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Diocese Removes Six Priests Sexual Abuse Histories Cited

By Andrew Tilghman
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Albany The Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany on Friday permanently removed six priests who church leaders said had sexually abused minors at least once, sending shock waves through the community and bringing the six-month nationwide scandal home to several Capital Region parishes.

The group of priests removed included two former vice chancellors of the Albany diocese, three who had worked at Catholic schools and a former Boy Scouts chaplain. One of the priests removed, the Rev. John Bertolucci, was a prominent Catholic theologian who had a nationally syndicated television program in the 1980s.

Bishop Howard J. Hubbard said in each case the abuse occurred more than 15 years ago and no repeat offenses have ever been alleged. The removals bring the Albany diocese into compliance with the policy adopted June 16 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, banning all priests with any known history of sexually abusing minors from working in the church.

The men removed are: the Rev. John Patrick Bertolucci, 64, who retired this year and lives in Catskill; the Rev. Joseph A. Mancuso, 60, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Schenectady; the Rev. Edward C. Pratt, 58, pastor of Corpus Christi in Halfmoon; the Rev. James J. Rosch, 55, pastor of St. Joseph's in Fort Edward; the Rev. Edward Leroux, 72, who is retired and until this week lived at St. Mary's in Glens Falls; and the Rev. David G. Bentley, 60, who was removed from the ministry in April.

Hubbard said he was "deeply saddened that these priests, who repented of their sins many years ago and showed that repentance by decades of holy and productive ministry, will never be able to function as priests again. It is a considerable loss to the diocese and to many parishioners."

"I hope the loss will be outweighed by the restoration of trust," the bishop said.

During the national bishops' conference this month, Hubbard was one of the only church leaders to voice strong opposition to the zero-tolerance policy. But on Friday he said the measure was "reasonable, given the overriding necessity of restoring the credibility of the church and people's confidence in their priests."

The announcement brings the number of Albany diocesan priests known to have abused children during the past 25 years to 11. In the cases of Bentley, Bertolucci, Leroux and Rosch, Hubbard knew about their histories of abuse in February when he stated publicly that the number of pedophile priests in the diocese was nine.

In two other cases, involving Mancuso and Pratt, victims came forward only in recent months following the spate of publicity concerning sexual abuse in the church. After investigating the claims, Hubbard said Friday, he decided to "make this painful announcement and move forward."

The priests' removal follows the church's acknowledgment this week that it paid a total of \$2.3 million in 11 confidential settlement agreements with victims of abuse over the 25-year period, including a nearly \$1 million payment to a single victim in 1997. That payment involved allegations against the Rev. Mark Haight, who was removed from the ministry in 1996.

Replacement pastors will be announced this weekend in the three churches where the priests were on active assignment. The diocese also plans to send a representative along with counselors to Masses at these churches where they will try to calm angry parishioners and field questions such as how parents can discuss the matter with children, church officials said.

Four priests who were living in church housing -- Mancuso, Pratt, Rosch and Leroux -- were forced to leave earlier this week and are now staying with friends or family, the Rev. Kenneth Doyle, a church spokesman, said Friday.

In the coming weeks, they will decide whether to live an entirely secular life or to move into a monastery setting for "a life of prayer and penance" where they would be prohibited from any contact with parishioners, celebrating Mass publicly, wearing clerical garb or presenting themselves publicly as a priest, church officials said.

There are no plans to defrock the priests, the formal process by canon law that strips the priests of their official ties to the Roman Catholic church.

None of the cases will result in criminal prosecutions because they occurred beyond the statute of limitations for criminal prosecutions, which runs out when a victim turns 23.

Word of the announcement spread quickly Friday afternoon throughout the 14-county diocese, which has 200 active priests and serves more than 400,000 parishioners.

Those at St. Mary's Church in Glens Falls were outraged to learn that three known pedophiles have been connected to their church over the years. Leroux was in residence there in recent months, Haight lived there for six years before his removal in 1996 and Pratt once taught at St. Mary's Regional Catholic School.

"I think it's disgusting. This must be like the diocese's Siberia, they just drop them here," said Annette Crawford, a St. Mary's parishioner for nearly 20 years. "Obviously they must look at Warren County and St. Mary's as being in the farthest reaches of the diocese and they don't care."

Elsewhere, one woman who asked to remain anonymous said Bertolucci's videotapes influenced her decision to convert at a late age from Presbyterianism to Catholicism in 1995.

"It's hard for me to believe," she said about Bertolucci's past. "I realize ministers and priests are human beings like the rest of us, and we all have temptations. But I feel sorry for all the trouble this is causing everyone, the abused people and the priests."

Stephen Dombroski, 70, of Latham, who was hurrying into St. Ambrose Church with a prayer book in hand for a noon Mass, recalled Bertolucci's many years at the church and said he was in total disbelief.

"He acted like a saint in all of his dealings," Dombroski said. "The way he blessed things gave you a very good feeling, like it was coming from heaven."

In the Halfmoon hamlet of Ushers, one of Pratt's parishioners at Corpus Christi recalled him as "a good pastor and a very competent administrator." "He would be the last one I would suspect," said church member Bob Southworth.

In the small Warren County village of Fort Edward, members of St. Joseph's Church learned that their past two pastors were known pedophiles.

"I heard the news through a neighbor who called me," said 75-year-old Charles Mullen, a lifelong member of the parish that now has a congregation of 700 people. "This community is quite devoted to the church. I know that this is just going to devastate a lot of people"

In the mid-1970s, both Pratt and Bentley were administrators at Vincentian Institute, a Catholic high school in Albany.

Doyle said the apparent placement of pedophile priests in the same setting was a "coincidence."

Rosch was a chaplain for the Boy Scouts program in the early 1980s.

Bertolucci emerged as a national spiritual leader of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, part of a movement that took off in the church in the late 1960s.

Dioceses throughout the country were taking similar measures this week as church leaders began to implement the new policy adopted in Dallas.

On Long Island, the Rockville Centre diocese announced Thursday that five priests with histories of sexual abuse will retire this year. Earlier this week, the Archdiocese of Chicago announced the removal of eight priests. In San Jose, Calif., two priests were removed this week.

Nationwide, more than 200 priests were taken out of their posts this year in the months leading up to the Dallas conference.

Many people wondered whether the new policy and the latest disclosures would end the sexual abuse crisis that has roiled the church since public revelations about widespread clergy abuse in Boston in January.

"Frankly I don't see it as the beginning of the end, except to be the beginning of the end of a culture of secrecy," said John Dwyer, a professor of theology at St. Bernard's Graduate School of Theology and Ministry, an academic arm of the Albany diocese.

"It looks as though the more that comes out, the more people come forward," he said.

Like many others, Dwyer noted the new church policy made no mention of bishops, like Cardinal Bernard Law in Boston, who reassigned priests with the knowledge they had abused, in some cases, hundreds of children.

"We are in a very funny situation here, where the priests who are involved are stripped of everything that gave their lives meaning and direction, and the bishops involved in the coverup -- and I'm thinking mainly of Cardinal Law -- all they have to do is say, 'I'm sorry.' "

Hubbard has said that dealing with the victims of sexual abuse has been the most difficult part of his ministry. "My deepest sympathy of all is reserved for the victims of sexual abuse. I have listened to their anguish, wept with them, felt their sense of betrayal and helplessness, tried to reach out with whatever healing I could offer."

David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, a Chicago-based victim's advocacy group, applauded the Albany bishop's public announcement.

"I am at least glad that Hubbard is naming names. Ultimately that will protect children," Clohessy said, noting that some bishops are not announcing the removal of priests.

At the Dallas conference, Clohessy and Hubbard voiced opposing views on the question of zero tolerance and the removal of all priests with even a single incident of sexual abuse, which Hubbard called "simplistic" and out of step with the Christian principle of forgiveness.

"Removing these men has nothing to do with forgiveness," Clohessy said. "Look at the behavior of the Pope; he went and visited in prison the man who tried to assassinate him, but he didn't unlock the door to let him out." Staff writers Erika Groff and Kenneth C. Crowe II contributed to this report.

FACTS:REMOVED FROM MINISTRY Six priests from the Albany Roman Catholic Diocese were permanently removed from the ministry Friday: The Rev. David G. Bentley, 60 Ordained in 1975. Removed from his ministry in New Mexico in April. Former principal at Vincentian Institute and head of the religion department at Cardinal McCloskey High School in the 1970s. He also served as an associate pastor at St. Bridget's in Copake Falls in Columbia County and Albany's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and as a chaplain at St. Peter's Hospital. He also worked in Africa, Ohio and, most recently, at a parish in New Mexico. The Rev. John Patrick Bertolucci, 64 Ordained in 1965. Retired earlier this year. A former vice chancellor of the Albany diocese and prominent member of the group called Charismatic Catholics. In the 1980s, he produced a nationally syndicated television program and was praised as a "Catholic Pat Robertson." He was also a schoolteacher who served on the faculty of St. John's school in Rensselaer, and Maria College. He was chaplain at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse at LaSalle School in Albany and at Greene County Community College. Bertolucci was associate pastor at St. Ambrose parish in Latham and moved to the St. Anthony of Padua Friary in Catskill in 2001. The Rev. Edward Leroux, 72 Ordained in 1956. Retired in 1996, forced to leave his residence this week at St. Mary's in Glens Falls. Leroux served as an associate pastor at Our Lady of Victory in Troy, St. Mary's in Gloversville, St. Joseph's in Cohoes and St. Madeleine Sophie in Guilderland; as administrator at Sacred Heart in Stamford and as pastor at Sacred Heart in Cohoes, Sacred Heart in Berlin and St. Joseph's, Fort Edward. Upon his retirement in 1996 he continued to live at St. Joseph's in Fort Edward. In January 2001 he moved to St. Mary's in Glens Falls. The Rev. Joseph A Mancuso, 60 Ordained in 1970. Removed this week as head pastor at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Schenectady. Mancuso served as associate pastor at Holy Spirit in East Greenbush and at St. Patrick's in Ravena. Since 1970, he has been stationed at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, as associate pastor until 1979 and as pastor since 1979. The Rev. Edward C. Pratt, 58 Ordained in 1972. Removed this week as pastor of Corpus Christi in Halfmoon. A Vietnam veteran, Pratt had served as vice chancellor for the Albany diocese. He was assistant principal at Vincentian Institute, principal at St. Mary's Regional Catholic School in Glens Falls and chaplain at Adirondack Community College. He served as associate pastor at St. Mary's in Glens Falls, Immaculate Conception in Glenville and as pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary in Hudson Falls. The Rev. James J. Rosch, 55 Ordained in 1972. Removed this week as pastor of St. Joseph's in Fort Edward. A former Boy Scout leader, he served as associate pastor at St. Joseph's in Scotia, Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Gloversville, St. Paul the Apostle in Troy, St. Madeleine Sophie in Guilderland and Our Lady of the Annunciation in Queensbury.

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