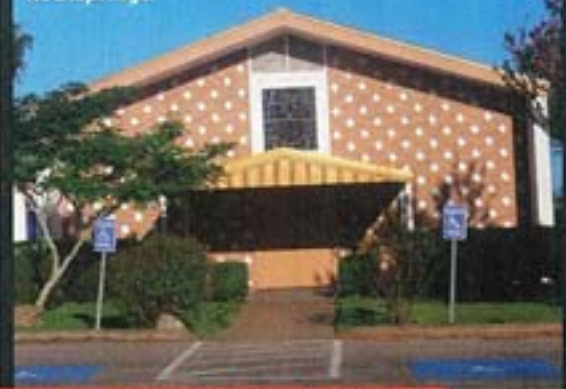


The Sacred Heart of Mary church in Rocksprings.



FATHER JOHN FIALA

DID THIS PRIEST HIRE A HIT MAN?



Fiala "had his ways" of making children and parents trust him, says one parishioner.

Police say a troubled Texas priest did more than molest an underage boy—he also tried to have him murdered

The priest and the assassin met in a parked car on the night of Nov. 18 in the Dallas suburb of Garland. The priest, Fr. John Fiala, had a serious problem: He'd been accused of raping a teenage boy. But he had a plan, and he asked the assassin for help. Fiala "told him he could shoot the victim in the head or he could cut the victim's head off," says Sheriff Don Letsinger of Rocksprings, Texas, the teen's hometown. "Either way he wanted the victim out of his life."

The hit man, it turned out, was an undercover police officer, and the car was wired. Now Fiala—a Catholic priest with a troubling history of bouncing from parish to parish just ahead of sexual misconduct allega-

tions—is under arrest and suspected of an unthinkable crime: arranging to kill the underage boy he allegedly raped. According to criminal indictments, Fiala, 52, forced himself on the then-16-year-old boy several times in 2008—including twice at gunpoint—before hatching his hit man scheme. "This makes you sick at heart when something like this happens in a small community," says Rocksprings County Judge Souli Shanklin. Like many in the town of 1,300, he blames the archdiocese of San Antonio for slipping Fiala into their small rural

church in 2005: "By putting that son of a bitch amongst us without telling us anything about him, it left us all at the mercy of a predator."

How is it that Fiala, who, like the archdiocese, declined to comment, was allowed to minister to boys after so many complaints and warnings from psychologists about his behavior? Ordained in the Omaha archdiocese in 1984, Fiala was in trouble just four years later, when a parishioner at St. Columbkille's, in Papillion, Neb., wrote to Archbishop Daniel Sheehan, complaining, "We had our problems with him... with my grandson." Fiala was sent to another parish.

In 1995 a senior dean warned the archbishop about Fiala, writing, "He

“FATHER FIALA WOULD SAY, ‘IF YOU DON'T DO WHAT I WANT, I WILL KILL YOU’” —VICTIM'S ATTORNEY TOM RHODES



Father Fiala (left) officiates at a baptism. Below: During Fiala's stay in this parish in Omaha, Neb., a psychologist who evaluated him determined that he was drawn to "young men."



“ [THE CHURCH] LEFT US ALL AT THE MERCY OF A PREDATOR”

—COUNTY JUDGE SOULI SHANKLIN

sometimes inappropriately invites young people to come to play video games with him late in the evening.” That same year Fiala was sent to a center that has treated priests dealing with sex problems. Just three years later, he was accused of inappropriate conduct with an underage boy in a Texas parish. Tom Rhodes and Tahira Merritt, the attorneys in a civil lawsuit filed by Fiala's Rocksprings accuser, say Church officials did not adequately investigate those charges, and the matter was dropped. Despite the complaints, the archdiocese of San Antonio granted Fiala full privileges as a priest in 2005, noting that “he has never been charged or convicted of sexual misconduct,” and sent him to the Sacred Heart of Mary church in Rocksprings.

There he quickly “made it clear he wanted to make an impression on the youth,” says parishioner Laura Avila.

“We thought that was nice.” Fiala organized camping trips, held a weekly youth service and, in 2007, became a mentor to his current accuser, allegedly giving the teen a cell phone, an MP3 player and cash gifts. According to the civil lawsuit, settled in January for more than \$1 million, Fiala drove the boy to a motel in early 2008 and raped him at gunpoint, saying, “If you tell anyone what happened, I will hurt you and your family.”

After three more alleged attacks, the teen swallowed a bottle of Tylenol and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. He told counselors about Fiala, and the priest was arrested in September on charges of aggravated sexual assault. While out on bail and living in an apartment in Garland, Fiala told a housemate he'd been falsely accused of sexual assault by “a boy he was just trying to help,” says the man,

who asked that his name not be published. “He said he wanted to go to Thailand to teach, but he couldn't if he had to register as a sex offender. But if [the accuser] was dead, he wouldn't have to worry about it.” Then, says the man, Fiala asked, “Do you think you could kill him for me?”

The housemate contacted police, who set up the Nov. 18 sting. Fiala is now in custody on a \$800,000 bond; his accuser, who is attending junior college, is “relieved” Fiala has finally been locked up, says Rhodes. But the battle to stop Church officials from recycling problem priests, says Rhodes, goes on. “Fiala's problems have been documented for 22 years,” he says. “It's hard to fathom all the damage that man has done.”

Alex Tresniowski. Cary Cardwell
in Rocksprings