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Abuses Cost Diocese Millions;

Albany Church Said It Paid Priests' Victims More Than \$2.3M in Settlements, with One near \$1M

By Andrew Tilghman
Times Union
June 27, 2002

The Albany Roman Catholic Diocese revealed Wednesday it has paid out more than \$2.3 million to sexual abuse victims during the past 25 years, including a nearly \$1 million payment to a single victim in 1997.

The largest payment was \$997,500 that went to a man who was abused when he was a teenager by former priest Mark Haight, the diocese said. The abuse took place in the 1970s and 1980s in the Capital Region, and a confidential settlement with the diocese was reached in 1997. The settlement is one of the largest of its kind in New York state.

The church forced Haight to leave the ministry after the victim -- Haight's second -- came forward in 1996.

The latest disclosure indicates that the nine priests, whom the 14-county Diocese of Albany identified as sexual predators during the past 25 years, have cost the church far more than was previously suggested. For months, the diocese has refused to say exactly how much it has paid in settlements, indicating the number was in the "hundreds of thousands."

In a statement to the Times Union Wednesday afternoon, Bishop Howard J. Hubbard described the 1997 settlement as "atypical and unusually high," but he declined to say why. Most of the other 10 cases settled for between \$50,000 and \$150,000, according to the statement.

All of the payments -- totaling \$2,357,500 -- were covered by the church's liability insurance policy, which has not seen a rate increase in several years, the statement said.

"The settlement amount in each case is structured following an independent psychologist's evaluation of the emotional injuries sustained by the victim and the extent of counseling needed to begin the healing process," the church said.

The nearly \$1 million case resulted from allegations that the sexual abuse of the boy started during his early adolescence -- after he met Haight at a hospital -- and continued into his teenage years, according to a source familiar with the settlement who asked not to be identified.

The settlement figures came to light as Hubbard plans to remove several priests who remain on active ministry despite having sexual abuse allegations against them substantiated by the diocese. The removals, which are expected within the week, are required under the new nationwide "zero-tolerance" policy the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted on June 16 in Dallas.

Church leaders acknowledged earlier this month that they removed Haight from the ministry in 1996 and settled a case with a sexual abuse victim shortly afterward, but they had refused to discuss the details, citing the confidentiality clause included in the out-of-court agreement.

The church said it issued the statement Wednesday acknowledging the nearly \$1 million settlement only after the victim's attorney, John Aretakis, turned over copies of the settlement agreement and two settlement checks to a reporter.

The church said Aretakis met with the church's attorney, Michael Costello, on June 4 and "demanded" an additional \$350,000 a year for six years as the price for continuing to honor the confidentiality agreement. The church said it promptly rejected the offer.

On Wednesday, Aretakis, who lives in North Greenbush and has an office in New York City, declined to comment on the case.

The church has settled two cases involving Haight, a Schenectady native ordained in 1976. In the 1970s and 1980s, Haight worked at several Capital Region churches, including St. Patrick's in Troy, Our Lady of Grace in Ballston Lake and St. Gabriel's in Rotterdam, church officials said.

The church received its first allegation of sexual abuse by Haight in 1989, when he was a pastor at St. Joseph's Church in Scotia. The church later settled with Haight's first accuser and sent the priest to a residential treatment program for pedophiles.

Church officials allowed Haight to return to a "limited form of ministry" in 1990, when he was posted as a chaplain at Glens Falls Hospital. For years church officials said they considered hospital ministries to be a sufficiently supervised setting for a priest with a history of sexual abuse.

Haight served as chaplain in Glens Falls for six years, during which time there were no known allegations of sexual abuse. He was removed from the post in 1996 after a second person came forward alleging sexual abuse, resulting in the nearly \$1 million settlement.

The church said confidentiality clauses were considered standard parts of liability settlements until May, when the diocese adopted a new policy that banned their use in any future cases because they were "perceived by people to be an attempt to engage in a cover-up or to gag the recipient of the settlement," Hubbard said at the time.

Other settlements the Albany diocese has acknowledged include another 1997 case, in which the church paid \$70,000 to Thomas Oathout of Watervliet, who accused the Rev. David Bentley of sexually abusing him in the late 1970s when they lived at the Albany Home for Children. Bentley remained on active ministry until Hubbard removed him in April from his post at a parish in New Mexico. FACTS: Abuse settlements Some large payments to child victims of sex abuse by Catholic priests: \$30 million awarded in July 1998 by a Stockton, Calif., jury to two brothers, who said Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony ignored documented evidence that the Rev. Oliver O'Grady was a child molester. \$23.4 million awarded in July 1998 by a Dallas jury to eight men and the parents of another who committed suicide, all former altar boys, who said former priest Rudolph Kos molested them. \$5.2 million agreed to in August 2001 between the Orange Diocese and Los Angeles Archdiocese and a former Santa Margarita Catholic High School student who accused Msgr. Michael A. Harris of molesting him. \$5 million awarded to five plaintiffs in a Feb. 1998 court-ordered mediation of Dallas cases in which two former priests, William J. Hughes and Robert J. Peebles, were accused of molesting children during the 1980s.