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Priest details longtime affair

Tells four children of the woman who died that he's sorry

By Stephen Kurkjian, Globe Staff, 1/31/2003

The Rev. James D. Foley, who fled when the Needham woman with whom he was having an affair took a fatal overdose in 1973, apologized to her four children -- two of whom he may have fathered -- during an extraordinary face-to-face encounter earlier this month.



Rev. James D. Foley (Globe Staff Photo / Tom Herder)

In a 90-minute meeting arranged by the Archdiocese of Boston, the children said, Foley, 69, told them about his secret, decade-long, affair with their mother, Rita J. Perry. And they said he apologized for not having done more to help save her the night she died, Aug. 7, 1973.

"He told us he was sorry for the pain and anguish he had caused our family, and he asked us to forgive him," said James Perry, 38, of Foxborough, the second-youngest of the four children. "I'm not sure we're ready to do that. We need more answers before we talk about forgiveness."

During the meeting with Foley, they said, the priest acknowledged that he rekindled the affair in the late-1960s -- even though Rita Perry did not initially remember him because she suffered from depression, and had had a lobotomy after they first parted in 1966. Until the church's secret files on Foley, which include the details of his multiple affairs, became public last month, Rita Perry's three sons and daughter had believed their mother died alone from an overdose of barbituates.

In an interview with The Globe Tuesday, the Perry children, now in their 30s and 40s, agreed to have their family identified in the hope that it will help them learn more about their mother's death. The interview was arranged by their attorney, Roderick MacLeish Jr.

After an interview last month in which the Perrys asked that their names be withheld, the Globe reported the family's devastation at learning about Foley, and their sense of betrayal by the church for keeping Foley's admission secret. "If people had done the right thing and investigated our mother's death 30 years ago we wouldn't have to be asking these questions now," said Christopher H. Perry, 43, a financial analyst from Foxborough. "But we feel it is our responsibility to get the answers now."

Rita Perry's husband has told his children that while he knew his wife was "enamored" with a priest, he was unaware of the affair. Perry and his wife had separated about a month before her death.

Emily S. Perry, 32, of Stoughton, the youngest of the four children, said Foley said that when he attempted to renew the affair, "Her first words to him were, 'Do I know you?'"

"So if he hadn't called they would never have started up again, and our mother might be alive today," she said.

After he explained who he was, Foley told the Perry children, their mother quickly remembered him and they began seeing one another again, Emily Perry said.

For Emily and James, the two youngest, the meeting with Foley was especially painful because Foley has said that their mother believed he is their father.

"I kept thinking to myself I am sitting across from the man who may have been responsible for my birth but also for my mother's death," James Perry said.

Their meeting with Foley was arranged by Barbara Thorp, the director of the Archdiocese's Office of Healing and Assistance.

The children were so apprehensive about meeting the man who had been secretly so much a part of their family's history that only Richard T. Perry, 46, a sales executive from Stoughton, shook Foley's hand at the outset of the meeting.

Foley declined to comment on the meeting yesterday.

Foley disclosed the affair and the fatal overdose to Cardinal Bernard F. Law and the Rev. -- now Bishop -- John B. McCormack in 1993. But Law and McCormack made no effort to notify the family. Instead, after sending Foley for psychological treatment, Law returned Foley to ministry in 1995 at St. Joseph's Church in Salem in 1995. He was removed from the parish when the records became public on Dec. 5.

When Foley, along with Thorp, met with the children on Jan. 13, the priest described for them his version of what happened the night their mother died, according to the children. Some of what Foley said contradicted the account reflected in church records from 1993.

Foley told them Rita Perry, who was 41, invited him to spend the night with her. Only Emily, who was 3, was home, and she was asleep in an upstairs bedroom.

After midnight, Foley told them, she became hysterical and questioned his love for her after he refused to spend the next day with her. Minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom with a bottle of pills, and asked Foley to help her get the top off. Foley said he took the bottle away from her and threw it under a sofa.

But, the children said, the priest told them that when she became sick shortly after that, and then fainted, he realized that she had taken some pills while she was in the bathroom.

Foley, the children said, acknowledged that he panicked after she collapsed and that he was unable to revive her. Then, he said, he grabbed his clothes, made an anonymous call to the Needham police emergency line and then fled the house.

He denied an account, written in 1993 by McCormack from his interview with Foley, that he fled the house in a panic after she collapsed, and only called police after he returned to the house sometime later.

The siblings said they were left with mixed feelings about Foley and his account. At one point, they said, Foley told them that the archdiocese knew nothing about the affair until 1993. But church records show that when Foley was assigned to the Calgary, Alberta, diocese in 1966, Rita Perry visited him. At the time, church officials in Boston and Calgary corresponded about the visit.

"He didn't have to meet with us, but he did and I think that took a lot of courage," said Richard Perry. "But I don't think we got the full story. I think he said things that put himself in the best light, but we have real questions as to whether it's true or not."

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Career timeline: James Foley. 1960 Ordained a priest. 1960-62 St. Bartholomew Church, Needham. 1962-66 Most Holy Redeemer Church, East Boston. 1966-68 On loan to St. Mary's Cathedral, Calgary, Alberta. 1968-79 St. James Church, Haverhill. 1979-83 St. Mary of the Annunciation Church, Cambridge. 1983-87 Pastor, St. Peter's Church, Dorchester. 1987-93 Pastor, Our Lady of Fatima Church, Sudbury. 1994-95 Health leave. 1995-96 St. James Church, Stoughton. 1996-2002 St. Joseph's Church, Salem.

Rev. Foley's 'double life'

As early as the mid-1960s, officials at the Archdiocese of Boston knew that the Rev. James D. Foley was a womanizer, according to his personnel records. Yet official concern about his sexual affairs was expressed only when his behavior threatened to cause public scandal.

Here are some highlights of what even church officials described as Foley's "double life":

1960 Foley ordained and assigned to St. Bartholomew Church in Needham.

1962 Foley requests a transfer from St. Bartholomew. "Became involved with a married woman in first assignment," Bishop Alfred E. Hughes wrote in 1993 file. "Asked to be transferred and was sent to Holy Redeemer, E. Boston, but woman would not let him go. She was obsessed with him."

1964 Foley, then 31, is hospitalized at Glenside Hospital, a Jamaica Plain psychiatric facility.

1966 Foley is transferred to the Calgary, Alberta diocese, where officials knew of his problem with women. May 19: Bishop Francis Carroll of Calgary writes to the Boston Archdiocese, notifying them that Foley's "problem" -- a Needham woman Foley had a long-term affair with -- had arrived in Calgary, and the two had gone off together. But Carroll says that he is willing to take Foley back because "his problem is not known here."

1968 May 22: While Foley is in Massachusetts, his affair with a 19-year-old married woman in Calgary is disclosed in a court session. The Calgary diocese administrator writes Foley that his "double life" has become publicly known and he cannot return -- not even to retrieve his car, which will be driven back to Boston by someone else.

May 23: The Calgary diocese administrator informs Cardinal Richard J. Cushing about the Foley scandal, writing that "there are indications that he has been involved with others. There has been considerable scandal." When Foley is confronted, he has a "breakdown" and is sent to a psychiatric hospital.

June 1: The Calgary diocese warns the Boston Archdiocese that Foley's assurances he can straighten out cannot be trusted, and cautions against giving him another assignment. Even when he gave assurances that he had no problem, the letter says, "He seemed capable of living a dual life."

1993 July 21: The Rev. John B. McCormack writes a note to Bishop Hughes, saying he recalls the Calgary incident and adding, "Sounds to me that he was dealing with growing up issues."

Aug. 30: After meeting with Foley, Hughes writes memorandum about Foley's Calgary affairs, including visit from Needham woman. "He felt cornered. He finally persuaded her to return to husband. She has died. Jim is not certain that husband knew, but presumes this because of her leaving home."

Dec. 23: Foley meets with Cardinal Bernard F. Law, according to McCormack's handwritten notes. Foley says he fathered two children by Needham woman. Woman "overdosed while he was present - fainted - he clothed - left - came back - called 911 - she died - a sister knows." McCormack writes: "criminal activity? overdosed - later called."

1994 Jan. 23: McCormack writes memo saying dead woman's sister "threatened him that if he bothered the family she would reopen case about cause of her death and who called 911." Foley, McCormack writes, says there is unlikely to be scandal about affairs in Calgary, Haverhill, and Needham. McCormack notes that Foley's main problem was "vulnerability... how to make sure it doesn't happen again -- by knowing himself and having a close relationship with the Lord."

Feb. 7: McCormack writes memo after talking to Foley's psychotherapist, including notations: "He is not going to stop," "Is he going to continue? Yes," and "Proud relationships."

Feb. 14: The cardinal's Review Board, after concluding that Foley was guilty of "serious sexual misconduct and wrong judgment," recommends that he be removed as pastor and placed in a residential treatment program.

March 20: Foley writes McCormack about his feeling of "complete betrayal" over the decision. Foley says the circumstances of his affair with the Needham woman are "ugly and tragic." "I cannot in my wildest imaginings understand how that can ever be made public."

July 15: McCormack writes to the Rev. Edwin Cassem S.J., a psychiatrist, asking, "if anything did break out about [Foley], particularly that he fathered two children, do you think people would feel we had put them at risk and that it would be a source of scandal?" Cassem's answers, according to McCormack's notes: "No basis to put him back in ministry... unstable, unpredictable... highly charged sexually."

Aug. 15: Foley writes Law from Southdown, the treatment center in Ontario, saying he confided to some part of the reason for his removal. "Obviously, I did so in the most self-serving manner, disclosing only those parts of the story guaranteed to win me sympathy and withholding the damaging parts."

Sept. 20: The Rev. Brian M. Flattery, who oversees priests accused of sexual misconduct, writes McCormack, noting that when McCormack visited Foley at the Southdown treatment facility, he noticed that Foley was interacting sexually with the woman at the table and may not have been aware of it. Even so, Flattery recommends that Foley be returned to ministry. Dec. 5: Cardinal's Review Board recommends Foley be returned to partial ministry. Foley is assigned to St. Mary's Church in Waltham.

1995 Dec. 4: Review Board recommends Foley be returned to full ministry. Dec. 11: Law accepts recommendation. Foley is assigned temporarily to St. James Church in Stoughton.

1996 Foley is given a permanent assignment at St. Joseph's Church in Salem.

July 6: Foley is diagnosed as having a bipolar disorder after a psychotic episode in which he was running red lights "thinking that they were red only for other people" and "using language in homilies that indicated that he saw himself as the savior of Salem."

Sept. 4: Foley returns to ministry at St. Joseph's.

2002 Dec. 5: Foley is removed from ministry after the records of his sexual misconduct become public.

Source: Archdiocese of Boston records