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Priest Away As Charge Arose

Spencerport Pastor on Sabbatical When Sexual Abuse Claim Surfaced

By Diana Louise Carter
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A priest charged with sexual abuse on Friday had been on sabbatical for months before the allegation emerged earlier this year.

Rochester police charged the Rev. Dennis Sewar, 54, who most recently was pastor of a Spencerport church, with a class B misdemeanor, sexual abuse in the third degree; and a class A misdemeanor, endangering the welfare of a child. The charges apparently stem from an incident in 1999 when Sewar was pastor of Church of the Annunciation in northeast Rochester.

A statement from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester said Sewar has been on administrative leave — meaning he cannot engage in public ministry — since June 14, after the abuse claim reached the diocese in April. A diocese spokesman said the allegation was turned over to the Rochester Police Department immediately.

"I am deeply disturbed by these allegations," said Bishop Matthew Clark in a statement Sunday. "I sincerely hope that they do not diminish in the eyes of our faithful the great progress made over the last three years," Clark said, referring to efforts by the local diocese to investigate reports of abuse and offer counseling to any victims of abuse.

The news surprised parishioners at St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport, where Sewar had been pastor until his sabbatical in January. One parishioner said he hadn't even heard of the arrest.

Another said he had learned about it on television Saturday night.

"The pastor was well liked here and a nice guy," said St. John's member Rick Stoffel. "He was a great guy, he knew the Lord. ... My prayers are just that everything comes out that is right."

Joe Marchand of Henrietta, who was tutored in English by Sewar in 1979, said, "I'm stunned right now, in disbelief." Marchand said he went along with Sewar on a camping trip to Skaneateles that year, when he was an eighth-grader, and Sewar helped him prepare for his entrance exam for McQuaid Jesuit High School. Nothing illicit happened, Marchand said. Sewar was a teacher at Good Shepard Catholic School in Henrietta at the time and not yet ordained as a priest.

Sewar later officiated at Marchand's wedding and baptized his children. Sewar also married several of Marchand's siblings.

"We're just a little shocked and in disbelief of all this because we've known him for a long time," Marchand said.

Stoffel said that when Sewar went on sabbatical, he mentioned his father's recent death and his desire to re-examine his own life. Michael Tedesco, the diocesan spokesman, said the sabbatical had nothing to do with the allegations.

The Rev. Lance Gonyo, St. John's new pastor as of Wednesday, announced the arrest to parishioners Sunday morning and said that he shared their sadness at the news. Being his first Sunday as pastor

of the church, he then introduced himself and said he looked forward to his new assignment with joy, despite starting off at a sad time.

Tedesco said Gonyo's assignment to the Spencerport church comes at the usual time that new assignments begin — late June through July. He had apparently applied for the seat some time ago.

A call to Sewar's home in Spencerport went unanswered. Further information on the incident relating to the charges was not available from the Rochester Police Department.

According to the diocesan statement, Sewar had also served at St. Helen Church in Gates, Church of the Assumption in Fairport, St. James Church in Irondequoit and St. Mary Church in Waterloo. It was not clear exactly when he had started at the Spencerport church. Stoffel said he was already pastor there when he began attending the church a couple of years ago. A diocese directory for 2001-2002 still listed Sewar as pastor of Annunciation.

Both St. John the Evangelist and Annunciation have weathered prior sex abuse scandals. Two priests who had served at St. John were removed from the ministry after charges were made regarding their sexual conduct. One, the Rev. Robert Winterkorn, was removed in 1993 after admitting to a long-term affair with a female parishioner who was underage when the affair began. No criminal charges were filed.

The Rev. Albert H. Cason, who served there in the 1960s, was accused of molesting a 12-year-old altar boy then. He was removed from the ministry in 1985.

Annunciation's pastor from 1987 to 1999 was the Rev. Robert O'Neill, who allegedly molested eight boys in the 1970s in Jefferson County while on camping trips. Criminal charges were filed against both Cason and O'Neill, but statutes of limitations had run out long before the victims came forward as adults.

Earlier this year, a priest at a Greece church also called St. John the Evangelist pleaded guilty to federal charges of possessing images of child pornography.

The diocese said then it erred in its handling of the Rev. Michael Volino, arrested in March, because although he was not allowed to be alone with children after concerns were raised about his "maturity," he was still allowed contact with children in his ministry