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Man Sues Priest, Diocese

Attorney Seeks \$2m for Client Who Claims Minister Exploited Him

By Thomas Dimopoulos
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The Queensbury man who claims he had an adult sexual relationship with the Rev. Gary Mercure between 1992 and 1994 filed a lawsuit in state Supreme Court in Warren County on Friday against Mercure, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany and Bishop Howard Hubbard.

The lawsuit, filed by attorney John Aretakis on behalf of his client, John Watkins, seeks \$2 million in damages for slander and a non-monetary settlement called an "injunctive relief" that asks Mercure be permanently removed from the priesthood.

Mercure, an ordained priest since 1975, was an associate pastor at Our Lady of the Annunciation Church in Queensbury in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and pastor at St. Mary's Parish in Glens Falls, in addition to working at a number of other parishes in the Capital Region.

In January, the diocese announced Mercure was under investigation by the diocese's Sexual Misconduct Review Board and he was granted a paid leave of absence pending the results of a currently ongoing investigation, which is not related to Watkins' allegations.

In Watkins' case, diocese spokesman Kenneth Goldfarb said Friday that as far as the diocese is concerned, the issue has been put to rest, although he would not identify Watkins by name.

"The Albany Diocese was contacted by an adult in 1994 who said he had been involved in a consensual adult relationship with Father Mercure, who was then a pastor with St. Mary's in Glens Falls," Goldfarb said.

"The diocese conducted an investigation at that time and took appropriate disciplinary action against Father Mercure.

The adult involved asked the diocese for assistance and we have provided assistance," said Goldfarb, who declined to discuss what that assistance was.

Aretakis said Friday that the assistance consisted of paying \$8,000 for Watkins' psychiatrist and removing Mercure from the Glens Falls church where he was serving at the time, to a church in East Greenbush.

"They just moved him from one St. Mary's to another St. Mary's," said Aretakis.

"The \$8,000 to me is an admission and acknowledgement that Father Mercure abused him," Aretakis said.

"Why are they giving him money to pay his psychiatrist if it was consensual? They are paying him because his priest harmed him," he said.

Aretakis clarified his client is not suing for abuse, but for libel and slander and claims the diocese

issued "intentionally false" statements to the media in January stating that a consensual sexual relationship existed between the two adults.

Aretakis claims that the situation was one of an older man in a position of power sexually abusing and exploiting a man in a position of vulnerability who had come to his priest for help in his suffering from psychological problems in connection with having been abused as a child.

On Friday afternoon, Aretakis produced a handful of photographs, some of them graphic in their depiction of a man matching Mercure's image, that the attorney said were part of a series of pictures that Mercure gave to Watkins in the early 1990s.

Aretakis said that Watkins had approached Bishop Hubbard with the photographs in 1994 to report Mercure after an alleged incident near a school.

The lawsuit states that the priest drove Watkins to Queensbury Middle School "so Mercure could watch the children leave school at the end of the school day and make comments about his sexual interest in children."

In addition to damages for his client, Aretakis said he would like to see Mercure stripped of his ability to ever function as a priest and not be paid any salary, pension, or insurance benefits.

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