could not be released were medical evaluations, letters of complaint from parishioners to Bishop Fliss (because they could have been used to take a personnel action), and the pornographic pictures found on Erickson's computer. The files used in this case study were obtained from the Hudson Police Department and the transcript of testimony at the John Doe hearing was obtained from the Clerk of Court.

² Ryan Gene Erickson, "My Autobiographical Sketch for Clinical Pastoral Education," obtained by police from hard drive of Erickson's computer.

³ Letter from [signature page missing] to Rev. Kevin M. Gordon, Vocation Director, Diocese of Superior, August 28, 1996.

⁴ Heron Marquez Estrada and Randy First, "Horrors Are Still Emerging Three Years After the Slayings," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 5, 2005. An anonymous caller who said he went to high school with Erickson told the Hudson Police that he was on the wrestling team with Erickson, and that Erickson had molested him on several occasions when the caller had visited Erickson's home (Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 23, 2004).

⁵ Letter from [signature page missing] to Rev. Kevin M. Gordon, Vocation Director, Diocese of Superior, August 28, 1996.

⁶ Howard Sinker, Richard Meryhew, Randy Furst, and Paul Levy, "'Father Ryan' Cloaked Himself in Many Faces," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, December 11, 2005.

⁷ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p. 42, ll. 31-32.

⁸ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 14, 2005. Because the names of informants have been redacted in many of these reports, I have given only the date of the report.

burned the remains of the animals or put them on stakes, and he made a small electric chair to fry a gopher. He threw cats into the air and shot at them.⁹

After his father was transferred from the area, Ryan, then seventeen years old, lived with a priest, Rev. Michael Moran, for about eighteen months so that he could finish high school in Campbellsport.¹⁰ During the time he stayed with Father Moran in Campbellsport, he formed “strong religious beliefs” to the point of being “opinionated” and if challenged he became “aggressive” to the point “of being angry.”¹¹ Erickson graduated in May of 1992.

When he was eighteen years old, Erickson was at the Eagle River campground in Wisconsin. A woman remembered him: “My son was 14 and all the kids ran around together. It was pretty obvious to me that he was gay. He talked constantly about becoming a priest, and I just assumed it was because he didn’t want to come out to his parents.... How do I know he was gay? His attitude toward girls, for one thing. He was a good-looking kid, and the girls were always flirting with him, but he wouldn’t have anything to do with them, which I can tell you is quite unusual for an 18-year-old boy.” Ryan also, according to this woman, drank heavily.¹²

Investigator Albert L. Thompson of the Vilas County, Wisconsin, District Attorney’s Office reported that a boy, who was about fourteen or fifteen years old at the time, met Erickson at the Eagle Lake Resort in the summer of 1992. The boy went to Erickson’s trailer around midnight; Erikson told him scary stories about the devil and massaged the naked boy to calm him. Erickson fondled the boy’s genitals and then offered to give the boy oral sex. The boy refused.¹³ The boy reported this incident to his mother, who went to the police. But by then the boy was depressed and undergoing therapy for emotional trauma. He had grave doubts about his sexual orientation and was thinking of enlisting in the Marines in order to prove his manliness. Therefore, Thompson concluded, the boy “may not be a reliable witness” and, without any other witnesses, this allegation would have to be considered “uncorroborated” and therefore “I do not feel that the burden of proof ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ can be met.”¹⁴ But Thompson said that he “was not totally convinced that Ryan is totally innocent of some impropriety” but because Ryan is in the seminary “that the benefit of any doubt should be given to him.”¹⁵

Before he entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary, which was on the campus of St. Mary’s University in Winona, Wisconsin, Erickson in July 1992 had a psychological evaluation

⁹ Heron Marquez Estrada and Randy First, “Horrors Are Still Emerging Three Years After the Slayings,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 5, 2005; Kevin Harter, “Priest Role Gave Erickson Cover: Hints of Violence Trailed Devout Man,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 16, 2005.

¹⁰ “Diocese Says Tests Showed Erickson Fit for Priesthood,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 7, 2005.

¹¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 14, 2005. Because the names of informants have been redacted in many of these reports, I have given only the date of the report. The source on this report indicated that there had been “rumors” that “there may have been some homosexual activity occurring” at the rectory.

¹² Bruce Rubenstein, “The Sins of the Father,” *City Pages*, October 5, 2005.

¹³ Vilas County District Attorney’s Office, Case CSO 94-2231, Investigator’s Report, March 14, 1994.

¹⁴ Vilas County District Attorney’s Office, Case CSO 94-2231, Investigator’s Report, May 10, 1994; Paul Levy, “Erickson Was Dogged by Sex Accusations,” *Star Tribune*, October 13, 2005.

¹⁵ Letter from Albert L. Thompson, Sensitive Crimes Investigator to Father Kevin Gordon, Archdiocese of Northern Wisconsin, July 13, 1994.

by Dr. Anthony Mullozzi¹⁶ that concluded that he was “problem free, appeared healthy, psychologically stable and would make an outstanding priest.”¹⁷ This was the same summer as the incident at Eagle Lake.

In 1994 the Superior diocese received the report about the Eagle Lake incident from the Vilas County District Attorney that “a teenage boy told police that Erickson fondled the teen’s genitals and asked to perform oral sex on him in 1992.” But the district attorney had decided not to file charges.¹⁸ Bishop Fliss acknowledged receipt of this letter.¹⁹ The investigator wrote in May 1994 that “the bishop has relieved Erickson of all responsibilities associated with young people and directed that he undergo another psychological examination, this time devoted entirely toward Erickson’s sexual orientation and persuasion.”²⁰ The diocese was concerned because of this allegation and “another unproved allegation within his extended family and a compromising situation with his classmate and close friend.”²¹ These later two incidents are not explained; the first may be the one that occurred between Erickson and a cousin when Erickson was six years old; the latter may be the incident in which a seminary student woke up and found Erickson sitting on his bed. Erickson received therapy from Dr. George Planavsky, who detected some problems because Erickson was the adult child of an alcoholic, but who indicated he had “no significant reservations regarding Ryan’s continuance as candidate for priestly study.”²²

Erickson was only provisionally admitted to St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, because the admissions committee was concerned about “allegations of some form of sexual misconduct.”²³ Erickson in an earlier evaluation had admitted to two incidents, one when he was six years old and one when he was seventeen. The admission committee consulted Dr. Mark Hansen, who had serious reservations about Erickson. Hansen “found Erickson’s grasp of the allegations unreflective.” Hansen thought that Hansen’s two sexual experiences could be classified as “sexual experimentation, a normal experience” and did not appear to be criminal especially since Erickson was only six years old when one incident occurred. But, Hansen noted, Erickson said “police investigated both events.” This puzzled Hansen: “If there was no criminal behavior, why was there an investigation?” Hansen also questioned Planavsky’s favorable comments, on the general ground that “it is inappropriate for a psychiatrist or psychologist who is in a therapeutic relationship...to be involved in an evaluative process.”²⁴

The seminary hired an evaluator, Dr. Jay McNamara, who concluded that Erickson’s behavior was within normal limits and Erickson did not appear to be “predatory or exploitative in his

¹⁶ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment.

¹⁷ “Diocese of Superior Statement on the Late Rev. Ryan Erickson,” *Winona Daily News*, October 8, 2005.

¹⁸ Paul Levy, “Erickson Was Dogged by Sex Accusations,” *Star Tribune*, October 13, 2005.

¹⁹ Steve Scot and Kevin Harter, “Sex Charges Go Back Years,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 5, 2005.

²⁰ Heron Marquez Estrada, “Horrors Are Still Emerging Three Years After the Slayings,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 5, 2005.

²¹ Letter from [page with signature missing, but on letterhead of Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary] to Rev. Phillip J. Rask, Rector, St. Paul Seminary, May 16, 1996.

²² Letter from Rev. Kevin M. Gordon to Rev. Ron Powers, Director of Admissions, St. Paul Seminary, August 1, 1996.

²³ Letter from [signature page missing] to Rev. Kevin Gordon, Vocations Director, August 28, 1996.

²⁴ Letter from [page with signature missing] to Rev. Kevin M. Gordon, Vocation Director, August 28, 1996. But Hansen later agreed that Erickson was a “good candidate” (Letter from Rev. Phillip J. Rask to Ryan Erickson, October 25, 1996).

overall orientation and he does not seem to be a high risk for acting in a sexually aggressive or manipulative manner in the future.” To McNamara it was clear that Erickson was “not a sexual predator.”²⁵

The rector of the St. Paul seminary, Rev. Phillip Rask, asked the Superior diocese about a sexual misconduct allegation about Erickson.²⁶ Rask was concerned about Erickson’s inability to control his impulses. One student complained that he woke up to find Erickson in his bed.²⁷ Erickson was also disciplined for an unspecified heresy and between his third and fourth year at this seminary suddenly became a conservative or traditionalist. He began wearing a cassock²⁸ to cover up, according to Rask, his impulses but Erickson was “unable to control his promiscuity.”²⁹ His fellow seminarians called him “the Monsignor” because of his views.³⁰

Because Erickson was handy with guns and was an excellent shot, Rask had him shoot the rabbits which were destroying the seminary garden.³¹

Erickson’s drinking problems did not escape notice at the seminary. During his semester in Israel, the seminary received repeated reports that Erickson was “out drinking every night.”³² After a trip to Israel, he was asked to undergo an assessment for alcoholism. In 1998 he told a fellow student, “I’m an alcoholic, but I can fool the testers.”³³ Erickson had promised seminary officials that he would not use alcohol and said he was attending an AA group.³⁴ On the return trip from Jerusalem, Erickson stopped in Rome and attended a private Mass with Pope John Paul II.³⁵

While he was at the seminary Erickson was an intern at St. Anne’s parish in Somerset, Wisconsin, and worked there one weekend a month. His supervisor there, Rev. James Brinkman, remembered Erickson as “happy-go-lucky” and “very friendly,” in fact, “your normal, everyday, good-hearted American seminarian.”³⁶ While on this stint at St. Anne’s, in 1999 Erickson met a visiting altar boy, Thomas Smith.³⁷

One seminary professor voted against ordaining Ryan. Quinn stated that “I have serious reservations about his strength of character, I see him as one who deflects responsibility for his

²⁵ Memo from Rev. Ronald J. Bowers, Admissions Committee Chair, to Rev. Phillip J. Rask, Rector, October 14, 1996.

²⁶ Steve Scot and Kevin Harter, “Sex Charges Go Back Years,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 5, 2005.

²⁷ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, February 21, 2005.

²⁸ Kevin Harter, “Priest’s Peers Expressed Concern,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 11, 2006.

²⁹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, February 21, 2005; “Interviews Show That Many Expressed Concerns,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, March 23, 2006.

³⁰ Bruce Rubenstein, “The Sins of the Father,” *City Pages*, October 5, 2005.

³¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, February 21, 2005.

³² Ryan Erickson, Third Year Review, Summary of Faculty Comments, April 12, 1999.

³³ Heron Marquez Estrada and Randy First, “Horrors Are Still Emerging Three Years After the Slayings,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, October 5, 2005.

³⁴ Fr. Phillip J. Rask, Ryan Erickson’s Deacon Review, October 20, 1999.

³⁵ Letter from Ryan Erickson to [redacted], February 18, 1999.

³⁶ “Former Hudson Priest Says Clergy Feels Betrayed by Erickson,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 27, 2005.

³⁷ *John Doe*, p. 40, ll. 3-8. This case study uses pseudonyms for victims.

actions, loose with his tongue, and somewhat manipulative.”³⁸ Fourteen faculty members voted to ordain Erickson.

The Zealot

Bishop Raphael M. Fliss of Superior, Wisconsin ordained Erickson a priest on June 4, 2000, at St. Anne’s Church in Somerset. Erickson was the only priest ordained for the diocese that year, the Jubilee Year of the birth of Christ. At his ordination Erickson said that he saw “his ministry as a chance to pass on the values he received as a child”³⁹ and was shortly thereafter stationed at St. Patrick’s Church in Hudson, Wisconsin, a town of 6,000 about twenty miles from St. Paul, Minnesota.

The Rev. Peter Szleszinski was the pastor there. Erickson developed a reputation as being “almost...pre-Vatican II.” One priest described him as “traditionalist, conservative, head strong, and very rigid.”⁴⁰ Others thought Erickson manifested “right wing nuttiness.”⁴¹ This conservatism took the form of a pastiche of popular, pietistic American Catholicism from the 1950s, based on an emotional, Baroque spirituality of rolled eyes, tears, diatribes against non-Catholics, and a heavy emphasis on sexual sin. He wore a cassock and said Mass in Latin; he told people that contraception, abortion, and masturbation were sins.

Erickson denounced “lukewarm” Catholics.⁴² Children to whom he had spoken would go home and challenge their parents; not all parents were happy with what Erickson was telling the children.⁴³ Some parishioners at this parish liked Erickson very much. Helen Kasper described him as “the ultimate priest” and noticed that “he was very strict in what he wanted done. He was very faithful to his religion.”⁴⁴ Erickson associated with conservative families with children. They called him “Pope” and accompanied him on a pilgrimage to Rome. Parents let him stay overnight and wrestle with their boys. One family gave Erickson a 9 mm. semiautomatic pistol.⁴⁵ They knew that Erickson liked guns. He wore a gun under his cassock and even wore it under his vestments at Mass.⁴⁶

Erickson, who did not like being around small children and usually avoided the parish school, nonetheless associated with a group of boys. He took them fishing; “the boys would throw the fish on the bank of the lake and Erickson would shoot the fish and make them explode.” He also liked watching R rated violent movies with the boys.⁴⁷ A parishioner saw Erickson at a rural retreat center where Erickson was taking some boys swimming and rubbing their backs with

³⁸ Faculty Canonical Vote for Students Petitioning Ordination to the Priesthood.

³⁹ Julie A. Miller, “Jubilee Celebrations Mark Top Local Church News,” *Catholic Herald*, December 28, 2000.

⁴⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 30, 2004.

⁴¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, February 15, 2005.

⁴² Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 3, 2005.

⁴³ Randy Furst, “The Funeral Home Murders: Police Asked Priest Hard Questions in Hudson’s Slayings,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, January 13, 2005.

⁴⁴ “Parishioners Say Priest Inspired Flock,” *Daily Globe*, December 21, 2002, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Kevin Harter, “Priest Role Gave Erickson Cover,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 16, 2005.

⁴⁶ Edward J. Defort, “Case Closed,” *American Funeral Director*, December 2005, p. 56.

⁴⁷ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 14, 2004.

mud, which she thought very odd. She also saw Erickson exit the rectory with a young man, who joined in a more than friendly embrace. She thought this was a “G-A-Y moment.”⁴⁸

Erickson became a leader at St. Patrick’s in Christ Renews His Parish, a movement that brings adults together for discussion about the Catholic faith. The adults who participated in that group tended to have children in the parish school. Erickson was in charge of sex education, and lectured the children about the gravity of sexual sins, about abortion (which is not actually a sexual sin) and most of all about masturbation. In an e-mail to the parish, he wrote: “Even Sunday Mass is not safe from the immodest dress of some devils. They come to read, give out Holy Communion, etc....looking like an advertisement. Their immodest dress says to all present: *I’m easy. Please go home and masturbate to my beautiful body.* The sad thing is that some do.”⁴⁹ Erickson kept pushing the children to come to confession to him. A deacon who worked with him thought that Erickson stressed confession because he wanted “to herd the weak and vulnerable, particularly women and their children.”⁵⁰

Some conservative parents liked this emphasis on the straight and narrow. Others were put off both by Erickson’s emphasis on sexual sins and by his bizarre behavior. He would break into weeping during sermons or hold up the Host for minutes at the elevation of the Mass and cry and cry. Jean Richie, a parishioner, was at first stunned and then put off. She confronted him in the sacristy and told the sobbing Erickson, “Aren’t you overdoing it a bit? Can’t you quit crying?” He stopped immediately.⁵¹

Erickson liked being in control. He found a monsignor’s outfit and started wearing it.⁵² When the pastor Szleszinski became mysteriously ill and was admitted to a hospital, Erickson said that Szleszinski was sick “because he has an evil demon in him” and expressed the hope that if Szleszinski died, he would be made pastor.⁵³ In Erickson’s copy of *Our Sunday Visitor’s Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine*, he had underlined “Pride,” “an inordinate desire for status, for praise and reputation among others.”⁵⁴

Those parishioners who did not like Erickson complained to Bishop Fliss about his antics. Erickson e-mailed his supporters about the “continuing nonsense of gossip, rumors, hate, wrath, and pure evil” from those who were “a festering sore on the Mystical Body of Christ.” Fliss apparently thought that Erickson suffered from immature zeal, and advised Erickson to “Lower the bar.” Erickson lamented that “they think I am too strong and forceful when I preach. They want me to be a little less passionate about the Divine Master.”⁵⁵ Erickson had taken a loaded

⁴⁸ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 28, 2005.

⁴⁹ Email of Ryan Erickson of November 25, 2003; Bruce Rubenstein, “The Sins of the Father,” *City Pages*, October 5, 2005.

⁵⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, February 10, 2005.

⁵¹ Howard Sinker, Richard Meryhew, Randy Furst, and Paul Levy, “‘Father Ryan’ Cloaked Himself in Many Faces,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, December 11, 2005.

⁵² Bruce Rubenstein, “The Sins of the Father,” *City Pages*, October 5, 2005.

⁵³ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Voluntary Statement of Michael Martell Swanby, February 10, 2004.

⁵⁴ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 16, 2004.

⁵⁵ Matt C. Abbott, “Late Priest’s E-mails Show Dissension, Sorrow,” *Renew America*, January 9, 2005.

gun to this meeting with Fliss.⁵⁶ Fliss sent Erickson for yet another psychological evaluation to Dr. Nicholas Griffith.⁵⁷

Erickson sent a stream of e-mails to his supporters. He exalted the priesthood:

The Priest is above all a suffering servant, because he is in persona Christi captivus [this should be capitis – Erickson’s Latin was very weak] alter Christus.⁵⁸

and the Mass:

As a priest it is my greatest privilege to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I cannot think of another activity, prayer or duty that I perform in a day which surpasses the joy and happiness I receive when I offer this Spotless Sacrifice to God in atonement for my sins and the sins of the whole world.⁵⁹

He came down hard on all he regards as heretics:

...the Mystical Body of Christ has cancer! That cancer is every disobedient, disrespectful, heretical jackass who thinks they have a right to change the Church’s ancient doctrines because they have some new insight that far exceeds the Church’s understanding! These idiots have robbed the Church of her credibility, and in the process have left the Church’s immune system weak and vulnerable.

There is only one solution to the Church’s problem: **cutout the cancer!** Excommunicate those who are notoriously disobedient, who continue to teach heresy, who allow these things to continue under their watch and jurisdiction.⁶⁰

Erickson lamented those who had left the Church:

I just found out that my Godson, his mother, and his sister are now attending the Presbyterian Church. I cannot tell you how much that pains my priestly heart!

because

*Outside the Church there is no Salvation.*⁶¹

He liked sentimental poetry:

Lovely lady dressed in blue-

⁵⁶ Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case J-02 0477, Interview with Camilla “Cammy” J. Westerdahl, April 6, 2005.

⁵⁷ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment.

⁵⁸ Email of Ryan Erickson of October 16, 2003; all e-mails obtained by police from hard drive of Erickson’s computer.

⁵⁹ Email of Ryan Erickson of November 6, 2003.

⁶⁰ Email of Ryan Erickson of April 15, 2004.

⁶¹ Email of Ryan Erickson of December 2, 2003.

Teach me how to pray;
 God was just your little Boy,
 Tell me what to say!
 Did you lift Him up, sometimes,
 Gently on your knee?
 Did you sing to Him the way,
 Mother does to me?⁶² etc.

Erickson wrote to his supporters of the blood of St. Januarius, the blessing of throats in St. Blaise day, the Guardian Angels, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, the rosary, the scapular, the Seven Sorrows. He liberally quotes saints - St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Josemaría Escrivá, St. Francis de Sales - and writers such as Fulton Sheen and Dietrich von Hildebrand.

He gave spiritual direction, especially to teenage boys. After Erickson's death police discovered in his office sheets entitled "Spiritual Direction, Who Am I?" which had been filled out by a sixteen-year-old boy. Asked to list three things that make you nervous, the boy wrote "Sinful People, Heresy, Apostasy." When asked to list "good events," he listed "your class, confession" and "bad events," "Stop going to mass; stop going to confession, masturbation."⁶³

Erickson was a racist. An employee of St Patrick's told the police that Erickson "didn't like colored people."⁶⁴ After his death police found these lyrics in Erickson's handwriting (the spelling and underlining is in the original) in purple ink on a white paper bag:

Fighting white boys from the West,
 God nows there America's best.
 Shooting niggers till they fall,
 Makes me proud of nowing them all.

Fighting white boys from the South,
 Hanging niggers by there mouths.
 Pulling tighter as they sway,
 Just to make sure they don't get away.

Fighting white boys from the North,
 Pegging off niggers from there porch,
 Seeing there faces with all that fear,
 Whiel you want to get another beer.

Fighting white boys from the East,
 Killing those nigger beasts
 Shooting high and shooting low.
 Just for a trophy, when they get back home.⁶⁵

⁶² Email of Ryan Erickson of December 8, 2001.

⁶³ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 13, 2005.

⁶⁴ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, April 6, 2005.

⁶⁵ Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case J-02 0477, December 16, 2004.

The Abuse

When Erickson was stationed at St. Patrick's Church in Hudson, he visited St. Agnes High School and ran into Thomas Smith, the teenage boy he had met at St. Anne's in Somerset, Wisconsin. He invited Smith to visit him in Hudson. Later Smith got into some minor trouble with the law and was supposed to be doing community service under Erickson's supervision. Erickson gave Smith, who was then about sixteen years old, beer and 180-proof Jagermeister. He played drinking games with the boy, and the boy would lose and have to take a shot. Smith estimated he drank a twelve-pack on Friday nights and the equivalent in hard liquor on Saturday nights. Over two years Smith drank around 1200 beers and 1200 shots. At times he vomited and Erickson told him "all the college kids are going to laugh at you. You need to hold your liquor better." Smith undressed and took a shower while Erickson watched. Smith sometimes passed out on the bed and knew nothing until the next morning.⁶⁶

While they were drinking, Smith and Erickson would lie on a bed as Smith confessed to masturbation, which Erickson regarded as a mortal sin although he said he did it. Erickson told Smith that "he was in orgys [sic] and would always get drunk."⁶⁷

They both wore boxers, and somehow Erickson's hand would end up on Smith's genitals. Erickson tried to get him to intertwine legs. Smith could remember about ten of these sexual incidents, which he thought never went as far as anal or oral intercourse, but he was frequently so drunk that he would wake up in the morning not knowing what had happened the night before. Edward Jones, a friend of Smith, noticed the change and big mood swings in Smith. Smith later became an alcoholic and found it troubling to be physically close to his girlfriend.⁶⁸ Erickson did not like Smith having a girlfriend; he tried to persuade Smith that he "would make a good priest."⁶⁹

Jones was at some of these drinking sessions at the rectory, starting when he was fourteen years old. By the time he was seventeen he had "figured out that Erickson was 'grooming' him for more than being a good Christian." Adam's parents did not know about the alcohol. Erickson explained to Adam that he "just wanted it to be their 'thing'"⁷⁰ Jones wondered why Erickson had so many guns around, including a Beretta in his bedroom dresser drawer.⁷¹ Jones also saw Erickson pointing a BB gun out of the rectory window and pretending to shoot people whom he disliked.⁷²

When Smith went to college he took a psychology class in which he heard a description of how abusers groom their victims; he realized that was what Erickson had done to him. In March 2003

⁶⁶ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, March 4, 2005.

⁶⁷ Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case J-02 0477, December 15, 2004.

⁶⁸ Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case J-02 0477, March 4, 2005. See also Kevin Harter, "Judge: Priest Was Funeral Home Killer," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 4, 2005.

⁶⁹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, March 4, 2005.

⁷⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 15, 2004.

⁷¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 15, 2004.

⁷² Ellen O'Brien also witnessed Erickson "demonstrate holding a long gun and shoot at parishioners whom he did not like as they exited St. Patrick's Church parking lot" (Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment).

Smith reported to the Bismarck, North Dakota, police that Erickson had given him alcohol.⁷³ They sent the report to the Hudson police on April 8, 2003, but since it seemingly concerned only giving alcohol to minors, it sat unnoticed in the Hudson police files for a year.⁷⁴

In a letter addressed to Father Ryan, a writer apologized for having “chickened out on the ‘AND’ part of what we were talking about.” The writer protested that “I make mistakes and mess things up but I will NOT commit a mortal sin. I will NOT break my marriage vows. I will never cross that line. Therefore, that means we can be spiritually intimate and know that it will never, ever be any more than that.”⁷⁵ From the context it is clear what Erickson had proposed to the writer.

The Murders

Dan O’Connell was born in 1962 and attended St. Patrick’s Elementary School in Hudson. He became an EMT. In 1988 he married Jennie McKnight and became the father of Kyle and Kaitlin. He became the director of the O’Connell Family Funeral Home in Hudson and active in the community: Rotary, YMCA, Boy Scouts, and Knights of Columbus. After the September 11 attacks in New York his family held a spaghetti dinner and raised \$25,000 for the New York fire, police, and ambulance services. He had an intern, twenty-two-year-old James Ellison, a student from the University of Wisconsin – River Falls, who started working with him in 2001.

On the night before the murder, Erickson and O’Connell had a “big argument,” according to Erickson.⁷⁶

On the morning of February 5, 2002, Dan O’Connell had a meeting about insurance in the town of Baldwin and left around 9:45 a.m., explaining that “I’ve got a guy I have to meet in Hudson.”⁷⁷ Mary Pagel, the school bus driver whose route included St. Patrick’s school, ran into Dan O’Connell at the Wal-Mart and had coffee with him. He asked her if she had ever seen Erickson touch a child in an inappropriate way. She responded that she hadn’t seen any such behavior. O’Connell then asked her if she had seen Erickson mostly with boys or girls. She responded that Erickson seemed to ignore the girls and concentrate on the boys. O’Connell told her that he had a meeting around noon to talk to Erickson. Pagel, who was trained in spotting sexual abuse, advised him to go to the police, but O’Connell said “that he could take care of himself.”⁷⁸ At about 11:15 a.m. Pagel saw Erickson leave the rectory, and he was wearing civilian clothes, instead of a cassock or black suit. He drove away in his four-door, light silver Buick Regal. Pagel mentioned the planned meeting to Erickson and O’Connell to the dispatcher, but assumed O’Connell’s death made the whole matter moot. She did not mention the meeting to

⁷³ “Case Closed; Erickson Blamed,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 6, 2005.

⁷⁴ Randy Furst, “Inside the Hudson Murder Case,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 9, 2005.

⁷⁵ Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case J-02 0477, December 16, 2004, Evidence item #19.

⁷⁶ Erickson told Michael M. Swanby this several months after the murder after Erickson had been drinking. Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case J-02 0477, January 29, 2004. Swanby passed a polygraph test and also testified to this under oath at the John Doe hearing.

⁷⁷ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, March 22, 2002.

⁷⁸ “Case Closed; Erickson Blamed,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 6, 2005. JD, pp. 23-27.

the police until after Erickson's death,⁷⁹ at which time she took and passed a polygraph test about her testimony.

Betty Caruso lived across the street from St. Patrick's rectory. She and her family were friendly with Erickson, and Smith was very concerned about Erickson's relationship with her children. Erickson often took naps at the Caruso house to escape phone calls and in fact slept in the house several nights a week. Betty Caruso later said that Erickson around 11:15 a. m. of the day of the murders had asked her if he could use her house for a nap that afternoon. She said she came home around 1:30 p.m. and found him asleep on the sofa. But Erickson never said anything to anyone about being at the Caruso house on the day of the murder.⁸⁰

Between 1:08 and 1:22 p.m., February 5, 2002, Erickson entered the funeral home. O'Connell was at his desk. Erickson shot him at point blank range once in the head with a 9mm semiautomatic pistol, killing him instantly. Erickson left the office; Ellison came into the room, saw O'Connell's body and walked toward it. Erickson returned and fired again but missed. Erickson then shot Ellison through the skull at point blank range. Ellison died instantly and collapsed over the chair, with a bullet casing underneath him. Head shots are effective but difficult, because the head is both a small and a moving target. It takes a practiced shooter who is familiar with his weapon to kill so efficiently.

Police had a report from Thomas Evenson that he saw a white male, wearing a light t-shirt (highly unusual wear for a February in Wisconsin), blue pants, and a baseball cap, in front of the funeral home at about 1:15 p.m. This man got into a white sedan.⁸¹ Evenson later said the person he saw could have been Ryan Erickson.⁸²

At 1:40 p.m. Marty Shanklin, the St. Croix County Medical Examiner, came by to sign a death certificate and discovered the bodies. He immediately left the building, fearing the murderer might still be there. He called the police, who came and searched the building, finding no one. They finished the search at 2:27 p.m. and only then began to notify people of the murder.

The secretary at St. Patrick's got a call at 2:00 p.m. to send a priest to the funeral home. She couldn't locate Erickson,⁸³ so Rev. James Dabruzzo was sent to the murder scene.⁸⁴ A reporter who had heard the sirens and who had raced to the funeral home spotted a baby-faced priest in a cassock there around 2:30 p.m. The priest did not stay long⁸⁵; neither Dabruzzo⁸⁶ nor the police remember seeing him there. About 2:30 p.m. Erickson paid an unexpected visit to the Carmelite Monastery a few blocks from the funeral home in Hudson; he had said Mass for them but had

⁷⁹ Kevin Harter, "Tip Turned Focus of Probe to Priest," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 16, 2005.

⁸⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 31, 2005.

⁸¹ Hudson Police Department, Case A-01 0477, Voluntary Statement of Thomas Wayne Evenson, February 6, 2002.

⁸² *John Doe*, p. 69, ll. 8-23.

⁸³ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, September 10, 2004.

⁸⁴ Eleven women accused Dabruzzo of sexual harassment; the diocese suspended him from the priesthood in 2005 (Kevin Harter, "Bishop Will Meet with Reeling Hudson Parish," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 11, 2006; Jon Echternacht, "Diocese Removes Hudson Priest for Alleged Inappropriate Behavior," *RiversTown.net*, June 10, 2005).

⁸⁵ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 6, 2005.

⁸⁶ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 4, 2005.

never previously visited them. He told the nuns that Dan and his assistant had been murdered. (He may somehow have heard something at the funeral home, but the police did not release this information publicly until later in the day.⁸⁷) He also told the nuns that he tried to enter the funeral home to anoint the bodies, but that he had been turned away.⁸⁸ Nor did he anoint the bodies later before they were embalmed.⁸⁹

At 3:00 p.m. Erickson was in his parish office. He gave no indication to his secretary that he knew anything about the murders.⁹⁰ He claimed that he went to visit the O'Connell family this time.⁹¹ But he did not go until later that night (see below). Several parishioners reported that Erickson's behavior at the 6:00 p.m. Mass that day was bizarre; he was agitated and started speaking of "cutting off the breasts of Agatha."⁹²

On the day of the murder a friend of the O'Connell's called St. Patrick's to ask that a priest visit Jennie O'Connell, the widow. Erickson showed up that night,⁹³ said a short prayer, and left immediately. He "showed no emotion and was not in the least bit sympathetic" according to the family friend.⁹⁴ He was the only priest ever to visit the widow after the murder. Erickson went to the O'Connell wake; the only one who noticed anything amiss was the police dog, who, when Erickson approached him "became very agitated."⁹⁵ On Saturday, February 9, 2002, Erickson concelebrated the funeral mass for Dan O'Connell at St. Patrick's Church.⁹⁶

In the May after the murders Erickson got rid of his late model car, the silver Buick Regal, in excellent shape, and bought a black Lincoln Continental, very like the 2000 black Grand Marquis in which he had ridden with Dan O'Connell when they went to funerals together. He mentioned that if he were "stopped by the police they would think that it was Tom O'Connell."⁹⁷ He also took up smoking cigars.

Sometime after the murders Erickson told Michael Swanby that Erickson had had an argument with O'Connell just before the murders, but now (alluding to O'Connell) "the devil or demon was gone."⁹⁸ In the months after the murders parishioners who came to church found him "howling and weeping about the sin of abortion."⁹⁹ The former school principal, Patricia Brandner, said that she often saw Erickson crying at the altar in the months after the murder.¹⁰⁰

⁸⁷ "Case Closed; Erickson Blamed," *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 6, 2005.

⁸⁸ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, January 6, 2005.

⁸⁹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, February 14, 2005.

⁹⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, September 10, 2004; "Case Closed; Erickson Blamed," *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 6, 2005.

⁹¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of November 11, 2004, p. 3, l. 14.

⁹² Kevin Harter, "Priest's Peers Expressed Concern," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 11, 2006; Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case J-02 0477, March 23, 2005.

⁹³ Heron Marquez Estrada and Randy First, "Horrors Are Still Emerging Three Years After the Slayings," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, October 5, 2005.

⁹⁴ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, March 10, 2005.

⁹⁵ *John Doe*, p. 30, ll. 20-21.

⁹⁶ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, September 10, 2004.

⁹⁷ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, May 4, 2005.

⁹⁸ Randy Furst, "Priest Likely Was Killer, Judge Finds," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 4, 2005.

⁹⁹ Bruce Rubenstein, "The Sins of the Father," *City Pages*, October 5, 2005.

¹⁰⁰ Kevin Harter, "Priest's Peers Expressed Concern," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 11, 2006.

The police were baffled. They suspected drug dealers, because someone claimed that formaldehyde is used to spike marijuana (it isn't). But nothing was missing from the funeral home. They questioned a small group that is opposed to embalming.¹⁰¹ But that lead went nowhere. A reward of \$100,000 did not produce any information. The police interviewed 1,800 people, including Ryan Erickson.

On September 16, 2003, Erickson was transferred to Our Lady of Sorrows in Ladysmith, Wisconsin, as assistant pastor. The pastor there, Rev. John Anderson, complained to Bishop Fliss about Erickson's drinking and asked that Erickson be transferred.¹⁰² After he had heard that Erickson had spent the weekend partying on Beer Can Island, a teenage hangout, Anderson reprimanded Erickson for such behavior, and Erickson replied that he wasn't a priest that weekend.¹⁰³ (Erickson when he was in the seminary had promised to stop drinking and he had been attending Alcoholics Anonymous.¹⁰⁴) Anderson noticed that Erickson frequently preached on suicide and how grievous a sin it was.

At Ladysmith Erickson continued his great weep. A parishioner remembered him:

Fr. Ryan cried sometimes during Mass. That's true. Sometimes he did. He is a passionate preacher and quite frankly, the first Mass that I attended with Fr. Ryan preaching, I cried also – during the consecration. I've never experienced such love and reverence for the Eucharist before. He also cried during my only confession with him. I only wish to have had the opportunity to experience the sacrament of reconciliation with him one more time.

Fr. Ryan was my priest when he was assigned to the OLS cluster in Ladysmith. I truly loved this man. His love for the Christ, the Church, Mary and the Eucharist was incredible. He "oozed" holiness and his holiness was infectious.

Nemesis

In January 2004 Jeffrey Knopps started working on the case and on April 9, 2004, interviewed Smith, the North Dakota student who had complained that Erickson had given him alcohol. The boy started hinting at sexual involvement with Erickson.¹⁰⁵ On April 24, 2004, the case was featured on "America's Most Wanted."

On August 10, 2004, Erickson was transferred to St. Mary of the Seven Dolours in Hurley in far northern Wisconsin. There he insisted on the signs of outward reverence: around town, and not just in church, he wore a cassock (under which he wore a gun¹⁰⁶) and a cape with gold frogs. He said Mass partly in Latin (to the disgust of the liberal nuns); he asked people to fold hands when

¹⁰¹ Robert Imrie, "Leader of Small Group Denies Having Role in Killings," *Indiana Gazette*, February 15, 2002.

¹⁰² Steve Scot and Kevin Harter, "Sex Charges Go Back Years," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 5, 2005.

¹⁰³ Kevin Harter, "Priest Role Gave Erickson Cover," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 16, 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Memo from Rev. Phillip J. Rask, October 20, 1997.

¹⁰⁵ Randy Furst, "Inside the Hudson Murder Case," *Star Tribune*, October 9, 2005; Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment.

¹⁰⁶ Bruce Rubenstein, "The Sins of the Father," *City Pages*, October 5, 2005.

they prayed and not to chew gum in Church and to go to Confession often. This young, intense, charismatic priest intrigued parishioners, and attendance increased 50% after he arrived at the parish.¹⁰⁷ He stressed the importance of confession: “It is important to go to confession. A priest should be the No. 1 person to go to confession himself... We are men and struggle with temptations like everyone else.”¹⁰⁸

Erickson was known for his humor, which not everyone liked. In the seminary he was counseled about using “prudence in the use of his humor and jokes.”¹⁰⁹ Some seminary faculty noticed that “his humor sometimes hides aggression or hostility – when his ‘joking around’ becomes mockery and thinly veiled sarcasm.”¹¹⁰ Many remembered his sermons as funny, and he could be sociable and entertaining at dinners. Erickson was a practical joker. In Hurley the church staff found out that Erickson was afraid of snakes. The planted a rubber snake in his office which gave him a start. “In retaliation, Erickson placed plastic dog poop on the floor, laid false mousetraps and hid in the closet so he could scare the church secretary when she went to hang up her coat.”¹¹¹

He also adopted a rescue dog and gave it the name of Beast; he beat the dog mercilessly, according to the deacon and to the youth minister at St. Mary’s Hurley.¹¹² When the dog chewed up a TV remote, Erickson said “I’ll invest in a 13-cent slug and put it between his eyes.” Erickson smoked cigars; the dog’s ears were scarred with burns.¹¹³

On November 11, 2004, detectives Jeffrey Knopps and Shawn Pettee traveled from Hudson to Hurley to interview Erickson about the sexual assaults that Smith had told them about. They told Erickson they wanted to talk to him because he had been a priest in Hudson at the time of the murders. Erickson suggested that the O’Connell family was involved in the mafia and the two men were killed by the mafia.¹¹⁴ The detectives asked how the two men were killed. Erickson replied

I think James was going through a door and out a door? And Dan was behind his desk. I think that’s what I, that’s what I, I mean, if I had to say what took place, I would say James was at the door and, and Dan was at the desk.¹¹⁵

The detective asked how many times they were shot. Erickson replied “I thought one time,”¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Levra, “Parish Holds Memorial for Erickson,” *Daily Globe*, January 18, 2005.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Levra, “Evidence in Murder Case Points to Priest,” *Ironwood Daily Globe*, March 31, 2005.

¹⁰⁹ Rev. Phillip J. Rask, Third Year Review for Ryan Erickson, April 27, 1999.

¹¹⁰ Ryan Erickson, Third Year Review, Summary of Faculty Comments, April 12, 1999.

¹¹¹ Kevin Harter and Alex Friedrich, “A Reputation in Limbo,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 30, 2005.

¹¹² Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 20, 2004. Anne Marie Batiste, the youth minister said that Erickson could be “friendly, mean, and compassionate,” but she saw him “beat the shit” out of Beast (Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment).

¹¹³ Kevin Harter, “Priest Role Gave Erickson Cover,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 16, 2005.

¹¹⁴ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of November 11, 2004, p. 24, l. 24. “Records: Priest Accused of Murder Suggested Mafia Was Involved,” *Ironwood Daily Globe*, October 6, 2005.

¹¹⁵ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of November 11, 2004, p. 26, ll. 10-12.

¹¹⁶ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of November 11, 2004, p. 26, l. 31.

Erickson knew that O'Connell's body was found behind his desk and that Ellison had been shot after coming through the door, and that each had been shot once, a scenario that would explain peculiarities of the crime scene. Erickson claimed to know this from the news, but that information had never been publicly disclosed.¹¹⁷ Police keep such information under tight wraps both to use to test false confessions and to determine who knows things only the perpetrator would know. At this moment the detectives had to keep from exchanging glances, because they both knew the significance of what they had just heard.¹¹⁸

Erikson chatted about hunting, and said he had mostly single shot shotguns, explaining "I like the single shot because...my grandfather used to say, if you can't hit it with one, you shouldn't be out there shooting."¹¹⁹ He also had two 9 mm. guns.¹²⁰ The detectives noticed the globe with bottles of liquor and glasses inside,¹²¹ objects that had played a role in the drinking games that preceded the sexual abuse of Smith.

After this interview Erickson told Faye Lindgren, the deacon's wife, that he was "not going to jail." His father and brother were prison guards and "he had heard stories about being in prison" and Erickson insisted that "I won't let it happen."¹²² He told Deacon Russell Lundgren about how the detectives questioned him about the murder. As they spoke Erickson became angrier and angrier. Erickson said, "I done it and I'm gonna get caught. Do you know what they do with young guys in prison, especially priests?"¹²³ Lundgren told church staff about this remark but did not tell police until after the suicide.¹²⁴

Erickson and the detectives agreed to meet at Sheriff's Office in Ladysmith on December 7, 2004. The detectives confronted Erikson about discrepancies in his remarks about the murders. The detective pointed out

In the course of this investigation never once has anybody from the Hudson Police Department ever mentioned where the bodies were, positions, etcetera. Nor in the course of this investigation through nineteen hundred some people has anybody ever brought up a speculation, a probability, a possibility or anything like that as far as where the bodies were. Nor has anybody told us how many times they were shot or where they were shot. If that hasn't been brought up in nineteen hundred and some interviews and of the course of five people in our department that knew exactly that and not even he knows where that was, why do you know that?¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ Randy Furst, "Priest Likely Was Killer, Judge Finds," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 4, 2005.

¹¹⁸ "Veteran Investigators Say Patience and Perseverance Paid Off in O'Connell Case," *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 20, 2005.

¹¹⁹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of November 11, 2004, p. 29, ll. 2-3.

¹²⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of November 11, 2004, p. 29, l.18.

¹²¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of November 11, 2004, p. 57, ll.12-38.

¹²² Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 20, 2004.

¹²³ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment; "Case Closed; Erickson Blamed," *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 6, 2005.

¹²⁴ Hurley Police Department, Statement of Russell J. Lundgren, January 11, 2005; Randy Furst, "Inside the Hudson Murder Case," *Star Tribune*, October 9, 2005.

¹²⁵ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p. 34, ll. 12-19.

All Erickson could say was “I don’t know why I know that.”¹²⁶

The detectives also confronted him with the accusation of sexual abuse. Erickson denied ever having touched anyone sexually¹²⁷ (contrary to his statements to his seminary), but he admitted that he had given alcohol to juveniles and had drunk with them,¹²⁸ and that he had lain down next to a teenage boy he was counseling about sex and told the boy it was all right to be sexually aroused.¹²⁹ Erickson told the detectives that he was afraid that if the bishop heard of this, he would be removed from the priesthood: “you don’t understand the predicament I’m in. The only thing I’ve loved above all thing [sic] else, that’s being a priest. It’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted. And, uh, one accusation, whether it’s proven or unproven, doesn’t matter, they should automatically remove you. You’re a disgrace.”¹³⁰

The detectives kept asking Erickson how the murderer would feel, if confession in fact took all the guilt away. Erickson replied that “the guilt always remains with you” and maybe “that is God’s way of saying don’t do it again.” Erickson explained that “you could be forgiven of your sins, but that doesn’t erase the consequences of those sins.”¹³¹ The only sins that Erickson would admit to were giving minors alcohol and being a bully in school. He said he had considered suicide when he was younger but denied thinking about it now. The detectives asked him if he would kill someone he was angry at if he could get away with it. Erickson replied:

I believe if I did something that heinous I would tell you because I didn’t think I could live with myself. I honestly don’t believe I could, I mean I would, you know I’ve thought about suicide before. You know if I did something that heinous, I tell you what, I think I’d be thinking about it now and I’d be ready to and...¹³²

but Erickson immediately denied he was thinking about suicide. The detectives were worried about him and offered to take him to a ward, but he said he didn’t need help. The detectives searched Erickson’s car and found a 9 mm handgun and clip in the trunk; he had driven to the meeting with it under the front seat. After this interview Erickson’s housekeeper for the first time found a handgun and loaded clip in Erickson’s dresser drawer.¹³³

¹²⁶ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p. 34, l. 21. Betty Caruso, a close friend of Erickson and who worked in City Hall above the police department, claimed she had told Erickson this fact, and that she had heard it from Sgt. Jensen (Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, September 1, 2005) but that probably Sgt. Jensen would not remember this conversation (Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, September 6, 2005). But Jensen denied ever having had a conversation with her about the crime scene (Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, September 6, 2005).

¹²⁷ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p.42, ll. 34-40; p. 55, l. 36 to p. 56, l. 4.

¹²⁸ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p.44, l. 20 to p. 45 l.4. Erickson claimed the boy was 18; the boy was not 18 and was still in high school. Kevin Harter, “Priest: ‘If I Did It...I’d Tell You,’” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 26, 2005.

¹²⁹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p. 47, l. 29 to p.48, l. 26.

¹³⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p. 105, ll. 36-39.

¹³¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p.83, ll. 15-23.

¹³² Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Interview of December 7, 2004, p. 111, ll. 30-34.

¹³³ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment.

Erickson at first agreed to a polygraph test on December 14, but on December 13 he refused to take the test on the advice of his attorney.¹³⁴ He began calling his friends in Hudson “asking for an alibi for Tuesday, February 5, 2002, between 1300-1500.”¹³⁵

On December 16, 2004, local police, including Hurley police chief Daniel Erspamer, who sang in the choir at Erickson’s church, confiscated Erickson’s computer on which they found Erickson’s last will and testament.¹³⁶ In it Erickson spoke of himself in the past tense. “I tried to make a difference.” They were concerned that Erickson might be suicidal. They, with Erickson’s consent, confiscated his guns, and gave them to Deacon Russell Lundgren. Erickson assured the police chief that he would not harm himself, and that he would see the police chief on Christmas Eve in the church choir. Rev. Philip Heslin, moderator of the curia of the Superior diocese, spoke with Erickson. Erickson was in “good spirits,” but was nervous about being questioned, and denied any part in the murders.¹³⁷

After the murders, Kathleen O’Connell, Dan’s sister, heard about the Vidocq Society, a voluntary association of law enforcement experts who assist police in solving crimes. The crimes are usually murders, and the Society takes on a case at the request of the family. The Vidocq society identified Erickson as a strong suspect.¹³⁸

The *Hudson Star-Observer* published comments from Detective Shawn Pettee that the case was close to being solved. Richard Walter, a forensic psychologist, a founder of the Vidocq Society, and a consultant for the television show “Medical Detective,” had reviewed the information the detectives had obtained and given them new insights. He warned the O’Connell family that the murderer would be someone they knew.¹³⁹ In mid-December 2004 Walter told the local paper that, “If I were the perpetrator here, I don’t think I would buy any green bananas.”¹⁴⁰ When Erickson saw bananas in his rectory kitchen, he became “paranoid,” according to the rectory housekeeper.¹⁴¹

Suicide by Hanging

While he was stationed in Hudson, Erickson became a friend of Tom Burns, who later described Erickson as a “John Wayne fan, a ‘man’s man’ who loved to hunt and fish.”¹⁴² On Friday night, December 17, 2004, Richard Reams (also a friend of the murdered Dan O’Connell) and Tom Burns came to visit him because they had heard that police were questioning him about the

¹³⁴ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 9, 2004.

¹³⁵ Hudson Police Department, Supplemental Report Form, Case A - 04, December 23, 2004.

¹³⁶ Randy Furst, “Inside the Hudson Murder Case,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, October 9, 2005.

¹³⁷ Brian Bonner, “Dead Priest Had Been Questioned in Hudson Slaying,” *Duluth News-Tribune*, December 21, 2004.

¹³⁸ Donna Halvorsen, “Freeland Super-Sleuths Helped in Hudson Probe,” *Star-Tribune*, December 19, 2005.

¹³⁹ “Dad Shocked by Erickson News, Possible Connection with murderer,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, December 23, 2004.

¹⁴⁰ “Former Hudson Priest Found Dead; Had Been Questioned in O’Connell Homicide probe,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, December 19, 2004.

¹⁴¹ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Homicide Assessment.

¹⁴² “Police Sought Lawyer After Questioning,” *Ironwood Daily Globe*, December 23, 2004, p. 2.

murder and that he was upset and uneasy. On Saturday, December 18, 2004, Erickson said the 4 p.m. mass at St. Mary's. The two friends went out to dinner with him. He seemed upset but not distraught. The only odd thing he said was that "he had lived more life than most 80 year olds."¹⁴³ They watched two movies, "Bells of St. Mary's" and John Wayne's "Big Jake." The last words they exchanged that night were "God bless." Reams and Burns stayed in the rectory with Erickson.¹⁴⁴

At 7:02 a.m. Reams got up and greeted Erickson, who seemed his usual self. Reams got ready for church; he noticed that the door to the smoking room was closed and he assumed that Erickson was getting ready for Mass. Reams went downstairs to start his truck. He had just left the rectory when "I stopped when I saw a body part on the ground part being held off the ground by a rope that was tied around the neck." Reams ran back and rang the bell at the rectory door, then he saw a maintenance man blowing snow and waved to him, yelling "Father Ryan has killed himself." The maintenance man replied, "No, That's just a dummy. He is always playing jokes on me."

Reams was not pleased with the joke and muttered "that sonofabitch" and proceeded to clear the snow off his truck. Reams went inside the rectory to tell Burns and Erickson to get the dummy down. They couldn't find Erickson. Reams and Burns went outside; Reams "noticed frost crystals on an ear and thought frost wouldn't form on a dummy." They ran back in and found on the table three letters and the crown of thorns ring that the two friends had given Erickson on Christmas two years ago.¹⁴⁵ They called the police, and by coincidence a camera crew showed up within minutes, intending to interview Erickson about the abuse allegations.

Erickson left his friends a suicide note:

Rick and Tom:

Thank you for this weekend. It took my mind off of these last few days. I want you to know that along with [redacted] you were my closest friends. I loved you as brothers and always appreciated your help, generosity and love.

Your families are wonderful and I am sure they will do great things in this terrible world. If you get back to Rome please light some candles for my eternal rest. Have Masses said for me too.

I've lived a hard but exciting life. I learned and I taught. I helped people and I hurt them...But I never killed anyone. My ego, my pride, my lust, my envy have always stopped me from being the best person I could be. I am tired.

With my love, Father Ryan. Again – Thank you for everything.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Hurley Police Department, Statement of Thomas Robert Burns, December 19, 2004, 10:25 A.M.

¹⁴⁴ Randy Furst, "The Funeral Home Murders: Police Asked Priest Hard Questions in Hudson's Slayings," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, January 13, 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Hurley Police Department, Statement of Richard Jon Reams, December 19, 2004, 10:25 a.m.

¹⁴⁶ Warren Wolfe and Randy Furst, "Second Suicide Note Released," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 6, 2005.

When he was at St. Patrick's Church in Hudson, Erickson had told the school children that suicide was a mortal sin and that those who committed suicide would go to hell. After his own suicide, children at St. Patrick's asked the pastor, Rev. Szleszinski, whether Erickson was in hell. Szleszinski told the children Erickson was wrong in this case, that "he was not in hell and the children should pray for him."¹⁴⁷

In his unsigned Last Will and Testament (written on November 15, 2004, after his first interview by the police and modified December 8, 2004, the day after the second and final interview by the police), Erickson left to his family and friends his computer equipment, guns, swords, bayonets, movie collection, his dog "The Beast," and his religious items: his Breviary, his rosary, his chalices, the cross of St. Francis, the picture of Padre Pio, the picture of Our Lady of Guadeloupe, the picture of Jesus looking over Jerusalem, the picture of Simeon holding the baby Jesus, etc.

But Erickson also collected other images. When the police searched Erickson's hard drive on his computer, they discovered, in addition to games such as Atomic Pop and Space Rocks and music ranging from Johnny Cash to Ave Maria, a deeply buried file My Pictures\folder\holy Mass Prayers\Mass prayers\New Folder, which had been created on August 26, 2004, and last accessed December 12, 2004, shortly before Erickson's suicide. It contained "more than forty images of gay and prepubescent male pornography in a variety of sex acts and poses."¹⁴⁸ The police described some of the images:

- Photo of two young males engaged in anal intercourse. Mid to late teens.
- Young male posing naked on a bicycle. Late teens, early twenties.
- Young male posing half naked on a weight bench. Male is holding his erect penis. Late teen to early twenties.
- Two young males masturbating each other. Late teens to early twenties.
- Two young males engaged in sexual intercourse. One male appears to be pre-pubescent, the other mid to late teens.
- One young male performing oral sex on another young male. Mid to late teens.¹⁴⁹

Police also discovered post-it notes, signed by "Ryan" or "Ryan XOXO" but not in Ryan Erickson's handwriting. The notes read: "Wear Me! I'm back, come up when you return!" and "I'm going over to the library thru the Computer Lab. Be back as soon as possible" and "Try me on for size! I'm upstairs, come up when you're through" and "Wear these, Please," and "I'm up in my room!"¹⁵⁰

In his farewell letter to his parents, attached to his will, Erickson admitted he was a sinner:

All of us are a mixture of angel and devil. Each of us does good and evil. No matter how good we look to the world we each have our favorite sins, which we keep private even as

¹⁴⁷ Margaret Levra, "Hudson Chief Says Priest Not Suspect," *Ironwood Daily Globe*, January 4, 2005.

¹⁴⁸ "Case Closed; Erickson Blamed," *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 6, 2005.

¹⁴⁹ Hudson Police Department, Case 05-039108.

¹⁵⁰ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 16, 2004.

we battle against them. There is no one who is perfect. I am above all --- the least in perfection. I have preached truth, but I found myself unable to live it in its entirety.

To the last he maintained that he did not murder anyone:

This murder investigation is a turkey shoot they want to hang it on someone, so use character assassination to achieve their goal, I did not murder anyone! I did not kill Dan or James.¹⁵¹

Erickson claimed that “I have been tormented for years, ever since I was twelve years old.” From the context, it appears he was acknowledging his sexual failures, and traced them to something that happened when he was twelve. Was he molested himself at that age? Or is he just trying to portray himself as a victim?

But then he takes an odd detour:

Ultimately, I have grown tired of this weary world – and of all the evil it has unleashed in the last 100 years. I am extremely tired and disappointed with myself, and of the evils I have all too often performed... Why was I so lustful?

Having acknowledged his guilt in sexual matters, he still denies having committed the murder: “I did **NOT**, however, kill Dan O’Connell or James – or anyone for that matter.”

He repeats his weariness:

I am ready to leave this horrible world: I am ready to sleep forever. Anxiety, worry, fear, and stress have been part of my life from the time I was twelve. And I am tired of it.

Erickson claims he has to prove he is innocent of the murders and cannot prove it, but focuses on the argument that nothing can be proved against him:

None of my guns matched, no DNA of mine was found, no one saw me leaving the funeral parlor.

These are not the words of an innocent man.

The whole tone of the letter is false. Experts of the Vidocq Society dissected it, pointing out the “aggressive anger” which Erickson justified by portraying himself as a “misunderstood and wronged victim.” Erickson wrote with “grandiosity,” “theatrical flair” and with “operatic declaration.” He tried “to present a beleaguered servant of God who had become overwhelmed by the cares, vicissitudes, and wrongful insinuations.” He presents “a litany of excuses for being an aggressor.” While claiming he could not possibly kill anyone, he was planning to kill himself. Erickson’s last request in his will was “Please have Masses said for my soul, and offer penances for my eternal rest.” He still wanted Ryan Erickson, and not the victims of Ryan Erickson’s

¹⁵¹ Heron Marquez Estrada, “Horrors Are Still Emerging Three Years After the Slayings,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 5, 2005.

crimes, to be the center of everyone's care. Despite his pleas for prayer and forgiveness, his focus remained himself. He still wanted to escape the consequences of his actions.¹⁵²

Lundgren on January 11, 2005, wrote to the police about Erickson's admission of the murder.¹⁵³

Even after Erickson's death, his friends and supporters refused to cooperate with police.¹⁵⁴ It was perhaps understandable that Burns shortly after Erickson's suicide was angry at the police and told an officer that "I want to tear your fucking head off, but then I'd get arrested."¹⁵⁵ But others were also extremely uncooperative in an investigation of a double murder. One refused to talk to the police unless he was subpoenaed.¹⁵⁶ Others would not talk to the police except "through the court system to ensure a neutral environment in which questions are reviewed by the DA and responses are recorded by the court reporter."¹⁵⁷

At the request of the O'Connell family, a John Doe hearing was held. "According to the Wisconsin Court of Appeals, the purpose of a John Doe proceeding is to determine that a crime has probably been committed and who probably committed it."¹⁵⁸ Such a hearing is held in front of a judge without a jury; it may be closed; and the standard of proof is civil (the preponderance of evidence) rather than criminal (beyond a reasonable doubt). Witnesses can be compelled to testify under threat of jail time. Only five states have this investigative tool, and it is rarely used.

St. Croix District Attorney Eric Johnson presented the evidence to Judge Eric Lundell on October 3, 2005. Fifteen witnesses testified, revealing much of the information contained in this case study. Judge Lundell stated at the end of the hearing about the murders and sexual assaults: "I find that and conclude that Ryan Erickson probably committed these crimes in question. On a scale of one to ten as far as strength of evidence I would consider this ten. It is a very strong case for circumstantial evidence."¹⁵⁹

After the hearing Ellison's mother said that the clergy are not above suspicion: "Only God is without sin. He is not God. He is a human being." Mike O'Connell, Dan's brother, added: "God is probably as sad today as we are."¹⁶⁰

Although the diocese of Superior knew that Erickson had admitted to two incidents of sexual abuse before he entered the seminary, that he was accused while in the seminary of another incident of sexual abuse, and that he behaved questionably at the seminary, it did not list him as an accused priest in its own audit of sexual abuse or in the survey that the bishops of the United

¹⁵² Letter from Richard D. Walker to Detective Shawn Pettee, January 13, 2005.

¹⁵³ Hurley Police Department, Statement of Russell J. Lindgren, January 11, 2005; Randy Furst, "Priest Likely Was Killer, Judge Finds," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 4, 2005.

¹⁵⁴ "Some Still Won't Talk to Police about Priest," *Hudson Star-Observer*, February 4, 2005.

¹⁵⁵ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, December 23, 2004.

¹⁵⁶ Hudson Police Department, Case J-02 0477, Supplemental Report Form, May 4, 2005.

¹⁵⁷ E-mail from Friend of Father Ryan to Meg Heaton [at local newspaper], February 2, 2005, forwarded to Hudson Police Department.

¹⁵⁸ Colleen Kottke, "John Doe: Is Law Just a Legal Thorn in the Side of Correctional Officers?" *Fond du Lac Reporter*, December 13, 2007.

¹⁵⁹ *John Doe*, p. 201, ll. 8-12.

¹⁶⁰ Kevin Harter, "Judge: Priest Was Funeral Home Killer," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 4, 2005.

States had commissioned the John Jay School of Criminal Justice to do in 2004 - because the incidents and accusations did not occur when Erickson was a *priest*.¹⁶¹

After the John Doe hearing, no one from the diocese called O’Connell’s widow to offer condolences or apologies.¹⁶² In fact, the only member of the clergy to call on the widow in the three and a half years after the murder was Ryan Erickson, the murderer.¹⁶³ Bishop Fleiss was a busy man and had trouble finding a time to meet with the widow of Daniel O’Connell. Fleiss was asked why he took so long to visit the parishes in which Erickson had been stationed; he replied, “I really don’t have a good answer for that.” When asked whether he thought Erickson committed the murders, he replied “I still hope he didn’t. In my heart I still hope he didn’t.”¹⁶⁴ When the O’Connell and Ellison families tried to meet with Catholic bishops in November 2005 when the bishops were meeting in Washington, the families were first “ejected from the downtown hotel” and then invited back for a ten-minute discussion with a member of the bishops’ staff. The bishops, the staff member explained, could not speak to the families, as the bishops were much too busy: “they have a full agenda.”¹⁶⁵ It did not include sexual abuse.¹⁶⁶ The O’Connell’s filed a suit against U.S. Catholic bishops asking them to reveal the names of all credibly accused priests. The lawsuit was dismissed in December 2007.¹⁶⁷

Carsten and Sally Ellison, the parents of James Ellison, did not join in this suit against the Catholic bishops. Instead they filed a wrongful death suit, asking for unspecified damages to go to the James Ellison Foundation for the Protection of Children.¹⁶⁸ The suit was dismissed; the judge declared that it was “too remote” to think they diocese had information which might have led them to suspect Erickson was capable of murder, although the diocese was aware of Erickson’s “temper, child pornography, and violent tendencies.” The attorney for the diocese applauded the judge’s decision.¹⁶⁹

A woman whose daughter was murdered wrote to the O’Connell family:

“The oceans of tears that will come and go at the most unexpected times – murderers don’t care about this. There is no time limit to how long these emotions and feelings will continue. The inner and silent suffering that takes place can create a hole in the heart that may never close, again, and murderers don’t care.”¹⁷⁰

[.cbslocal.com/0/2005/10/01/320x240/images_sizedimage_273224337.jpg](http://cbslocal.com/0/2005/10/01/320x240/images_sizedimage_273224337.jpg)

¹⁶¹ “Before Retiring, Bishop Should Admit All Abuse,” *Duluth News-Tribune*, October 9, 2005.

¹⁶² Steve Scott and Kevin Harter, “Sex Charges Go Back Years,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 5, 2005.

¹⁶³ “Jennie O’Connell Is Ready for the Healing to Begin,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, October 13, 2005.

¹⁶⁴ Matt McKinney, “Bishop Voices Regrets,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, November 5, 2005.

¹⁶⁵ Alan Cooperman, “Families Try, Fail to Talk to Bishops,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 2005.

¹⁶⁶ Alan Cooperman, “Two Families Seek Church Accountability in Abuse Cases,” *Washington Post*, November 14, 2005.

¹⁶⁷ Chao Xiong, “Lawsuit against Bishops Halted, Hudson Family Vows to Fight On,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, December 31, 2007.

¹⁶⁸ AP, “Judge Rejects Requests to Dismiss Wrongful Death Lawsuit,” *Winona Daily News*, July 1, 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Chuck Rupnow, “Lawsuit Rejected in Case of Priest Who Killed Two,” *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, September 23, 2008.

¹⁷⁰ Margie Mayer, “Parent Whose Daughter Was a Murder Victim Offers Advice,” *Hudson Star-Observer*, February 22, 2002.