

BishopAccountability.org

Ex-RPI Student Accuses Priest

Troy Former Student Says the Rev. Charles R. Celeste Took Advantage of Him While the Priest Was a Fraternity Chaplain

By Brian Nearing
Times Union (Albany, NY)
November 11, 2003

A 38-year-old former Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute student on Monday accused a Roman Catholic priest of sexually abusing him in the 1980s.

Randall Sweringen, who lives in Berkeley, Calif., charged that the Diocese of Albany is ignoring its own rules on clergy abuse by not suspending the Rev. Charles R. Celeste. The priest is pastor at Holy Family Parish in Little Falls, Herkimer County.

Sweringen said Celeste sexually abused him from 1984 to 1987, when he attended RPI. Celeste at the time was chaplain to the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity, where Sweringen was a member. He was 18 when he met Celeste, who at the time lived in the rectory of nearby St. Paul the Apostle Church.

Sweringen gave his account by telephone during a morning news conference organized by his attorney, John Aretakis, outside the fraternity house on 13th Street. Sweringen is director of alumni and church relations at the Pacific School of Religion, a multid denominational Christian seminary in Berkeley.

On Monday afternoon, the diocese issued a five-sentence statement. "This matter involved an allegation from approximately 20 years ago between two adults. While this type of behavior is extremely inappropriate for a priest, at this time the Diocesan Review Panel did not recommend that the priest be removed from ministry," the statement reads.

"However, the Diocese, upon investigation and appropriate evaluation of the situation, has responded and continues to handle this matter in a proper fashion. As best we know, the priest has been leading a celibate life for many years."

Sweringen first contacted the diocese about Celeste in August. In a Sept. 24 letter to Sweringen, Teresa Rodrigues, the diocese's victim/survivor assistance coordinator, told him that the priest had been given the complaint.

"As he did not deny it, no investigation was ordered," Rodrigues wrote. Her letter said typically in such a case the priest is evaluated, a review board considers the findings of that evaluation and Bishop Howard Hubbard decides what to do, a procedure that can take up to six months.

The diocese's policy to protect children and adults from sexual abuse states that "no priest or deacon can remain in public ministry or can be transferred into, out of or within the diocese if an allegation of sexual abuse against him has been substantiated."

It was not immediately clear why Rodrigues said no investigation would be conducted, but the church's statement Monday said it had acted after an investigation.

Sweringen said the diocese initially offered to pay for 10 counseling sessions and then increased the offer to 20 sessions.

"They were just hoping that I would give up and go away," he said.

Sweringen, who studied to be a Benedictine monk after college before leaving the order in 2001, said he did not report the priest's abuse at the time because he was "overpowered by someone who had so much spiritual authority over me."

Sweringen said he had tried to forget what had happened until the sexual abuse scandals surfaced in the Boston Archdiocese in 2001.

"It made me think how dangerous Father Celeste could continue to be. I never want this to happen to another person again," Sweringen said.

He said he now is openly gay but denied that he and the priest were involved in a consensual affair, even though he never refused Celeste's advances.

"I was deeply in the closet at that time, even to myself," Sweringen said. "He was my spiritual director. It was not just me against another man. It was me against God."

Sweringen, who has not filed a lawsuit, said he called Celeste in December 2002 seeking an apology, but "he told me that it was my problem to deal with. That's when I got really scared that he may still be doing it."

Celeste was not affiliated with the RPI's Newman Center, where the school's official chaplain is assigned, and RPI does not provide chaplains to fraternities, a college spokeswoman said.

"We are deeply disturbed by the allegations detailed in the letter," said spokeswoman Theresa Bourgeois. "It deeply saddens us that one of our students may have been victimized. We hope the Albany Roman Catholic Diocese takes all appropriate action to address it."

Celeste was formerly pastor of St. John Francis Regis Church in Grafton. On Monday, a man answering the telephone at the priest's residence in Little Falls said "No thank you" and hung up.

At least 14 priests from the Albany Diocese have left the ministry since June 2002 following allegations of sexual misconduct. One of them, the Rev. John Bertolucci, also had been reassigned to be a pastor in Little Falls.

FACTS:PREVIOUSLY As of September, at least 14 priests from the Albany Diocese have left the ministry.THE LATEST Former RPI undergraduate Randall Sweringen of Berkeley, Calif., on Monday accused the Rev. Charles Celeste of sexually abusing him from 1984 to 1987.WHAT'S NEXT Sweringen wants Celeste to be removed from ministry, but the diocese has not done so and said it "continues to handle this matter in a proper fashion."